

Our Great Hope

Luke 20:27-40

Rev. Rick Hull ~ Luke 20:27-40 ~ July 28, 2019

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

³⁴ Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” ³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” ⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him another question. (Luke 20:27-40)

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This morning, I’m grateful to Jeff for assigning me Luke 20:27-40. At first I wasn’t. It is after all, just one more Holy Week story of the authorities trying to trip Jesus, ridicule Him, and finally destroy Him. But, as I studied, I began to understand why the Holy Spirit included it in Luke’s Gospel. This text is not about a rather silly story, or an esoteric debate. Instead, it is brimming with good news that we don’t preach enough in the western church: where you go when you die, and what to hope in now.

And I think I know why. The material on Heaven is not always easy to grasp. There are questions left unanswered. And, most of us are profoundly anchored in this life. We don’t want to let go! And that is completely understandable. Yet, there remains a nagging hope that, if this life must end, perhaps there still could be something more – something sure and certain that we could all look forward to, that could encourage our hearts.

And since Faith Church has said so many “good-byes” to so many dear ones already this year, I think that encouragement may be really timely!

And we Christian believers, cannot talk about heaven without focusing on the Person who opens its door (and I’m not talking about the mythology and humorous anecdotes gathered around St. Peter!). This is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and our Savior.

We treasure John 3:16 – that God so loved us, that in Christ He offered us eternal life. But we also have all those life-and-death issues that stretch and challenge us.

Does this heaven really exist – or is it a simple projection of our hopes for a better life, and our fear of dying? If there is an afterlife, what is it like, and who gets it? Is anyone really sure that they are on a course toward God’s blessing? Is anyone denied the blessing? Can I be sure of anything?

Like a quiet “white noise” humming in the back of our minds, the questions just won’t go away. And, when we deal with them, I want us to do it with the assurance that the Lord who loves us will not leave us to face them on our own. As the Psalmist put it, we are not stumbling around in the dark – “*even though we walk through the valley of the shadow*

of death, we fear no evil” ... because our Lord walks with us.

That’s the preamble. Now let’s go to the scripture. This whole story begins with a group of Sadducees who come to Jesus with a fanciful story about the heavenly resurrection of an earthly widow. In that day, passing down the family name and heritage was crucial. It was understood that if the husband died childless, another family member could marry the widow and try to have children. So, they create a narrative that is both silly ... and, I’m guessing, pretty hard on the poor childless lady!

But here’s the rub: These are Sadducees. *They do not believe in the resurrection!* These are the most disingenuous debaters! And Jesus captures the moment by rising above the discussion, and treating their question as though it actually might be legitimate. And in doing so, He addresses the deeper life-and-death questions that linger in every human heart.

Now, there may be a little Sadducee in each of us. Not that we’re necessarily arrogant debaters, but perhaps some of us can’t believe that there actually is a resurrection, or a life in heaven. And all of us have detected the subtle whispers of worry about life and death.

In our text here, there are at least three realities that form a reassuring **Great Hope** for Jesus’ followers.

First, In Jesus Christ, WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF TWO AGES - - -

In verses 34 and 35, Jesus speaks of *“this age”* and of *“the age to come.”* There *is* a “coming age” – - He is certain of it. And if the Son of God believes it, then we can, too! There *is* an “age to come” and we are a part of it! For us, it started on a hillside outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. It continues now! And it will be completed in a future that does not end!

John caught on to that, and he wrote: *“Beloved ... we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for*

we shall see Him ...” The age to come has begun, and the age to come will unfold for us in Heaven. We Shall See Him.

Of course, we are anchored in this world. He meant for us to be! He gave us this world – and this life -- to care for it, to love it, and to glorify Him in it. Now look again at verse 34. The key word is *“belong.”* There are some folks who “belong” to this age. They are owned by this moment. But, believers don’t finally **belong** here! We live it in hope because we already have one foot in the age to come. We know that this life is not all there is! And, that’s a huge assurance!

I remember standing at the hospital bedside of one of our very elderly saints, years ago, at our church in Oregon. She had run her course ... and lived it with faithful distinction. Now her body struggled, but it could take no more.

As she lay there comatose, I remember saying: *“Catherine we love you. Your Lord loves you. He is holding you now. You can let go. It’s OK. We release you. Go with Jesus.”* On the next day, she was gone. She left the bed of illness to be at home with her Lord, as I said at her funeral: *“in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to life eternal in Jesus Christ.”*

Our Lord is categorically clear! There *is* another age. And, He has promised that we belong to it! Our hope in Christ is that we are people of two ages.

Second, in Christ, WE ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE RESURRECTION! What a wonderful title! It’s right there in verse 36. God’s children are “children of the resurrection.”

Like so many of you, Barb and I have set up a family trust. It contains all of our worldly possessions. And it quite specifically states that Matthew Richardson Hull and Katherine Marie Willis will inherit everything we leave. **Why?** Because they are the children of Rick and Barbara. (Now, we’ve left a few other bequests, but no one

else gets the estate! They are the children of the Hulls. Period!)

Jesus calls us “**children of the resurrection.**”

Peter picked up that idea, with the same language of “birth-right.” *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy, we have been born anew – to a living hope – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – and to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”* Kept in heaven for YOU. You are the children of the resurrection.

Of course Peter would say that! He was there at Lazarus’ grave when he heard Jesus promise: *“I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me, though that person dies, yet shall they live -- and the one who lives and believes in me shall never die.”*

And, John told us how that works, that *“to all who received Him – who believed – who put their faith in Him – he gave the right to become the children of God.”* Children of the resurrection. **Believing Church – that is us!**

Now, there is also some confusing stuff tucked into these lines. There’s no marrying and being given in marriage in heaven? Wait a minute! What’s that all about? I want to know my wife in heaven! We are about to celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary, and I’m already looking forward to the one-hundredth!

No marriage? Of course that is not what Jesus meant here! He is saying that you can’t limit heaven to the simple constructs of earth. You can’t super-impose earth’s systems on heaven. Your mind just isn’t big enough to contain it!! **Heaven does not negate the best of earth, or earthly love. It Magnifies it!**

We can’t grasp this because frankly, the joy we have here in earth’s relationships is a mere shadow of what awaits! You are children of ... inheritors of ... the resurrection!

And, by the way, the same principle applies to all or earth’s inadequacies! Our heavenly relationships will be so much more blessed! There are no weaknesses, sins, or breakdowns. Jesus says it isn’t like earth ... **it is better!** That’s truly a Great Hope!

And, what’s with that stuff about angels? Some folks read verse 36 and see us with wings and harps, scrambling for cloud-space. First of all, that is not even an accurate picture of angels. We don’t actually have one! And by the way, we don’t become angels either!

And second, that isn’t what He means. We need to read the whole verse. Like the angels, *“They can no longer die.”* That’s the only similarity!

OK, what do we know so far? [1] We live in two worlds. This earthly temporary one ... and the eternal and blessed one. [2] Our faith-walk with Christ *now*, is just a foretaste of what is to come. [3] We are children of the resurrection. And, [4] All that He has, is ours to inherit. His will, and His family trust, were written at the cross!

But it still isn’t easy to think about letting go of this life. It isn’t easy to place our hopes on something we haven’t seen. And, perhaps the biggest challenge is in believing that all of this eternal blessedness is actually coming – that the end of things here, is really the beginning of our future. The uncertainties of life, and the overwhelming certainty of death can leave us feeling like helpless victims. So, our hearts struggle.

We sing: *“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, oh what a for-taste of glory divine...”* But a part of us wonders: “How can I be sure?” And the answer is: on your own, **YOU CAN’T!** That’s the bad news!

I can’t reassure myself with any plan I make, or story I tell, or good that I do to get on God’s good side. I can’t make a case that I deserve heaven, no matter how hard I try to balance an imaginary ledger. I’m just an ordinary, corrupted, sinful

human being, like everyone else, be they Mother Theresa or Saddam Hussein.

That's the bad news. But there is *good news* here, too. ***Our hope lies not in our ability to achieve heaven ... but in God's gracious offer to give it!*** And that leaves us at the third reason for our Great Hope:

*In Jesus Christ, **WE ARE THE REDEEMED OF THE LORD!***

In verse 38, Jesus said: "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for in Him all are alive." But who are these "ALL"? Is that everybody, or a particular "all?" And how am I sure that I'm part of the "all"?

Here's where context is vital. The "all" of verse 38 are the ones "who are considered worthy" in verse 35. That's who inherits heaven!

Well, since "considering" is involved, then who does the considering? The answer, of course, is: **The Lord God.**

Then, how do *I* go about being "considered worthy?" Answer: Not by reason of my goodness ... my efforts ... or my piety. And not by any argument I make for divine entitlement. I am not entitled. Period.

So, here's the *hope* in our Great Hope: Because of the cross -- because of everything we celebrate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the worthiness of Christ is God's gift to us. We who have given Him our lives are the Redeemed of the Lord.

That's a word that means to be "**bought back**" -- rescued from the broken system where everything decays and comes to an end -- and born into life that cannot end! "He is the God of the Living!" Children of the resurrection inherit eternal life because we are redeemed!

At that cross our Lord said to me: "*Rick, you are not worthy. But you are worth redeeming! Come be my*

child. Come with me now. Whatever this world may do to you here, walk with me into eternity. I am the God of the living, and I will never let you go!"

Let's boil it all down to a few Q&A truths to take with us.

Question: *If I commit my life to Jesus now, can I be sure that eternal life is for me then?* **Yes** -- unequivocally! He has given you both this age, AND the next.

Question: *If life deals me disasters, pains, griefs and losses, who or what can I blame?* Blame life in a broken world. And if you cry out in understandable anger, or in natural fear, or in any kind of pain, cry to God. He can handle it. And He won't love you less.

Question: *Does God know what He's doing ... and does He appreciate what I am facing in this world, where death seems to have the last word?* **Yes, He does.** And He will never let go of you in this age or in the next.

Question: *Why doesn't He solve all the problems, and just make it all go away?* He never promised to do that. That was a human construct. We made that up. And we do not control God. He did, however, promise to walk with you through it all ... no matter how hard it may be.

Statement: *I want to live.* Almost everyone does. And, people of faith are no different. Endings are inevitable. But, in Jesus Christ, endings are not the end. He made us a promise: We are "Children of the Resurrection."

And, yes, of course, this hope can be so very hard to grasp when we think about the end of earthly life. But, we are not alone here. Jesus held out hope -- and hung onto that *same* hope -- in that very circumstance! The scripture we are studying here is from Holy Week. What lay ahead for Jesus was an ugly, painful, terrifying death. And, it is in the midst of His walk to the cross that He can speak to us about eternal life!

Statement: *I don't want to leave the ones I love, and I don't want to leave them alone either. Of course.* And, yes, that is part of the pain we know as finite and fragile human beings. And that pain is a testimony to all that is the best in what our Lord has provided. Letting go hurts. But, we place our lives in His Hands. And we place the lives of our loved ones in those same Hands. And if we are both together in those Hands, then the pains of our partings are temporary, because we will be together in Him Forever! The pain truly is real. But so is the promise!

Last Question: *What's it like to go to Heaven?* I do not know. I intend to know someday. For now, I am trusting in what the Lord Himself has said, and what His scriptures promise. And while a detailed description would really ease my mind, I'm trusting that all the details are known to my Lord – and waiting for me when I meet Him face to face.

What's it like? I don't know. But, maybe a true story will help.

Years ago I heard the testimony of a mother whose little son was desperately sick. The doctor and the parents knew he was dying. And with the intuition of a little child he sensed it.

As he lay in bed one evening, he asked his mother, *"Mommy, what is it like to die?"*

She gulped and pushed back the tears. She excused herself and left the room. She went to the kitchen and laid her head down and wept. She cried out to God for answers. And she would tell later that that was when the answer came.

Drying her eyes, she went back into the sick room, and said, "Honey, think about when you are outside playing all day long. You love that. And you come in at the end of the day so tired that you just lay down on the couch and fall asleep.

"In the night your daddy comes with his big strong arms and gently picks you up, and carries you up to your own bed, and tucks you in. In the morning,

you wake up in your own room, safe where you belong, rested and ready for the day. That's what it's like.

"The Lord who loves you will take you in His strong arms, and when you wake up you will be in the place where you belong. You will be with Jesus."

I'm so grateful to those Sadducees for asking that idiotic question. And for the Great Hope that Jesus declared when He answered it. Amen.

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"The Next Step"

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Luke 20:27-40 again. What stands out to you? Are there any surprises?
2. The passage begins with the Sadducees' attempt to trip and ridicule Jesus. Why do you think that was important to them?
3. The Sadducees' example of ancient marriage law, and their rather silly question to Jesus raises the question of what our relationships will be like in heaven. What do you think we can expect? How do we sort mythology and primitive metaphors from truth about eternal life?
4. The text indicates that we are "people of two ages." Many assume that belief in "the age to come" is just an escapist way of avoiding the stress of the age we live in now. How do we answer them with assurances, and how do we embrace both ages?
5. Jesus called us "children of the resurrection." Peter explained it, suggesting that we are children who "inherit" the blessings of God's family. Are you an inheritor? How can any of us be sure?
6. If the popular image of people becoming angels with harps and wings is a misleading myth, what *do* we know about angels? What do we expect when we meet them in heaven?

7. Jesus said that God is “the God of the living,” and that the living are the ones “considered worthy.” How can we be sure that we are among the “worthy?” What other scriptures or Biblical truths may speak to that question?

8. The pains of this life, and the certainty of death, are so real that they can sometimes leave us depressed and helpless. But Jesus seems to speak hope here.

How can we claim that hope? And how do we hold onto it when life’s stresses are the greatest?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What do you think heaven is like?
What has Jesus done for us that lets us know that we can be with him in heaven someday?