

Sermon: The Grave Truth
Scripture: Luke 20:27-38
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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The Protestant Christian writer Clarence W. Hall writes “Easter says you can put truth in a grave but it won’t stay there.” Our Lenten series last spring was focused on the 7 deadly sins, but I need to add 2 more to the list. Now if you’re thinking you can’t just keep adding to the list, it’s not the 9 deadly sins, is it? Well, the list has fluctuated over the ages and for those of you who know the Enneagram of Personality, you know that there are 9 types of personality and so there’s 9 corresponding deadly sins to those 9 types. And come on greed, gluttony, envy, lust, anger, sloth and pride while covering a lot of human waywardness, still leave out 2 doozies that especially these days we should make extra room for on the list. The 2 are deceit and fear. If ever there were a list of human proclivities that knock us off-kilter from our call to live God-inspired good and virtuous lives, then fear and deceit would have to be on that list, right?! What a number fear can do to derail our best of intentions and how terribly deceptive we can be with one another and with ourselves.

Lies and deception play such a significant roll in our current political turmoil these days and the result of this deadly sin is evident for all to see. Or if you’ve ever related to an addict in your life, you’ve also likely witnessed the not-so-subtle effects of the sin; the confusion it reaps and the damage it causes. And it’s so often not just the addict protecting the lie of their disease but those who surround them also

who can get so caught up in the deceit themselves as they enable and deny and twist themselves to protect the self or the other. That we have a man in sitting in the highest office in our land who plays very loosely with truth, I believe has had a trickle down disorienting effect on the rest of us so that many many of us, on whatever side of the aisle, do not feel safe right now, are fearful right now. But that is also simply life to some extent, lesser and greater degrees of being vulnerable to the dangers of this world. Those among us who suffer with anxiety might simply in many ways be seeing the truth of the world more clearly than others of us.

Our scriptures refer to fear in two primary ways. Jesus says more than a couple of times – “do not be afraid” and “fear not” – and the wisdom teaching of the Psalms and proverbs suggests what the proper direction of our fear should be God - “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Proverbs 9:10 Like anger, the deadly sin of fear is good and natural to some extent but can quickly spin out into the wildfire of sin if not focused appropriately. And these two sins deceit and fear are related for how often does the sin of deceit arise due to our fear of the consequences of truth. When the chips are down, how many of us will opt for truth over our own safety, our own privilege, our own benefit. Yet this world is designed in a morally coherent way, it’s built to operate on truth and not lies and ultimately while for a time we might put truth in a grave, likely we’re going to find out that it won’t stay there.

Which is a long way of getting to the point of today’s scripture on whether or not resurrection is true. Some would suggest resurrection is

a lie we Christians tell ourselves because we cannot face the truth of the finality of death. Others claim it is God's truth and the acceptance of it as truth determines where we'll find ourselves after death. Some say Jesus resurrected is the heart of Christian faith, others say they can take or leave the resurrection and simply take Jesus as a great teacher and moral guide. But that the belief in resurrection has a bearing on the deadly sin of FEAR, seems to me to be of little doubt, and that it could be a result of the human sin of deceit at least must be entertained because it's either true what we've been told or we've been deceived. So based upon this scripture today I want to speak of what resurrection is and then if you'll allow me a 2-part sermon here before we move into the holidays and the beginning of the church year, next Sunday I'll preach on how we know that what we've been told about the resurrection is not a lie.

So are you clear about what we mean when we talk about the resurrection? I would guess that many of us are not, as prevalent as it is in our Christian theology. The resurrection is now pretty much exclusively thought of in relation to Jesus Christ, but as is evident in our scripture for this morning, it was a belief that had some significant traction in the Judaic world in Jesus' time, which is why it comes up as a debate topic between the Sadducees and Jesus.

The Sadducees aren't referred to in the New Testament as much as the Pharisees, they were rival Jewish factions but as far as the Gospels were concerned both groups were against Jesus. The Sadducees were religious leaders attached to the temple in Jerusalem with significant wealth while the Pharisees were more the religious

leaders of the people in the towns hangin' with the common folk. The two biggest theological differences of the groups of religious leaders were that the Sadducees believed that only the first 5 books of the Bible were authoritative – the Pentateuch – and they didn't believe in a life to come, the resurrection. The Pharisees did believe in resurrection and held that the totality of what we call the Old Testament was authoritative. As the old Bible school mnemonic device went to remember the difference between the two groups – “The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead so they were sad-you-see!”

But they weren't all that sad about it, in fact they were kind of snarky with Jesus as they challenged him about his belief in the resurrection and came up with an extreme example to prove their point; asking what would happen to a woman who had multiple husbands and no children in the afterlife. Whose husband would she be? Jesus responds in 2 ways: first of all by saying that the structures and systems of this world wouldn't be operative in the next and he digs back into the holy books that the Sadducees accepted and showed how Moses refers to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and since God isn't a God of dead things but a God of LIFE that means that those who are dead to us are actually alive to God. The Sadducees bested by Jesus in their argument might THEN have been sad-you-see!

But clearly there was talk and debate and belief about the afterlife within Jewish and Roman communities at the time and truthfully there were as many perspectives on what happens after this life as we have today. The Sadducees didn't believe there was anything after life, that continuity of oneself was through one's blood line and that was it. The

Greco-Roman world tended toward an immortality of the soul approach, where when we die the body is shed and the soul floated away to the afterlife. This was popularized in certain Greek myths as well as Christianized by Dante's *Inferno* and other writings. There was also a belief in between states of being, a shade or shadow state, not living, not dead, some of which could interact with this realm of being.

And along with all of these variety of beliefs came this strange and distinctly Jewish – at the time - belief in resurrection. It is often misunderstood to this day despite the prominent place it holds in Christian belief and theology. The 2 critical things about resurrection as opposed to other beliefs in the afterlife is, first of all, that rather than it being a shedding of the body, resurrection mysteriously involves the body. It's a glorifying of the body, a movement where our physicality is drawn up into eternity. It's very distinct from an immortality of the soul and holds out for the redemption of the material world, which is distinctly Jewish and became distinctly Christian. An example of this being in Jewish scripture is in the Book of Job and thanks to Handel one of the most famous Christian lines from the Old Testament – “I know that my redeemer liveth!” Job says this and continues “and though worm destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God!” That's from the Old Testament, and when the Jews surrounding Jesus experienced him after his death, not as a Ghost but they could touch his wounds and eat breakfast with them, they realized fully what Job meant! From a Christian perspective, God did not become enfleshed in Jesus Christ at Christmas to live a life, get killed, and return back to Spirit. God's enflesh-ment was permanent in Jesus Christ. (I'll revisit that next week)

And the second thing about resurrection is not only that it's corporeal but corporate. The distinction that modern Christians – more children of the enlightenment you might argue than children of the Gospel - lose track of is that the resurrection of the dead is less an individualized saving of the self than it is a corporate event that redeems the world! Well, there's arguments to be had there too. Does the resurrection of the dead involve only a select group or the whole world and all creation? But either way resurrection is corporeal – bodily – and it's corporate – collective or communal. This is what Revelation refers to when it says “And on that day I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had departed.” The final chapter, the end of the story is not a shedding of these bodies and this earth but a redeeming or restoring of it all to its original purity and perfection.

So there are at least 2 beautiful things that I want to lift up about this RIGHTLY understood theology of resurrection – it suggests that those we adore, who we've given our love and our very lives to, and who have died, in the end we will be together in the final consummation and because this earth and these distinct bodies are redeemed and blessed we will recognize one another. It only seems right, no? That it won't be some airy, half distinct shade of the people we knew beyond this life but a more absolute and distinct and perfect figure of the person we knew, the people we loved; the bodies we held and all.

And secondly what we as Christians profess to believe is that in Jesus' resurrection while the end-time redemption of the world has not completely taken place – that's obviously as we look around - the

process has begun. The movement towards the glorification has been initiated and we are invited to participate in that movement. 2000 years is but a hairs-breath from the perspective of eternity but Jesus has begun what will unfold for all creation, a glorifying of body and soul unto God!

So ideally we are no longer afraid of even death itself. We are no longer paralyzed by the thought of those we love forever being taken away from us. Ideally, we can live lives leaned towards the truth of the resurrection know that the deadliest of sins, the worst the world can do can never ultimately separate us – body, mind, and spirit - from the love of God, which is what it's all about in the first place. It gives us reason to opt for truth over deceit even if we and our comfort and our loved ones are threatened by what the truth reveals because we remember that God, Truth, Love is supreme and we can try to put truth in the grave but we cannot – in the end - keep it there.

It's a beautiful thing, but is it true? Is the resurrection true? Jesus said it was. The church has always said it is. So stay tuned - next week I'll give you the proof of it.