
Children of the Resurrection

Luke 20:27-38

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 10, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Staring at me every Sunday to my right and up in the transept. Gazing at me with a bodily presence that seems to probe and study my soul is a multicolored, mosaic stained glass window of a man's body wrapped in death's clothes, yet alive, made alive, resurrected by Jesus—Lazarus, the one whom Jesus loved. Lazarus hangs there with his hands, feet, and eyes uncovered. His eyes, though closed, are glaring, almost intentionally to dare any preacher who stands in this pulpit to doubt the resurrection. His eyes are closed, unlike the other stained glass figures that surround him, so that our eyes may take a wide-open look at his resurrected body. It's as if his body silently asks preachers every week, "Do you believe?" The top middle position of his stained glass presence in the Chapel, facing the pulpit, is not a coincidence. He is not supposed to be overlooked just as resurrection is not to be ignored. You can't preach the gospel if you don't believe in the resurrection because not to believe in the resurrection is to bow down at the altar of death and weep eternally at Lazarus's tomb, as if he's not with us today. But the apostle Paul was right, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor 15:14, NIV). Resurrection is at the heart of the gospel. So brother Lazarus, this one is for you and anyone else who's currently buried under burdens but desperately wants to live. We want to live. We yearn to live on.

But how do we do this? In the ancient patriarchal society of the gospel of Luke, we're offered a glimpse of one approach toward gaining life. Marriage and children. A man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall then marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers and all eventually married the widow but "all seven died childless." That seems to be the headline Jerusalem news but tucked away in smaller font several pages later in a crowded obituary section for unnamed women-only, and as if of no importance, we learn "finally the woman also died." Having seven husbands will kill anyone. Some of you know that even one is a handful and perhaps too much!

This particular scenario reveals the institution of the Levirate, which we find in Deuteronomy (25:5ff)—a widow without a son must go and marry her deceased husband's brother in order to have a son to carry on the name. Males and male offspring matter within a patriarchal perspective of marriage. A woman/wife was something a man took and had, and was instrumental to his need for progeny and an after-life. This Levirate institution was a means to ensure posterity even for a man who died without leaving children of his own. When one does not believe in the resurrection, one's progeny becomes one's means of resurrection. This is a futile attempt to gain an after-life through one's own offspring. Procreation becomes an attempt at resurrection in order to clothe oneself in a kind of immortality through one's children who bear one's name. Marriage and children as a means to a supposed eternal life. A woman, a wife, a child, as commodities for one's own biological perpetuation.

Without the resurrection, procreation becomes the primary means at attempting to extend one's own life rather than the life of God. Because we yearn to live on. It is a kind of reincarnation through bloodline and gene pool. One's name lives on through one's children thus in a sense one lives on through this biological legacy. We desperately desire to live on which is why we have buildings with our names on it, to keep us alive in the memory of generations to come. Having a child was not necessarily about the innocence and beauty of children but about one's status, name, and genetic eternity so that one could live on. When all there is, is just our earthly existence, when all there is, is only dying and death, the way to life, one's own eternal life, is through marriage and children. But what do you do with those who've never been married, don't want to get married, or can't get married? What do you do with those who don't want to have children or can't have children or who will never have children? To live on through a patriarchal paradigm, one has to get married and have a child. But what do you do when the seven die, and the widow woman dies, childless? From this perspective, without earthly progeny, without a belief in the resurrection, one dies, is dead, forever.

But we yearn to live on, almost by any means necessary—money, sex, or power, even if it means power over a child or woman as only an objectified means to a selfish end. Women may not even be viewed as truly human but only as feminine objects to be used and to produce, hopefully another male. The last question the Sadducee asks says it all: “Whose wife will the woman be?” A woman’s status was tied to a male relative. Her socioeconomic security was found in men. Her identity and worth were situated outside of herself and gender. This androcentric oppression is a byproduct of disbelief in the resurrection and living in, through, and by this disbelief. By doing so, our earthly existence only becomes about ourselves and our eternal life on earth and whatever it takes to live on, we’ll do it. There may even be a fear that roles might be reversed and the question may become, “Whose husband will the man be?” But I’m still waiting to hear that question.

Thus, out of fear, and despite the fact, that many churches would barely survive without the presence of women and their gifts, the ecclesiastical office of preachers and pastors remain predominantly preserved for men today. Women may teach a Christian education class perhaps, sing in the choir, serve in the nursery, they may even testify from the floor but cannot preach from the pulpit in many congregations. And if they are ordained as pastors, there may be restrictions on them for becoming bishops. We can’t seem to break the machismo mentality that asks, “Whose wife will the woman be?” This attitude is why 19th century evangelist, Jarena Lee, in recounting her call to preach, writes, “O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper, for a woman to preach? Seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as the man. If a man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one? As those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach would seem to make it appear. Did not Mary first preach the risen Saviour....”

The irony is that God chose a woman’s womb to give birth to an enfleshed Word for the world. Without this young woman overshadowed by the Holy Spirit there would not be the incarnate Word yet some can still teach that women today should not proclaim the word of God in some ecclesial settings. We’ve distorted Christianity to such an extent that it is not about life anymore, and definitely not about resurrection, but only about death after death after death on the way to our own after-life. The seven died and the woman died. Who will be the next to die? The abjection and rejection of certain bodies will continue in order for some bodies to live on at the expense of the death of others. There are many diverse bodies “whose lives are not considered to be “lives” at all and whose materiality is understood not to “mat-ter”(Judith Butler). It could be a woman. It could be a child.

Malala Yousafzai, a 15 year old girl, was living in the Swat Valley in Pakistan when the Taliban took control of the region. She, along with other girls, yearned to live and desired an education in a patriarchal society so they secretly went to school six mornings a week; the school no longer had a sign outside of its building but only an ornamented brass door in a white wall that gave no hints of its educational purpose. On October 9, 2012, something changed Malala’s life forever. She always comforted herself with what others said: “The Taliban have never come for a small girl.” But on this day, they came for her during her ride home on the school bus as she sat with other girls. The young man didn’t ask, “whose wife will the woman be?” but “Who is Malala?” Both questions were agents of death. Malala was shot in the head at point-blank range. Miraculously, she survived and has been a champion for universal access to education and a symbol of peace, even being the youngest nominee ever for the Nobel Peace Prize.

What happened to Malala is a symptom of when one doesn’t believe in the resurrection because the resurrection will regulate what is wrong in our thinking and acting. That God raised Jesus from the dead is the promise and foundation for belief in the resurrection from the dead. “If there is no resurrection of the dead,” as Paul writes, “then Christ has not been raised” (1 Cor 15:13). His resurrection is the eschatological symbol of what is to come. His resurrection is the first fruits from the dead of God’s future for the world, a resurrected future for his children. And this resurrection affects our earthly existence because Jesus does not propagate the Neoplatonic ideal of immortality of the soul in which one is to escape our bodily reality. He asserts that the dead are raised thus resurrection says that even though we die, God restores the dead to life. Not just the soul is

raised but the body. “I believe...in the resurrection of the body,” according to the Apostle’s Creed. Resurrection asserts that our bodies matter, are redeemed and are given life through God’s power. This is rooted in Christ’s own bodily resurrection. The future meets the present through Christ’s resurrection and it’s significant that the resurrection happened “within our own world” (N.T. Wright) thus its effects should be felt in our world. It redeems the way we live on earth as God’s children because it touches the earth and challenges the mission of the church to anticipate God’s future purposes through concrete action in the direction of God’s life-giving future. Even the story of the burning bush and Moses, that Jesus mentions, implies the materiality and incarnational nature of the resurrection. Earthly existence is shaped because the resurrection of Christ happened in this world. To believe in resurrection is not to be so heavenly-minded and no earthly good, but it is to be earthly-good, earthly-minded, heavenly-minded and heavenly-good.

The resurrection should reorient our world and us. The resurrection from the dead, that the “dead are raised,” fundamentally shifts our relationships because the conditions of this world in which some seek procreation as means to their own perpetuity do not set the conditions of God’s world. Resurrection reshapes our reality now and then because there is no longer a distinction between male/husband, female/wife, and child because all are children of God. Childless, single, men, women, everyone, matters because all are children of God, children of the resurrection. The resurrection raises us up in God’s family thus redefining family and community. There is no domination or patriarchy in the family of God as God’s children. It is egalitarian. The resurrection overturns the stinging death of hierarchical relationships because all are human beings placed on an even and equal plane as children of God.

Through the lens of resurrection, those who desired children become children themselves to indicate that our value is not rooted in producing anything but in being children of God. We are not human doings. We are human beings. Our worth comes from God. To marry or have children is not the goal from the perspective of the resurrection. The goal is to be alive to God as God’s children, children of the resurrection, because God is a living God, “not of the dead, but of the living.” To be a child of God means you are alive to God. Others may not see it that way but that is because they disbelieve in a God of the resurrection and only trust in a God of dying and death. But you are not dead from the perspective of a God of the resurrection. You are alive because a God who is alive will not produce dead children. His bloodline flows with life-giving energy. Living on has nothing to do with procreation and everything to do with God. Children of the resurrection are God’s progeny. It is about the legacy of God’s life and God’s name in the world. It is not about perpetuating a human name but God’s holy character and life. It is not about us but about the resurrection and the new life of God in and through us for the life of the world. Not about our legacy but God’s eternity, not about our procreative acts but about being created by God in his image to live to die and to be raised from death forever. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you”(Rom 8:9-11). We are earthen vessels of resurrection. Ambassadors of resurrection light.

As children of the resurrection we do not believe in immortal death but believe that life can come out of death, that a cross is part of a redemption story, that a grave is not a dead end street, that our future is not closed but like the grave of Jesus, it is open; this is because our earthly existence does not confine the existence of the living God. Even as he’s on his way to death, Jesus speaks of resurrection as resistance to the powers of death, those powers that would even refuse to believe in the resurrection. But one’s disbelief in resurrection cannot stop the God of resurrection because nothing God does dies forever. Even the blood of Christ that dripped from the wooden branches of an old-rugged tree sowed seeds of hope that blossomed into the resurrection of a new creation. It may take three days or 40 days and 40 nights but resurrection to the Promised Land will come. Stained glass Lazarus reminds me of this and as children of the resurrection, we don’t have to give up on God, others, or even ourselves because God never gives up on us. Right, Lazarus? Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.