

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on November 10, 2019 (All Souls/RCL Proper 27 Year C)

A few years ago, I made a last minute decision to fly home to Chicago for Thanksgiving. Flight prices had plummeted, and I was missing my family. So I flew in on Thanksgiving afternoon for a surprise 24-hour visit.

That night, my brothers and I made the 30 minute drive to visit my Uncle Chuck. I say uncle, but that doesn't really capture it. My uncle was my dad's only sibling. He was his partner and co-worker at "the shop," the auto repair business they founded where all of us were pressed into service. For the first year of my life, he and his family were our upstairs neighbors. His kids were our favorite cousins. And, to me, he was my "compare," my Italian godfather. At the end of that Thanksgiving night, he walked me out, and waited on the front stoop as I got into the car. I blew him a kiss and he waved as I drove away.

The next day, we got a call from the shop. My uncle wasn't feeling well, and my dad, who had lingered with me over coffee, needed to hurry in. Dad started to get himself together, and then we got another call. My dad rushed out the door. Before he could drive the mile to the shop, my perfect healthy uncle had died of a heart attack.

He was here, and then he was gone. As I said over and over again in those first weeks and months, it felt like standing on the edge of an abyss-- like the earth had opened up and the ground just in front of me had disappeared completely, and I was left looking out into nothingness.

Today we remember all of those who, as the prayer book puts it, we love but see no longer. I imagine that many of us are holding someone or maybe someones in particular in our hearts. For some of us it was sudden. For others, it was a long road, in some cases even a relief. For some, it's in between.

However "prepared" we are or aren't, whatever that means, it can feel like a hole has been torn in our lives. There is an absence, an emptiness, a missing. As we keep living, we are painfully aware of all the spaces in our lives that the person we love used to fill. As we keep living into our futures, we stumble into the places we hoped and imagined that they would be. And if we are left with unresolved conflict, with hurts that had not had the chance to heal, the edges of that hole are especially jagged.

In the face of the abyss, we are not alone. Our Scriptures are full of stories of people who figure out how to keep living in the after. After exile. After death. After their own terrible mistakes. After everything falls apart. In fact, that is the story of the church. Figuring out how to live after Jesus. They offer us both wisdom and companionship.

We find some of that wisdom in this morning's Gospel, which comes from the last week of Jesus' life. Palm Sunday has already happened. Jesus is in Jerusalem, hanging out in the temple, and doing his last bit of teaching and ministry. The chief priests, scribes, and leaders are afraid of how the Romans will respond to Jesus. So here at the temple, they are challenging him, sparring and disputing with him in an attempt to discredit him. It's not working. In this particular passage, the Sadducees take their turn. The Sadducees are among the Jerusalem elites. And most importantly for our purposes today, they only regard the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish bible, as scripture. Because resurrection is not mentioned explicitly in these books, they don't believe in it. And so they step up to try to stump Jesus AND prove their point about resurrection in one fell swoop.

They offer Jesus this bizarre, hypothetical scenario. A man dies, leaving behind a childless widow. According to a tradition in the Torah, the man's brother marries the widow. He also dies. In fact, all seven brothers eventually marry the woman and die, none of them producing a child. "Aha!" they say. "How does the resurrection deal with *that*?"

I find this hypothetical upsetting. This tradition was designed to protect widows, but here, pushed to its preposterous extreme, she is treated like property, with no agency of her own. And it's upsetting because Jesus seems to be saying that there is no marriage in the resurrection. For those of us who long to be reunited with people we love, it's a slap in the face.

Let me be very clear: Jesus is *not* saying that we won't be reunited to those we love. Not in the least. It's important to keep in mind that the Sadducees are trying to stump Jesus. They're not coming to him for pastoral counsel, and if they were, I dare say he would have responded much differently. Jesus is refusing to answer the question. He is saying, it is entirely beside the point. Life in the resurrection is *qualitatively* different than life on earth. Our existence is transformed, and we become like angels. The rules and concerns and questions and logistics that plague us on earth, they will not matter in the resurrection. You are missing the point. You are missing the great gift that God is offering.

But it's really Jesus' second response that offers wisdom for living in the after. He argues that the Torah does actually affirm the resurrection. His argument is based, of all things, on grammar. When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, God says: I AM the God of Abraham, I AM the God of Isaac, I AM the God of Jacob. God speaks of our forebears in the present tense. All those we love but see no longer, *we* may speak of them in the past tense. But *God* speaks of them in the present tense because, *to God, in God*, all of them are alive.

For Jesus, on the threshold of his passion, questions about death and resurrection are not hypothetical. He has fears and anxieties. And he is concerned about his friends who, despite his repeated warnings, still don't see this coming. His death will shake them to their core, leaving them feeling like they are standing on the edge of an abyss.

Jesus offers his response in the hearing of these friends. "To God, all who have gone before are still alive." We no longer see or touch the people we love who have died. But that doesn't mean that they are gone. What looks and feels initially like a hole, an absence, is not actually nothingness. In the days and weeks after my uncle died, as the shock began to wear off and I could start to look beyond what was missing, I could begin lay hold of what I believe and know to be true. As the prayer we will say at the Eucharist, the same prayer we say at every funeral puts it, "to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended." Life is changed, not ended. It is different, not gone. Those we love and see no longer are alive in God. They remain bound to us in the communion of saints, in the life of God of which we, too, are part. With Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, they are part of that company of heaven. They join with us in the heavenly chorus as we gather at this table and sing. They share with us in this banquet. And they walk with us, continuing to love us and companion us as we keep living in the after.

Today we honor and hold these things together—the grief we rightfully have for the ones we love but no longer see or touch—and our hope that, through the grace and love of God, they are still alive. They remain bound to us. And one day we will again see them face to face. Amen.