

**A Trick Question about Tomorrow
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 20:27-38**

Do you live your life according to the Word of God? What would be different if you did? A.J. Jacobs, writer and editor at large for *Esquire magazine*—and a self-professed agnostic—embarked on a one-year experiment of trying to “find the original intent of biblical rules and teaching, and follow that to the letter.” By offering a day-by-day account of his experiences—from giving up shaving and hair-cutting to praying and even taking on capital punishment (by stoning—he decided to use smallish pebbles on Sabbath lawbreakers)—Jacobs hoped to show the absurdity of a literal interpretation of Scripture. As he puts it, “If you actually follow all the rules, you’ll spend your days acting like a crazy person.” There’s a lot of silliness in Jacobs’ experiment, but also a growing respect for the underlying themes of Judeo-Christian teaching: justice, kindness, love. And, one suspects, a growing awareness of the God behind the whole enterprise. [*The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible, Simon and Schuster, 2007*]

Jacobs’ farcical experiment came to mind as I read the text for today’s sermon. Here it’s the religious leaders who ask Jesus to comment on a situation that takes a legal requirement of faith to a ridiculous extreme. In so doing, they hope to discredit him and undermine his growing popularity as an authoritative teacher proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ answer exposes their crude ploy, but even more significantly, challenges their cherished understanding of the way God works in this world...and the next. Listen for God’s Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the twentieth chapter at the 27th verse.

[LUKE 20:27-38]

I don't think I've ever had anyone come through the line after the Easter service, pump my hand, and say, "Great music, Reverend, but I just don't buy that part about the empty tomb." They may think it, of course, but just get caught up in the moment of unrestrained joy: *Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth forever and ever; Hallelujah!* I always worry a little that Easter may seem not much more than the church's annual rite of spring—a kind of spiritual "Opening Day" with more hype than hope. So it's good in these autumn days of gathering darkness (and the recent memory of a disappointing defeat) to consider resurrection—and not Jesus' so much as our own. What is going to happen to you, to me, to our beloved ones, after we die?

A few years ago the Barna Group, America's foremost analyst of religion and culture, found that a whopping 80% of Americans believe in some kind of life after death; if you add the 10% who believe we return to earth in a different form, only 10% reject the idea all together. This might suggest that we can skip over this sermon because it's pretty certain none of those 10% darken the door of a church on Sunday, so aren't we preaching to the choir? Maybe yes, maybe no. The question takes on new significance when we remove it from the pollster's questionnaire and ask it as we stare into the grave of our parent, or spouse, or child.

But the Sadducees of our text were not asking to learn, or to find a way to deal with life's hardest hurts. Their minds were already made up. They were the religious rationalists of the day; there was no resurrection of the dead and no heaven; I'll take my reality straight up, no ice. The question they posed referenced an ancient law of Moses: if a man died childless, his brother was required to take the man's widow as his own wife, in hopes of producing an heir, a continuation of his line. Not incidentally, this practice also provided a social safety net for the widow, to provide for her economic well-being. The Sadducees' query obscured the good intent of this law in favor of an absurd scenario that must have had them biting their lips in order to keep from laughing out loud.

Here's where my Christian tolerance and understanding evaporate, because I really, really want Jesus to put the Sadducees in their place the same way I want to put the religious fundamentalists in theirs by retorting, "Well, that's the stupidest question I've ever heard. Why don't you worry about something important like war or poverty or the divorce rate?" But Jesus doesn't say that. Instead, he accepts their question on their terms-- and simply makes the point that there is a world of difference between "this age" and "that age." In this world, people die, and the future of the human race is sustained by procreation. But in the "resurrection of the dead" there is no more dying and thus no more need for regeneration through sexual activity. The future with God is not an extension of our current life with all the bad parts eliminated. Heaven is not an earth where everyone wins the lottery. It's something completely different; something else entirely. Resurrection means something more than resuscitation--it's transformation. A whole new world; a whole new way of being.

This past summer, one of you gave me a fascinating article from the *NY Times* about philosophical and scientific inquiries into the notion of eternal life. Contemporary neuroscience teaches that all we are --our particular identities, consciousness, character, memories, and so on—is rooted in the electrochemical processes of our brains. When those processes cease, the essential "me" dies. But the impeccably-credentialed author of "Immortality Defended" draws on quantum physics to insist that each of us is immortal because our life patterns are but an aspect of an "existentially unified" cosmos that will persist after our death. The soul consists not of matter which decays, but of information, which, according to quantum theory, lasts forever. [*Eternity for Atheists,* article by Jim Holt in the *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 2007] What especially intrigued me about the article is that it focused on the search for eternal life that did not depend upon a deity. Could atheists have their cake and eat it too? Somehow, eternity in cyberspace holds fewer charms for me than singing around the throne of God with the saints in light

(please may my heavenly voice sound like Lisa Litteral!). But that's just me. That some who cannot acknowledge God are yet homesick for the Eternal Mind is a start. And I will not be more certain I understand than the apostle Paul who wrote this about resurrection: *Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. [1 Corinthians 15:51]*

Jesus himself is maddeningly non-specific about that new world and way of being. Throughout his entire earthly ministry, he didn't talk much about the resurrection. He didn't weigh in on cremation, for example. He didn't explain precisely how this mortal body takes on immortality, or how we will relate to other beings. What will we do in heaven? And with whom? Will we know each other? Will Buff and Gretel, beloved pets from childhood, be among the "angels and children of God" or is heaven reserved only for humans? It's hard to imagine and easy to doubt. These, after all, are *not* trick questions. They are real. They are important. And they're unanswerable....

....at least by literalists. We don't have words, or descriptions, or visions from beyond. Even the tunnel and the bright light regularly reported by those who were medically "dead" but were resuscitated, have been attributed to hallucination brought on by oxygen deprivation. No, we don't have literal proof. What the resurrection of the dead will be like is, and will remain, a mystery.

Until, of course, we are resurrected. What Jesus gives us in this text is better than a literal description. We have the profound, yet utterly simple, declaration that God is the God of the living. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob (not to mention Sarah and Hagar and Rebecca and Rachel and Leah)—all those old dead patriarchs and matriarchs are alive, and God is still their God. Jesus speaks of it as "*the fact* that the dead are raised"-- as if there is no question about tomorrow. God is God not of the

dead, but of the living; for to God, Joan and Stu, Bob and Ginny and Betty and Lloyd, soldiers who gave the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country, atheists who died without believing, your precious child and my dad ---to God, all of them are alive. God does not leave us to our own fading beauty, partial intelligence, or inescapable information. In life and in death, we belong body and soul, to God who loves us forever.

The Sadducees had it backwards. The resurrection doesn't render this world insignificant. The tricky question isn't about tomorrow, it's about today. How will you spend the time of your life? For what will you strive? For whom will you dare? The late Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick wrote widely about an afterlife. He offered this bit of advice: Imagine what form of immortality would be best; then live your life right now as though it were true. Hmmmm. Instead of an absurdly literal application of biblical laws and directives, what if we were to envision the Kingdom of God as the prophets described it and Jesus demonstrated it: a world in which the poor have good news for a change; the captives are released from their prisons; the blind recover their sight; the oppressed are set free. What if we imagined that, and then lived right now as though it were true? If we did, I think people would begin to wonder, "Is this heaven?" The knowledge that God is working here and now to bring heaven to earth means this life and this world are of infinite worth and inestimable value. If God is God of the living, that suggests a certain priority—to spend our time transforming reality for the widows, the vulnerable, the suffering, *now*, and trust tomorrow to God.

Friends, the resurrection is a mystery. But God isn't. God is faithful. And God will do it. HALLELUJAH! FOR THE LORD GOD OMNIPOTENT REIGNETH. HALLELUJAH! AMEN.

