
I Know That My Redeemer Lives! Resurrection and Doctrine

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

"I know that my redeemer lives!" (Job 19:23)

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question... Jesus said, 'Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.' (Luke 20:27-38)

Death is not uncommon here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. All of us – clergy and laity alike—all of us deal with death every week here. We deal with death. We do not avoid it.

Because the Church is where we go –where all of us go—with our deaths. The Church – our local church, wherever it is—is where we take our death when it comes to us. And the same Church that blessed us when we were born, blessed us when we grew up, blessed us when we got married, blessed us when we got sick, blessed us when we rejoiced, blessed us when we lamented – that same Church blesses us when we die.

It is a holy privilege for me to preside at funerals. And I have walked down this aisle during funerals for years now. We form lots of processions at this church. And, at funerals, our opening procession is a procession through death. The church is where we do not avoid death; we process through it. We process through death at church.

When I, or any priest, walks down this aisle during a funeral, we are usually reciting verses from scripture that have to do with resurrection. People do not realize, sometimes, that we are quoting scripture; but we are. "I am resurrection and I am life," we say. "Whether we live or die," we say, "we are the Lord's possession."

And we also say this glorious line from one of the most painful books of the Bible, the Book of Job. In the midst of Job's undeserved suffering, he cries out the passage we heard in today's lesson: "I know that my redeemer lives...in my flesh I shall see God."

These are magnificent words from the Book of Job. But they are controversial. In ancient Judaism, some parties did not believe these words carried the weight of canonical authority. In first century Judaism, there was one religious party who accepted only the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture as authoritative. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy make up the section called the Torah, collectively called the Law.

The other parts of Hebrew Scripture were called the Prophets, such as Samuel and Kings and Isaiah and all. A third part of scripture was known as the Writings, containing Psalms and Proverbs, and this confounding story of Job. (When the Gospel of Matthew claims that Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, he was claiming the Jesus was to fulfill all the various sections of Hebrew Scripture.)

Anyway, the religious party that viewed only the first five books of the Bible as authoritative were the Sadducees. (Do you know why the Sadducees were so unhappy? Well, they were "sad, you see.") They were strict and legalistic. And what they noted, as any of us can note, is that there is no mention of an afterlife, or resurrection, in those first five books of the Bible.

A second religious party were the Pharisees, whom we hear much about in the New Testament as the antagonists of Jesus. Though we often group them together, the Sadducees and the Pharisees were not the

same; they did not believe the same things. The Pharisees did believe in some kind of afterlife, a resurrection; the Sadducees did not. Indeed, the Pharisees were actually more liberal and progressive than the Sadducees. The Pharisees did read, and learn from, such beautiful passages as these words from Job: "I know that my redeemer lives...in my flesh I shall see God."

This is why today's gospel presents the Sadducees testing Jesus with a hypothetical example. They present the hypothetical case: If there is a resurrection in life, what happens when a woman has had seven husbands in life and then is in heaven, in the afterlife. If there is such a thing as resurrection, which of the seven would be her husband?

And the response of Jesus is one of his most brilliant responses, meant not just for the Sadducees, but for the Pharisees, and even for all God's people, even us today! Yes, especially us today, who get tangled up in all sorts of words and doctrines about resurrection and life and afterlife, whatever party we might happen to be part of.

In the resurrection, Jesus preaches, categories and titles are not the same as the ones we use now. In the kingdom of heaven, there is not even any giving in marriage. Status and title and role are gone. Even death, even the category we know as death, is no more.

Jesus quotes their authoritative Torah back to the Sadducees. He says that when Moses spoke about the Lord being the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, he is acknowledging that they are all still alive; because God is not God of the dead but of the living.

"He is not God of the dead, but of the living." This is why our funeral processions quote the Book of Job: "I know that my redeemer lives!" Jesus, and we, are claiming something dramatic and life-changing.

Resurrection is not merely a doctrine, something to be argued about and discussed. Resurrection is not something to believe in. The particulars of what we believe about resurrection do not save us!

It is the experience! It is the experience of resurrection that saves us! Not the doctrine of resurrection!

We follow Jesus in order to experience new life, in order to know new life. We follow Jesus in order to live new life! And that new life is what we call resurrection. "I am the Resurrection and the Life," says Jesus.

A doctrine, in Christianity, is not something we simply decide to believe. A healthy Christian doctrine is something we have experienced! We know it to be true because we have lived it.

We believe that people are sinners because we have experienced it. We believe that Jesus saves us because we have experienced it. We believe that Jesus is resurrection and life because we have experienced new life.

The Lord is not God of the dead, but God of the living. We might also say that the Lord is not God of the "head," but of all that is living! The head is good, and useful. I like to think. I wish all of us thought better these days. We need some good and truthful thinking.

But thinking, alone, does not save us. Right and proper doctrine does not save us. Good and proper obedience to the correct canonical books of scripture does not save us. What saves us is right living. (Orthodoxy does not mean right doctrine; "ortho" plus "doxos" actually means "right praise!") Right praise is what saves us. God is God of the living and not the dead.

And that is why, during funerals at our churches, we proclaim life. We even join Job in proclaiming life, life even in the midst of wrongful suffering and disorder. "I know that my redeemer lives!" We walk through death proclaiming life.

We come to church to be part of a new world. It is a new world we live in, in this church that tries to bring forth the kingdom of God. We got a glimpse of this new world last week, during the days around All Saints Day. We prayed by name for those who have died last year in the church. With the homeless of Atlanta, right here in this Cathedral on Monday night, we prayed by name for those who have died on the streets of Atlanta in the past year.

To God, they are alive! And to us, they are alive! In the Church, we celebrate life, whenever and wherever it is. We believe in a God who is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living. Because we experience a God who is not a God of the dead, but of the living!

AMEN.

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