

Facing Up to the Finite Life [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 20:27—38

If you don't mind, I have just a few questions—the first of which concerns the most recent World Series: *'Can anyone here tell me how many touchdowns the Los Angeles Dodgers scored in that last game against the Toronto Blue Jays?'* And here's the second question: *'Can anyone here tell me the ERA, or the Earned Run Average, of the quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks?'* And if you're not into sports, please answer the following interrogation as if your life depended upon it: *'What is your favorite color?'* Now, before anyone consults *Google* to come up with the correct answer, my reasons for beginning like this are extremely tongue-in-cheek. These are not serious questions; in fact, the way I've phrased them constitutes a terrific confusion of categories. Baseball teams do not score touchdowns. Nor do football quarterbacks give up runs. And as far as anyone's favorite color is concerned, life goes on regardless of whether you answered *blue, green, pink, purple, orange* or *burnt umber*.

Even so, now you know. Now you know how Jesus may feel as he stands before the Sadducees (who are this particular denomination of first century Judaism). And now you understand how the problem they present to him isn't a real problem they expect him to solve. On the contrary, in raising the subject, it seems fairly obvious, they want to put Jesus on the spot. They want to knock him back on his heels. They want to catch him off-guard. And I wonder this morning if we can relate. Not all questions put to us are sincere and deserving of a heart-felt and thoughtful reply. And yet, what's so compelling about this passage from Luke 20 is that Jesus takes the opportunity; he welcomes being on the spot; he shifts quite adroitly from his heels to his toes; and he leaves his guard down without flinching one iota.

In the famous game show *Jeopardy*, contestants choose specific categories and provide their responses to clues in the form of a question. When the chosen category is *Belief in the After-life*, for example, the live audience will applaud things and you may add \$200 to your total winnings:

- **Clue:** This key event, central to Christian belief, is the physical rising of Jesus from the dead three days after his crucifixion.
- **Answer:** What is the Resurrection?

And so, here we go. We're playing a game. But do we move onto the next category? Do we qualify for the *Daily Double* or the *Bonus Round*? No. You see, a fellowship of faith like this one is not the place where we congratulate ourselves on memorizing the right answer—and spewing it out like so much trivia. It is the place to really think about it, or at least to come to the edge of our thoughts. I once arrived for a hospital visit, and as I was approaching the room—*Jeopardy* was over—and instead I heard *The Price is Right* blaring from the television. Sadly and unfortunately, the bedridden person had just died; and as the family members streamed out the door, I realized that they had left the television on as their grandfather, father, husband, uncle and friend had taken his last breath. I spoke with a few of them before entering the room myself; and I'll never forget fighting off the feeling that this precious man's life had been trivialized. And as I finished my prayer, the voice from the television was shouting overhead: "Come on down. You're the next contestant on *The Price is Right*." What I'm getting at here is how the Sadducees are attempting to treat Jesus as if he were a contestant on a quiz show. And what I'm getting at is how you and I are constantly cajoled and coerced to reduce the Resurrection from the Dead into something more manageable—into something... maybe we believe?... and maybe we don't? But at least we know the answer. *What is the Resurrection?*

Well, first and foremost, it's definitely *not* an event that happened in the past. That is, as far as the Crucified Jesus is concerned, the earliest Christians believed his Resurrection to be an Intrusion in time, a Mysterious Interruption or a Break in history... Right now, I can look at the clock on the wall and I can notice the passage of seconds and minutes; and if I wanted to I could measure all clicks in that mechanism until I'll be nibbling a cookie during the fellowship-time we host after worship. The Resurrection of Jesus, by contrast, won't be measured. There is no live-on-the-scene reporter giving us the blow-by-blow of air re-entering and exiting his lungs. No gospel writer calculates its duration; if you look at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John what we read about are the *before* and *after*. And that brings me to the second thing that Christians have confessed about Resurrection, which is that Jesus is the first fruits *among many* to undergo the Resurrection-Transformation. First Corinthians 15 is one of my favorite scriptures with hospice patients; and beginning in verse 35, the Apostle Paul unpacks the mystery:

“But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed... But God gives it a body... So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power...”

Now I realize how unlikely all this sounds, which this is precisely why we tend to make the Resurrection into a sort of Trivia Contest, or we sentimentalize it. I'll admit, that certain song-lyrics make me cry. Eric Clapton lost his young son in a terrible accident, and later shared his grief: *“Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven? Would it be the same if I saw you in heaven?”* Similarly, Billy Joel once tried to satisfy his daughter's curiosity about death:

“Someday, we'll all be gone/ But lullabies go on and on/ They never die/ That's how you and I will be...”

But will we? Is that all we'll be? Lullabies? Memories? Legacies? Living wills? Names etched in stone? That's where the Sadducees would like to lead Jesus. *All this resurrection talk is trivia. Let's move on. When you're dead, you're dead. And the best you can hope for is that your children—if you have children—will remember you fondly and carry on your good name. Come on, this is a joke. Imagine a woman who marries eight brothers from the same family and none of these marriages provide an heir. In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? Laugh a little, won't you Jesus? Haven't you seen Gladiator? Are you not entertained? Death smiles at us all. The best a man can do is smile back...* BUT MAYBE NOT! Maybe the best a man—or woman—can do is ponder this extraordinary alternative:

“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, 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. Instead they cannot die anymore because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”

And so, let's delve into this. I don't know about you, but I have at least two questions. First: *Is Jesus saying that individuals who've lost their spouses won't be enjoying a relationship with them in the resurrection?* No, not at all. But it's just that I won't be experiencing my spouse as my spouse, but as a child of God. She won't need to be my spouse and I won't need to be hers. And second: *Is Jesus saying there will no longer be the need for marriage as we understand it?* Yes, indeed, he does seem to be saying that; and for those who fancy how their romances are meant to last forever, I sympathize. I sympathize and I grieve and I wonder about each passing year. And then, with God's help, I face up to the FINITE LIFE I've been given... in the audacious hope of the INFINITE.

Like Angels! Jesus, says that we will be **“like angels”**—which isn’t to say that we will *be* angels in the way Clarence earns his wings in the Frank Capra film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. But being **‘like angels’** suggests that all the distinctions which have pre-occupied us in this finite life won’t ultimately matter as much as we suppose they do now. We’re talking characteristics and identity-markers like gender, sexuality, social status, ethnicity, nationality... All these things can be beautiful while they last. But I’d like to suggest they’re beautiful because they don’t last. And, according to 1 John 3:2, **“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.”**

A few decades back, one of the books by C.S. Lewis caught my attention. I read it in between two romantic relationships—one in high school and the other in college—and both of which I believed would culminate in the perpetual bliss of marriage—and so *we’d live happily ever after*. Anyway, when neither of them panned out, the author of *The Great Divorce* furnished me with an alternative vision. Lewis describes a scene in which a dysfunctional couple, married for many years, meets in some sort of nexus, or half-way point, between heaven and hell; and in this scene, it becomes clear how—during their earthly existence, prior to death—the husband had always guilt-tripped and manipulated his wife; and during their years of a respectable marriage, she went along with it. In *ETERNITY*, however, relationships are Radically Different. And here’s the conversation that takes place between the husband (who appears like a pathetic Dwarf) and the Lady (who appears in resplendent light):

"Oh, don't you understand?" said the Lady. "There are no miseries here."

"Do you mean to say," answered the Dwarf, "do you mean to say you've been happy?"

"Didn't you want me to be? But no matter. Want it now. Or don't think about it at all."

"Look here... We've got to face this." He was using his "manly" bullying tone this time: the one for bringing women to their senses.

"Darling," said the Lady to the Dwarf, "there's nothing to face. You don't want me to have been miserable for misery's sake. You only think I must have been if I loved you. But if you'll only wait you'll see that isn't so."

"Love! Love! Do you know the meaning of the word?"

"How should I not?" said the Lady. "I am in love. In love, do you understand? Yes, now I love truly."

"You mean... you mean—you did not love me truly in the old days?"

"Only in a poor sort of way," she answered. "I have asked you to forgive me. There was a little real love in it. But what we called love down there was mostly the craving to be loved. In the main I loved you for my own sake: because I needed you."

"And now! Now, you need me no more?"

"But of course not! What needs could I have," she said, "now that I have all? I am full now, not empty. I am in Love, not lonely. Strong, not weak. You shall be the same. Come and see. We shall have no need for one another now: we can begin to love truly."

Now, this conversation is a total fiction; but it's not trivial; and it may be truthful. It makes me wonder about all the open-ended questions and vague answers that have bantered about here at Northwood Presbyterian Church. Look around. Listen. Here are marriages, friendships, children and children's children; here are births and deaths; and here are the memories, the blessed memories of those who've fought in various wars. But, you see, none of this is forever. We are fleeting. We fade. We falter. We forget. But thanks be to God. In Christ, God remembers. And in the resurrection—in a time beyond time—WE ARE ALIVE!