

Job 19:23-27a
Luke 20:27-38

If after hearing today's scripture, you go home and google "jokes about the afterlife," you'll find this gem. A husband dies. A few years later, his wife dies. She gets to heaven, and sees her husband. Running up to him with tears in her eyes, she exclaims, "Oh darling, how I've missed you." The husband extends his arms, stopping her from embracing him. "Woah there, woman, the contract was until death." If you read Jesus' words closely today —he basically offers the same punchline.

Heaven, it would seem, still makes for good comedy, just as it did in Jesus' day. The mystery of what follows death is a fascinating element of our faith. At times, it can be great fodder for fun. As entertainment, it plays well — through television like "The Good Place" or movies like "Heaven can Wait," and in almost every New Yorker magazine, a cartoon set in the afterlife. Comedy helps us bear the mystery. What we don't know about the afterlife lets us speculate about what we will someday come to know. Laughter helps us endure what we DO KNOW comes AFTER death — for those who love us— the weight of loss and the disorientation of grief. In the words of the Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard "comedy is transparency through which we can see the serious." Or, perhaps, he meant, live through it.

When the lectionary offered this scripture for today, I was sure my late husband was behind it. I married Jim after his beloved wife died of brain cancer, and he often marveled that he'd found a strong, close, and vital bond with two wives, each different and imperfect, each essential to who he was and who he was becoming. Sometimes I would remind him of this absurd scenario presented to Jesus by those trickster Sadducees. "So, will you be with Terry, or with me, assuming we all make it to heaven?" He said if he answered wrong he might have to sleep on the couch. But I always put my money on me — after all, his first wife was beautiful and outgoing with a twenty-five year head-start on him — so surely she'd have a new boyfriend by the time of his arrival. We'd laugh at our stupid conversation. But behind our silly imagination, we both held legitimate wonder. If there is a heaven, how does it work? And for those who believe in an eternal outcome for our souls, shouldn't the thought of it be a comfort and not a conundrum?

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We all have questions about the afterlife. It is the great mystery, never to be resolved this side of death. Will we see our pets again? Will my Muslim neighbor be there? The child who committed suicide? The confirmed atheist my granddaughter has become? Will I have to forever hang out with annoying Uncle Howard? Can we still watch football there, hopefully with no more campaign ads?

Besides being driven by curiosity, speculation about the afterlife, pondering the logistics of what is to come detaches us from death and distracts us from the agony of separation from those we hold dear. Losing a loved one breaks our hearts as everyone here for the reading of a name knows full well. For my husband, the loss of his wife and his children's mother at the age of 50 was agonizing. Marrying me, he could anticipate my and our kid's journey through grief when he would likely predecease me. We turned the painful eventuality of loss into a funny game and intellectual conversation rather than discuss the real concern — how do we go on when we are awash in grief? Such trivial discussions moved us from HEART to head — to a place safer from the deeper emotions that define grief, feelings that we fear can swallow us, or that have engulfed us in the past.

The Sadducees were up in their heads, as well, though for other reasons. The modern intellectuals in early Judaism, an opposing division to the Pharisees, these Jewish elites only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament — the Torah — as the legitimate scriptures. Since Moses never mentioned resurrection, they rejected outright the possibility of it. For them, death was the end — the final word. This ridiculous idea of resurrection produced the perfect question for them to trap Jesus.

Reaching for a law of Moses in Deuteronomy called levirate marriage, in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his brother's widow, the Sadducees offer a scenario intellectually interesting and emotionally unsettling. With no nod to the trauma and pain a woman goes through when she loses a husband — much less seven of them — the question would more likely appear on an SAT than a pastor's ordination exams, presenting a puzzle that reminds us of how far-fetched and far-off faith can be. Their religion held onto absurd laws about marriage, spousal obligation and family heritage that arose from an oppressive patriarchal culture. (Perhaps a reminder to us in our culture and conversation to keep examining where our faith runs counter to the Gospel Christ continues to clarify for people of faith.)

So they bring Jesus a joke. Rather than snicker as we can't help do when we first hear their question, Jesus shifts the subject from marriage to God — the topic he really wants to talk about. God's heaven and our earth are not the same, he tells them — and eternal life will not be like earthly life. Heaven is not a continuation of life here, so marriage and death are not a concern. Resurrection brings something entirely different and beyond their imagination, though they are not, as good Sadducees, willing to imagine it.

But then Jesus takes a swipe at the Sadducees. Lacking the hope of heavenly reward to motivate good behavior, they have no reason not to live it up. Since this is all there is – the Sadducees go big and go for broke in their pursuit of power and wealth. Known as much for their corruption as their religious devotion, Jesus sees how these rich jerks oppress the hired help and others they consider beneath them. So he evades their intellectual trap with a teaching moment. In heaven, even the lowliest of their society — those who are handled like property, those who are barren and widowed — will be considered like angels. The childless widow and all those marginalized, pushed down, and cast out will be called children of the resurrection — a powerful phrase lost on them, but not on us. To free them from the trap of their own theology, Jesus turns their logical question about resurrection into a cosmic vision, letting go of laws that forced widows to be passed from brother to brother for a future full of dignity and respect. He might have gone farther to condemn their culture that put women on earth to be property for the sole purpose of providing men with children. But at least he makes clear that in God’s culture, this will not stand. Unjust social arrangements, in which women have no standing, no hope, no safety net unless married — have no place in God’s heaven. Those will pass away. The resurrection is a new world, a whole new way of life that we cannot even begin to comprehend. The nature of God is not based on law, or any broken religion — but love. That’s who God is.

Which means that the rewards of heaven are not dictated by life here. As one author points out, “to those whose culture had become their religion, their prescribed social roles their liturgy, he turns it around. In the life to come, there is no socioeconomic status or strata. In the resurrection, those dehumanized will be restored; those oppressed, set free; those treated as inferior will be raised up and called blessed. Women will no longer be property passed from man to man at will and whim. Those from whom joy and peace were withheld on earth will know it full in heaven.”

Jesus’ few words here reflect the whole heart of his ministry, offering hope to those so defeated they can’t image anything but loss or ponder even the promise of freedom. Your suffering will not last. Someday, the poorest in earth’s economy and this life’s lowliest will be considered like angels, children of God who will not be forsaken even in death. For the least, the lost, and the left out, resurrection is a

place of honor and respect. In the life to come — everyone can be who they are with their full humanity's embrace in the divine heart.

But what about in this life? Can the suffering hope for anything more on this side of heaven? Jesus' ministry of inclusive, radical love called us to care for the least of these here and now. His hunger for righteousness is within us and it compels us to work for the dignity and justice and opportunity for all the children of God in this life. Jesus gives us this precious gift — when you want to know what radical hospitality looks like — it will look like this view of Heaven. Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Like the Sadducees, we can easily get caught up in endless conversations about church law or liturgical policies — leaving ourselves open to needless division. The Gospel reminds us that trivial debates about who should be welcomed at the Table, who should be valued in baptism, what translations of the scriptures are allowed — those don't advance the cause of Jesus. While we must point the way for those with no hope to see the hope in heaven, we must be at work to make earth as it is there. Friends, for those who suffer in this life, Jesus had a message of hope.

But he also had a message for those who grieve. Moving this conversation from the head back down into the heart, Jesus speaks right into our pain. Death is the end of many things - but it is not the death of everything. Love lives on when we die. Nadia Bolz-Weber put it this way: "I am no expert in the afterlife, but all I know is that when we die, we somehow return to our divine source. And because God is love, the love we shared here on Earth is the connective tissue that unites us eternally with everyone who loved us. In some inexplicable way, we are all - every single one of us – held together in the heart of God."

On this day we come grieving, we come longing for just one more day with those we love. Friends, whatever else dies, love does not die. In the life to come, things will not be as they were here, but they will be beyond what we can imagine. We can live with our questions now because in time, and in God, those questions will come to rest.