

Resurrection – The Seven Husbands Problem

November 9, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Dr. J. Michael Solberg

Texts: Luke 20: 27-40

The years following 167 B.C., were a dark time for our ancestors in faith. Long story short, for self-aggrandizing political reasons, the ruler of the day, Antiochus IV, who gave himself the title “Epiphanes,” meaning “A manifestation of God,” clearly a humble man, ordered the defiling of the Temple in Jerusalem. Rather than smash it to the ground, he decided to claim the Temple as his own, and ordered that every possible unholy thing be done in the Temple to utterly subjugate the Jews. He sacrificed pigs – unholy of course to Jews – on the altar of the Temple, and sprinkled the Temple priests with the blood of the sacrifice. He commanded that the scrolls of scripture be sprinkled with the broth made of the pig’s flesh. He took the eternal flame, burning for centuries before the throne of God, and extinguished it. He forced the high priest and others in power to eat the pork from the sacrificed swine. He outlawed Jewish religious rites and traditions in general, forced people to work on the Sabbath, banned circumcision, and the Temple in Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God, was turned into a syncretic Greek-Jewish cult that included worship of Zeus. Oh, and he slaughtered many, many Jews as well.

So, pretty bad, right? Very, very bad. But you can, of course, push a people too far. And Antiochus had done just that. The Jews of Jerusalem and beyond rose up in protest, a revolution known as the Maccabean Revolt – after farmer turned revolutionary, Judas “the Hammer” Maccabeus.

At first, these rebels had little power or means of resistance, so they conducted a guerilla war, striking here and there where they could, but they grew in numbers and power, and after about 15 years of fighting, they defeated the government forces and controlled all of Judea.

In this 15 years though, huge numbers of Jews were killed, many of them as martyrs for refusing Antiochus’s demands of working on the Sabbath, or eating pork, or bowing down before images of Zeus, which looked very much like images of Antiochus.

These were very dark days for the Jewish people. And, like the holocaust, they profoundly changed the direction of Jewish life and theological reflection. Most significantly, the question of God’s justice came to the forefront in a new way – a way it never had before. The people of Israel had struggled with the justice of God for centuries, of course: trying to figure out how they could hold on to God’s love and justice in the midst of conquest and suffering was a central project of scripture. The answer we see in the Hebrew Bible, and that dominated Jewish thinking was that communal conquest and personal suffering were an expression of God’s righteous judgment – that they had gone astray, broken the law, and God’s chastisement was God’s loving attempt to bring them back to faithfulness again.

But this time, under the rule of this ruthless God-man Antiochus – this time was different. Now, it was precisely those who remained faithful who were being butchered. There was no way to believe they were killed for unfaithfulness – they died faithfully and courageously for the love of God. This was

different, and it brought out a new way of thinking about life and death and judgment.

It was at this time that belief in resurrection and the rewarding of the faithful in the afterlife became a central theme in some schools of Jewish thinking. To uphold the justice and goodness of God, these martyrs, dying for the love of God, had to be rewarded for their faithfulness – and given their deaths, that reward had to come as a restoration and vindication of some kind after death.

And, as I said, this notion became newly central to some schools of Jewish thought. When you read the Hebrew Bible, you will find very, very little about life after death, and even less about a concept of vindication after death. There is, of course, the notion of Sheol – the realm of the dead – but it is nothing to look forward to. It is by definition, devoid of life.

But in this period of martyrdom, a century and a half before Jesus, the notion that the faithful dead would rise in some way, and be vindicated in their faithfulness, grew into a central theme of Judaism.

With that, I hope you can see what's really going on in today's scripture reading from Luke: the problem of the woman with the seven husbands. The Sadducees, a powerful, although perhaps not large, party within Judaism, probably made up mostly of priests and scribes, obviously didn't buy into the "new" thinking about resurrection. They were known for sticking closely to the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, and as I said, there is nothing about resurrection in there. God's justice played out in this life, rewards and punishments came now or never.

Jesus shared the perspective of the Pharisees, however. He believed in the resurrection of the dead, and in a form of God's judgment and justice that extended beyond this life. To the Sadducees and their absurd question about the woman married seven times, which was clearly simply meant to make Jesus look bad, Jesus has two different responses. First, he says, look (and yes, I'm paraphrasing), whatever resurrection is, it is not simply a reestablishment of the way things are now – marriage was established for the birth of children, and in the next life, there is no need for the birth of children, so there will be no marriage. (I could say a lot about that pastorally, but that will have to await another time.)

And secondly, Jesus says that if the Sadducees understood scripture better, they would see that it does indeed teach such a thing as resurrection: for when Moses was at the burning bush, he called God the God of Abraham and God of Isaac and God of Jacob – and if God is, present tense, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then they must be in some sense alive, because God is not the God of the dead but of the living; for to God all are alive.

I don't know about you, but I get the impression here that Jesus is not taking the Sadducees very seriously. It's like they are playing checkers and he's playing four-dimensional chess – he just swats away their trick question with some one-liners and moves on.

But, of course, there is a profound question in all this – as I hope I began to bring out earlier. What about those faithful Jews, martyred under Antiochus, the self-named God-man? What about the faithful of every time and place who see nothing but suffering in this life? Does resurrection, whatever that means, help us put suffering in a more acceptable light? Does it help us trust in the justice of God?

And, as I think it is inevitable to ask, what's really going on here? What is this all about? Is life in this world a tragedy, as so many have concluded? Is there some satisfying resolution to it all, as so many have at least hoped? These are the questions talk of resurrection ultimately leads to.

Here's how I think about these things. I love reason and science and understanding the way things really are. I'm sure some would even say I am a rationalist, as I don't believe in what I call "magical thinking" even when it comes to the Bible and faith. But I do believe in something called "resurrection," a continuation of life that goes beyond this mortal sphere. That's because although practically a rationalist, I am not a materialist. Everything cannot be reduced to material causes. Looking at the evidence, I conclude that we humans, and so much of the rest of life in this world for that matter, are more than biochemical machines.

We are, and I mean this is the grandest sense of the phrase, storied beings – we are rational beings who through living become more than the sum of our parts. We have a sense of the past and the future and we are aware of the strange conundrum of our own existence. It is impossible to reduce consciousness to material causes. There is, by the very fact of living as unique stories in this world, something of the Divine in us. And because we are more than biochemical machines, it is entirely rational to conclude that something of us is not confined to this mortal life.

But that only follows Jesus' response to the Sadducees so far. I suppose that just because we somehow live on, doesn't mean that existence is anything desirable nor does it necessarily reflect the justice of God.

But what is God? God is not a being within creation. God is not simply the greatest conceivable being, even one filled with all goodness and love and beauty and power. God is not a being at all. God is the ground of being itself. The source out of which all that is, is. The one in whom we live and move and have our being.

And that means that God is the end to which all things return. If we are stories created by living in this world, then all those stories come to resolution in the one who is all in all.

There is justice and vindication for all those killed by Antiochus, and brutal rulers of every time and place. There is justice for everyone who dies of cancer, or suffers the slow death of Alzheimer's, and for those who suffer whatever this world throws at them. Their lives, their stories, their selves, are brought to completion in the fullness of the One from whom they came and in whom they find the completion of their story.

But it's even more than that. For we are not simply philosophers, or even theologians, but Christians. And what Jesus revealed to us, what Jesus indeed made possible in this world, is that it is not just the stories of the martyrs and those who unjustly suffer that are made good in God. It's everyone – it's everything. Whatever Jesus' resurrection was – and I think it's best we follow the New Testament and not try to pin it down too precisely – whatever Jesus' resurrection was, it was a statement that even the story of the cross – even the story of those who followed their fear and crucified the one who was God-with-us, even those who attempted to banish God from this world – even their stories are

somehow, someway, someday, made right and brought within the heart of God. They too came from the source of all things, and although their stories went very much awry, it is not too much for God to bring them around in the end.

And if that is good news for them, it is good news for us as well. It is good news for all beings who come from the being of God. Resurrection names God's refusal to abandon us, to abandon anyone, even in death.

If all that is a bit too abstract, let me draw out one practical conclusion. I ask you to look around. Who are these people? What is this, or any, church? We are those who trust in this vision of God bringing everyone home in the end - into the embrace of God. We are those who trust that God enfolds every story into the story of God's love and justice and beauty. And, even more to the point, we are those who seek to embody this vision in the here and now. The church, not the institution, but the people – you people in these pews, and people around the world in pews, on benches, on plastic chairs, on dirt floors – the church as people, is to be nothing less than a foretaste of what God has in store for everyone – everyone brought home in the love of God.

May we be such a people, now and always.

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

