



**Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 16
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One of the things I find myself doing quite a lot is funeral services.

That's not a surprise – funerals are one of the things clergy do, and of course I knew before I was ordained that this would be part of what I did!

But equally, it's difficult to predict how it will feel to take funeral services. The first one I took was about two years ago – and I remember the mixture of terror, privilege and worry as I prepared for it. The enormous privilege that this family had entrusted me with the responsibility of saying goodbye to their dad, granddad, brother. And the enormous weight of responsibility of carrying all their emotions, all their grief and pain, and bringing them into the context of the hope of resurrection.

And that's still how I feel as I prepare for funerals. A privilege, and a terrifying responsibility. A sense that my job is to hold people in their grief, and yet still convey God's message of hope: the message of resurrection life.

Which is difficult – and something that I (and perhaps, at least I hope, other clergy!) don't always get right. Often, people want to talk about death as – in the words of a rather unhelpful poem – being nothing at all; heaven as just being in the next room. And just as in funeral services, at this time of year, this season of remembrance where themes of death and grief and loss come back week after week in all sorts of different ways, we don't necessarily hear very much about resurrection life. And that means we, like the Sadducees, can get the wrong idea.

The Sadducees turn up in the Temple with the idea that resurrection is ridiculous, hoping to use a silly example to trap Jesus into saying something that the rest of those listening would find unacceptable. And to their surprise, Jesus agrees with them. Their idea of resurrection is ridiculous. They're right to reject the idea that eternal life is a simple, straightforward continuation of the life we know. Resurrection life is completely different.

But, says Jesus, that doesn't mean there is no resurrection.

Resurrection life is not just about a hope of heaven, an imagined future for the people who we love who have died. If we think of it like that, we can easily make the mistake the Sadducees did of assuming that there's nothing more to resurrection life than some more of the same – just being in the next room. And if we make that mistake, we're likely to make one of two others. Either, like the Sadducees, we assume that this makes resurrection just wishful thinking – a myth, that we make up to make ourselves feel better when someone we love dies. Or, we end up thinking that life in heaven will be exactly like life on earth.

And that's wrong, Jesus says.

Because of the particular silly example the Sadducees chose, it's easy to get the wrong idea about what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not saying that the relationships we have on earth are going to disappear in heaven – quite the opposite! But he is saying that the way life on earth works is not the way that resurrection life will work.

Marriage, in Jesus' time, wasn't primarily about love or companionship. Marriage was about having children – carrying on the family. The Sadducees' silly story makes that clear – this poor woman had 7 husbands all trying to use her to get the children who would carry on the family name. And this idea of carrying on the family is an idea that's rooted in human mortality.

That makes sense, doesn't it – it's part of human experience, not just in the time of Jesus but through history. We find it in Shakespeare: in one of his sonnets he tells the young man he loves to have children, so that his beauty doesn't die with him but carries on.

So Jesus is saying not that there is no room for our earthly relationships in heaven – but that the whole purpose of our resurrection lives will be different and reoriented: with no death to worry about, but even more, with the nearer presence of God to shape the way we think and act and feel. Things will be different; renewed; better.

Towards the end of funeral services, as most of us will know, we commit the person into God's keeping. And the words we use are these:

“in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body, who died, was buried and rose again for us.”

That is, just as the risen Jesus was like, but unlike the Jesus who had lived alongside his friends – they knew him, and yet he was different, changed, beyond human – so the life of the world to come isn't continuous with the life of this world.

The shape of resurrection life is created by the shape of Jesus' risen life: a life beyond death, beyond the merely human, beyond the pain and grief and choosing the best of bad options that shapes human life.

It's easy to cling on to this life – even with all its pain and prospect of death.

But resurrection hope is not about clinging on to this life, whether by avoiding all mention of death or by assuming that life in heaven is exactly the same. Resurrection hope is about believing in a God who is so vibrantly, dramatically alive that what we think of as life doesn't even register on the scale.

God is the living God: the God from whom all life comes, in whom all are made alive. That idea runs throughout the Bible: God breathes life into the world and into human beings in the act of creation. God, through the prophets, breathes life into the dead.

Even Job, from the depths of despair, cries out that God is the God who is powerfully, vibrantly alive. I know that my Redeemer lives! Even in the depths of suffering where Job has no hope of healing other than death, Job cries out in faith: God is the Redeemer. In the power of God's redeeming life, even the sick, grieving and broken Job trusts that he can be brought to life. And this is our resurrection hope.

God will take all the things that are wrong with this broken human world – a world that has been shaped by people turning away from God and a world where pain, grief and disappointment are always going to shape our experiences – and God will make all those things new.

So at this season when we look back at those we have loved and lost, as we will this evening, we do that with a new perspective – a resurrection perspective and a resurrection hope. We do that in the hope – the sure and certain hope – that God will restore them, and us, to life – not just putting things back the way they were, as the Sadducees assumed, but renewing them into the way things ought to be. Breathing life into us in a new way. Bringing us into the new world: the world of the living God. And breathing into us new and resurrection life: life restored by the living God, life no longer shaped by sin or mortality.