



# SAINT LUKE'S

“WHAT’S NEXT?”  
PROPER 27C

JOB 19:23-27A  
PSALM 17:1-9  
2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-5,13-17  
LUKE 20:27-38

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY  
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One of my Uncles said about heaven: “I want to believe that there is something but I don’t think there is”. Isn’t that a very human question? What’s next? We may vacillate between believing in the next life and finding it impossible to feel its truth. In Scripture, we see moments of deep belief. Job, in one of the oldest books of the Hebrew Scriptures says: *I know that my redeemer lives*. I think of the philosopher, Blaise Pascal and his testimony of **fire**<sup>1</sup>. On Nov. 23, 1654, he experienced a vision so profound that he wrote it down and sewed the paper into his coat lining, carrying it with him the rest of his life. Pascal’s testimony starts this way: *From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight...FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God.* Have you had moments like that? Moments of sudden connection and revelation, certainty that God exists, Resurrection is real, when you know that a loved one is still alive and you are connected with their spirit through God’s Holy Spirit?

Resurrection cannot be proven by reason or by experience. We have others’ stories and perhaps some experiences of our own. I think it makes an

<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal: 1623-1662.

enormous difference what we believe about the next life. What we believe about resurrection life deeply impacts how we live this life. If we believe that everyone is so loved by God that the essence of a person is of infinite value and lives forever, we will live differently today. We won't use people as pieces in our personal jigsaw puzzle but seek to honor and care for others. Jesus teaches us to strive for a more compassionate and just world today, but when our best efforts fail or fall short, and corruption and abuse of power thrives, we know that evil won't have the last word or endure forever. Today, we get to hear what Jesus believes about Resurrection.

Apart from a few references to the after-life scattered throughout the gospels<sup>2</sup>, today's gospel<sup>3</sup> is the only time Jesus talks about resurrection at any length. He is being quizzed by the Sadducees who during Jesus' life-time, are in competition with the Pharisees. The Sadducees are an aristocratic sect in charge of the Jerusalem Temple. They are the elite power-brokers, the beltway insiders of Jerusalem in Jesus' day. The Sadducees will not survive after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD 40 years after this encounter, but at this time they have no idea that their power and prestige will be gone in two generations. The Pharisees *do* believe in Resurrection. The Sadducees

<sup>2</sup> Eg. Mt. 25:46; Luke 14:14; Lk. 18:30; Jn. 5:29;

<sup>3</sup> and the parallel narratives in Mt. 22:23ff and Mk.12:18ff.

don't, either because they reject the idea of physical resurrection or – as purists – they argue that resurrection cannot be found in Torah, the Law. The Sadducees are trying to manipulate Jesus into endorsing their viewpoint by setting Jesus a trick question. Jesus gives a sincere reply. In heaven there is no need for marriage. Jesus' reply is consistent with Hebrew teaching. The Talmudic Book of blessings (*Berakot*) states: "In the world to come there is not eating and drinking or marrying or envy or hate, but the pious rest with crowns upon their heads, and are satisfied with the glory of God". God will be our joy and fulfillment. What a contrast to this life when we are rarely at peace. There is always something we are longing for, striving for, searching for, hoping for, needing, desiring. The teaching of Talmud and of Jesus is that in the next life, we will be content, resting in God, grateful, at peace.

Jesus also says that to God all people are forever alive...all Jesus' ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and all our ancestors. In Jesus we too are grafted into the eternal Covenant. Jesus believes that in God, no-one is lost. All are held in love for eternity. So Jesus says Resurrected life will be different; we and all our relationships will be transformed. If you believe

something similar, your beliefs align with what Jesus says today. To me this is helpful. One of defining beliefs of Christianity is the physical Resurrection of Jesus, and us. The Apostles Creed, the earliest Creed of the church, says: *We believe in the Resurrection of the Body.* We can put ourselves through mental gymnastics straining to believe in a bodily resurrection. If you find you can believe in physical resurrection that is fine – you align with the early churches’ teaching. But perhaps your beliefs are more like Jesus teaches today: there is a next life but it will take different forms<sup>4</sup>. We will still recognize each other but probably somehow by the shape of our souls not our bodies.

I want to close today with a poem by the late Mary Oliver. She wrote this poem about her beloved dog Percy. Please know that my intention is not to trivialize the gospel message of Resurrection by quoting a poem about a beloved pet. Quite the opposite – for me, it affirms and amplifies the message that Resurrection is a different life, and it is quite possible that, as all Creation is redeemed, so all creatures are eternal. I quite expect to find that dogs go to heaven. Listen for the poet’s longing to hold her beloved Percy, and Percy’s injunction that we cannot cling to this life. We always want more of this life, but

<sup>4</sup> St. Paul also believes that Resurrected “bodies” are different: eg. 1 Corinthians 15:35f, where he speaks of spiritual and imperishable bodies.

we can let go knowing something different and wonderful awaits us all, and all whom we have loved.

### **The First Time Percy Came Back**

*The first time Percy came back  
he was not sailing on a cloud.*

*He was loping along the sand as though  
he had come a great way.*

*"Percy", I cried out, and reached to him –  
those white curls –*

*but he was unreachable. As music  
is present yet you can't touch it.*

*"Yes, it's all different," he said.*

*"You're going to be very surprised."*

*But I wasn't thinking of that. I only  
wanted to hold him. "Listen," he said,*

*"I miss that too.*

*And now you'll be telling stories  
of my coming back*

*and they won't be false, and they won't be true,  
but they'll be real."*

*And then, as he used to, he said, "Let's go!"*

*And we walked down the beach together.*

**AMEN**



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