

# ST BART'S



**A Sermon by:**

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## Why Wait For What We Can Have Now?

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 10, 2013  
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 20:27-38*

It is so hard not to make a joke about this story. After marrying seven brothers, each of whom died, the gospel says: "Finally the woman also died"—to which I can only say, who can blame her? Enough already. Despite how it appears, this is not a story about levirate marriage at all—the practice of intra-family marriage, a widow's being married to the brother of her deceased husband. We could make that the story, for it was indeed both awful and protective for women at the time, but truly it was simply the way life was; no one questioned it. The real story is the ongoing argument between the Sadducees and the Pharisees over the question of resurrection and particularly the desire of the Sadducees to outwit Jesus in this thorny discussion.

Though knowing what I am about to tell you may not change any of our lives, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the Sadducees were a group of Jewish leaders whose followers came primarily from the aristocracy, the high priestly families. More conservative than the Pharisees, they and their followers were much more comfortable with the status quo and not surprisingly, as those with more power often do, considered themselves to be the real keepers of the faith, the ones who were right. The Pharisees, on the other hand—though in contrast to how we often portray them—were more in tune with people, their followers being less aristocratic and more affected by the hard plight of ordinary Jews. As in the case of other oppressed people through the ages, the people to whom the Pharisees spoke needed the notion of resurrection. They acknowledged how desperate life was for many and presented the idea of life beyond the current moment as a reward for living through such trials. "Yes," the Pharisee might say, "life is hard, even desperate, for you now; but live faithfully and your reward will be in heaven."

In this instance, and likely in most, Jesus is more aligned with the Pharisees than with the Sadducees. The answer Luke has Jesus give to the queries of the Sadducees clearly places him in the resurrection camp. It is also Luke who attributes to Jesus the easily remembered and oft-repeated comment made to the thief on the cross next to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

In living with this story this week, a story that essentially is just a side story in the saga of Jesus, I have found myself more moved by it than I would have expected to be. It has caused me to think as honestly as I can about our beliefs about resurrection, not so much Jesus' resurrection as ours. What do we believe about eternal life? The doctrine of eternal life has been a constant one in the Christian faith—one with which we have been confronted all our lives.

William James, the great philosopher around the turn of the 20th century, once said, "Religion for the great majority of people means immortality and nothing else." In other words, when all else is said and done, most people, he argued, are primarily interested in religion for its addressing this issue of life eternal. A hundred years later, I think to a large extent his assertion may still be about right. Many of us want the assurance that this life is not all there is; and though our desire to be open-minded keeps us from admitting it, we further hope that our religion, if not the only one, is itself right enough to assure us that we will qualify for the next life.

The first hurdle for us as a modern culture in approaching the notion of eternal life is to get beyond the immediate moment. Permanence is fleeting; nothing lasts long for us. When the

latest Apple gadget comes out, we are torn; we want to get it that moment but also want to give it a little time for the bugs to be worked out. But we don't want to wait too long because we know that its newer, faster, lighter replacement is moments away from being mass-produced somewhere in a country far away! Only the truly individuated embrace fashions beyond a season or so. Even those of us who claim we haven't changed styles in 30 years must admit otherwise when we look through photo albums. Sadly I once had a Nehru jacket, wrong in any age—and that doesn't even approach the bellbottoms. And more sadly, even our dearest and most intimate relationships often fall victim to the widespread nature of cultural impermanence. Contemplating forever is incongruous with the speed of our lives, and though I believe we still yearn for permanence in loving relationships, the work required for truly long lasting ties is a bit overwhelming.

Perhaps what William James claims about us is truest only as we get older. It is then that we begin to wonder what eternal life really means. What will it be like? Does it exist at all? Is there really a heaven? Is there really a hell? Scripture is strangely reticent about descriptions of either, and the few descriptions that do exist are often given in such metaphorical and/or extreme language that we remain short on specifics. It is a stretch for modern folks to imagine streets of gold or pits of burning fire.

This pulpit may be an unusual platform from which to proclaim the spirituality of agnosticism, but it may be the best message I have for you today. For me, in a growing number of areas, and particularly in regard to this question, a version of non-angst-ridden and strangely faithful agnosticism seems not only the most humble but also perhaps the best position to take. Nobody knows about life beyond this one. Our language simply is not adequate to describe what almost certainly for us remains in the category of ineffable hope. Any definitude we achieve is about us much more than about the "reality" we are attempting to describe. Being quite precise about life beyond this one is not only insufficient but also dangerous because it almost invariably—at least as religion has been lived out—takes on the character of being wonderful for some and not so fabulous for others. Additionally, again seemingly inevitably, the promise or threat of eternal life comes to be seen as a form of behavior control. Of this, I am pretty clear: That just doesn't work. If it did, people—including us—would act better! Besides that, acting in a certain way just to secure a reward or win a prize is a shallow understanding of ethical and moral living. Surely God can't be about that.

The best way I can begin to even approach an understanding of life after death is to realize that eternity has already begun for all of us. When Jesus spoke of eternal life in this text and in other places, it is my earnest belief that he was talking about something that is very real but also very different from what we normally think. Paul Tillich describes what I believe Jesus was referring to as the "eternal now." Eternal life is either here and now or it isn't at all. It is found in every relationship in every moment of every day—on good days and bad days, in good relationships and in bad relationships.

Our joy as children of God is to enter the infinity of eternity now—to live it, to love it, not to explain it! Jesus must have found the positioning of the Sadducees to be sad indeed. With what appears to be more than a little exasperation, Jesus finally says to them, "God is not the God of the dead; God is the God of the living—those living now and those living forever." Eternal life is not about waiting; it is about choosing to live now. In a twist from what we usually say about living today as though it were our last, in fact we choose to live today not because tomorrow we might die but because today we are alive! Resurrection not only awaits us; it surrounds us, demanding that we be conscious and alive—alive to ourselves, to one another, and to God.

In the end, we can believe what we want to believe about the next life, about whom we will know or not know, about what it will really be like; and if that helps us, so be it. But what we really know is that this is the moment we are alive, and the real question remains: What will YOU do with it?

In the name of the God. *Amen.*