



My Shepherd

TEXT
Psalm 23
Luke 20:27-39

April 10, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The resurrection of Jesus changes our lives now. Resurrection also touches the whole cosmos — the whole of creation that God loves. And the resurrection of Jesus is the reason we can have confidence in God’s promised day, the day when all of life is lived as God intends it. But I don’t want to be cosmic today. I don’t want to be ethical today. Today I just want to talk about heaven.

One Saturday morning, I got a knock on the door of my study here. “I hate to bother you.” He had put a flower in a vase in the columbarium. “I just wanted to ask you, do you think she will be waiting for me? Well, not waiting ... but do you think we will know each other?”

I don’t know if he had read this passage where Jesus says in the resurrection that we neither marry nor are given in marriage. (That doesn’t sound like good news to me. Carol is still mulling it over.) His question may have been the kind of question that just comes from grief. But this passage wouldn’t seem to help.

He said, “Do you think we will know each other? Truth be told, if I can’t be with her there, I’m not sure I want to go.”

I understand that. It was a cold January in 1987. William Voegelein lay in a casket not six feet from me. He had lived 95 years. The last several years had been hard ones for him. I had been a pastor for six months. I was 26 years old. I had never done a funeral.

I said, “Christ is the resurrection and the life.”¹ I said, “Nothing separates us from the love of God.”² I said, “Do not be afraid” — but the truth is, my knees were shaking. I can confess it now: I didn’t feel confident enough in resurrection to lead such a service.

I thought William Voegelein was a fine man. In an earlier season, he had been an elder in the church. He was respected by everyone who knew him. And he was loved by a woman whom he had loved for over 65 years. Had she asked me, “Will he be waiting for me?” I’m not sure I would have known what to say. I say that because I can’t say that I loved William Voegelein. I have learned this: There is no way to talk about resurrection unless love is involved.

When Jesus wanted to tell us about heaven, he tried to talk in ways we could understand. He said things like, “In my Father’s house are many rooms ... and I go to prepare a place for you.”

“Today you will be with me in Paradise.” “I am the resurrection and the life.”

But of all the things that Jesus said about heaven, this conversation with the Sadducees is the most unsettling.

Some Sadducees came to Jesus with their resurrection talk, and they sound like grad students. I don’t mean disrespect here; I’ve been a grad student myself. I say that because their question is academic. They are engaging in theological jousting. They sound like the guys on *Car Talk* when they do the puzzler:

Say there was this woman, and her husband died, leaving no children. Say, like the law requires, her husband’s brother married her, and he died; and so on and so on, until all seven brothers had married her. (It seems like after the third or fourth brother, they would have stopped eating the soup ... just saying.)

When they all get to heaven, who is she going to be married to? They looked at each other with approving eye twinkle. They were just trying to trick him up. They wanted to show Jesus how resurrection makes no sense. It was theological jousting.

Their question reveals two things. Firstly, they assumed heaven was just eternal life. Sec-

only, they couldn't imagine God being any bigger than their own reason. So what is Jesus getting at in this conversation with the Sadducees: "Those in the age to come neither marry nor are given in marriage"?

If I understand the text, Jesus is saying, resurrection is not simply more of life — but a transformed life. It's not just life eternal; it's God's promised day.

Charlie Cousar is a New Testament scholar and former colleague of Rodger's at Columbia Seminary. He has said, "Our temptation is to take something good in this life and raise it to the n^{th} power and call it heaven." He's right. We talk about heaven as streets of gold or music of angels or perfect tee times or an endless Caribbean vacation.

Heaven is not about tee times or dancing or days without rain. Heaven it is about relationships. It is about our relationships defined by love that make us whole and holy and that death cannot destroy. In heaven, we are transformed. We become our best self — a self that in this age we have only known in glimpses.

Here's my experience. We spend a lifetime becoming a person — becoming the person we are intended to be. This is what I mean: I was ordained in a sweltering Carolina summer in 1986. And the truth is, I thought I was going to be pretty good. But I was green as the first grass of spring. When it came to ministry, I didn't have a clue about how much I didn't have a clue about.

I've learned some things. I've grown a bit. I've got more to learn, and I haven't finished grow-

ing, I hope. Mostly, I've learned that when it comes to ministry, you just make your offering and let God do what God will do.

I got married in the same sanctuary a year later. I was the luckiest guy in South Carolina. When it came to marriage, I didn't have a clue about how many things I didn't have a clue about. It will be 29 years this summer. I've learned some things. In marriage, luck is nice, but it will take more than luck to see you through. And when it comes to marriage, it's not just the feelings we have; it's the choices we make that demonstrate love.

In 1973, I was confirmed. I promised that Jesus Christ was my Lord and Savior. I didn't have a clue. I only know a little more now, except I know I want to please him in a way I couldn't imagine in 1973.

At any given point, we are who we are, but we also change. We spend a lifetime becoming who we are in this world. And in the end, we are a mixed bag. There is good and there is bad in me. There are moments I am proud of, and there are moments I am ashamed of. If resurrection is more of that eternally, it's not heaven.

I did a memorial service; I'll say his name was Frank. I loved Frank. He was the best Sunday school teacher I ever knew, winsome and bright; he always had an encouraging word. When he died, I knew the church would be packed. It was. What I didn't know about Frank, I learned from his children — all grown, all living out of town. I told them of the great man I knew their father to be. They listened, and then they

told me why they lived so far away: "He beat us when we were kids. He beat us all the time."

He was a great man, but he was not his best self. He needed to be transformed.

There is greatness in us, but there is also need for transformation — in all of us. Heaven is more than the best we know in this life. It is the best "us" that God always intended. We finally become the person God intends us to be.

If I understand the text, Jesus isn't saying that we won't know each other, we won't love each other. He is saying we can't think of heaven as just more of this life. In the resurrection, we are made new. We can't talk about resurrection apart from transformation.

Unlike these Sadducees, most of the conversations I have about heaven are not theological jousting, but rather they take place because a heart is broken. Every Sunday, I see those of you who, with great courage, come to worship and face the loneliness of the empty place next to you. I know it takes courage, but I hope you keep coming — because peace comes. You ask these same questions, but there is nothing academic about your questions.

He wanted to know: "Do you think we will know each other?" I think we will know each other. It's the only way for us to be in heaven. I am not a person in isolation. I am only Tom in the relationships of love that constitute my life. It's true for all of us. Take that network away and who are we?

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, Nathan

Price travels with his family of four daughters to the Congo in 1959 to serve as a missionary. They face many trials. But the turning point, the point that brings them home, is the death of the youngest child, Ruth May. She is bitten by a poisonous snake and dies in minutes.

Rachel, the firstborn, says this: “The whole world would change then, and nothing would ever be all right again. Not for our family. All the other people in the whole wide world might go on about their business, but for us it would never be normal again.”³

Grief feels like that. When we grieve, it feels that nothing will ever be normal again. We grieve because we love. Grief is what love looks like when death has pulled us apart. When death comes, all who love grieve — which means God also grieves. So from this love that is found in the heart of God, God pushes back death and refuses death the power to pull us from God. I trust this: If God is love, then God can’t help but hold on to us. Love holds on.

At most memorial services, we read the Twenty-third Psalm. Have you paid attention to how individual this is?

“The Lord is *my* shepherd, *I* shall not want. He makes *me* ... He leads *me* ... He restores *me* ... He is with *me*; ... and *I* shall dwell.”

This is a love song, and love is never abstract. Love only lives in specific relationships. We don’t love humanity; we love people with names and faces and needs. And when death comes to those we love, we grieve.

It was 20 years ago now, and not six feet from me, the body of Leonard Gaw lay in a casket. I had been a pastor for about seven years and had done more than a few memorial services; but this was different.

Dr. G, as we called him, was my friend; I loved him. He stopped by the pastor’s study three years earlier. It was the first day I was pastor of his church. I was in jeans and a T-shirt and unpacking boxes. He thought I was with the moving company. “You know where our new pastor is?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Good God, you’re a kid,” he said. I was barely 30, and he told more truth than I realized. He came by often. We would talk about everything and nothing. Sometimes I would ask him about my sermon.

Once he said, “Tom, I’m 83 years old. Do you have any idea how many sermons I’ve listened to? Now what makes you think I’m going to remember the one you gave two days ago?” That’s a good point.

I remember the day over coffee when he said, “I don’t have long now. When the time comes, I want you to say the words.”

He was right about the time. I said, “The Lord is my shepherd.”⁴

I said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms.”⁵ We sang *Abide With Me*.

I told Dorothy, his beloved wife of 63 years, that he would be waiting for her, and she would see him again. No doubt by now they are together again.

The years had taught me something. I loved Dr. G. And I suppose because I loved him, I

was confident God loved him too. Resurrection can be trusted when we trust that God is love.

When death comes to you, God will not let go of you. You are not lost. Because God loves, God grants death no power to pull us from God.

“Do you think she will be waiting? I don’t mean waiting, but do you think ...” Yes, I do. Because resurrection is a holy promise that calls you by name.

It is true for Leonard Gaw and William Voegeli — but also for names we have mentioned in this room in recent weeks. So it is true for E. Mae ... and Gerry ... and Mary ... and Don ... and Susan ... and you.

Because the Lord is your Shepherd ... he makes you ... he leads you ... he restores you ... and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

¹John 11:25–26

²Romans 8:38–39

³Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1999), p. 366

⁴Psalms 23

⁵John 14:1–3

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.