

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 20:27-38

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The story of Jesus' controversy with the Sadducees regarding the resurrection is a conflict story. The telling of this story needs to reflect that. It has the tone of an adversarial debate. The level of conflict that is reflected in this story can be heard in the story of Paul's hearing before the council in Acts 23. I recommend that you look that up and read it. I'll give you a summary.

Paul was essentially on trial after he'd been arrested in the Temple. His first hearing took place when the Tribune brought him down to the Council to find out the exact charge. As they were condemning Paul after he insulted the high priest, he noticed that some in the Council were Sadducees while others were Pharisees. So he said, "I am a Pharisee and I'm on trial here because of my hope in the resurrection from the dead." Luke explains that Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection.

A big battle ensued. Certain scribes and Sadducees stood up and contended with the Pharisees. The dissension became violent and they were starting to hit each other. Anybody who's been involved in a church fight, either at major church conferences over some issue or in local churches, is familiar with the dynamics. However, the level of conflict that is present in our church fights today rarely leads to people hitting each other, though I have witnessed it. So Luke is relating serious conflict.

In Luke's telling of the resurrection controversy, Jesus doesn't ridicule or denounce the Sadducees as he does in Mark's telling of the story. Rather, Jesus' response has the tone of a teacher who is instructing the Sadducees about the character of the resurrection in the age to come. In the second part of his response, he meets them on their own exegetical grounds in his reinterpretation of the story of Moses and God at the burning bush. He interprets the Lord's saying—"I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob"—as a sign of the resurrection. Furthermore, he asserts that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had been raised from the dead. Jesus introduces a radically new exegesis of these foundational stories.

The sound of the story opens with the Sadducees' question that is long and fast. It has a tone of absurdity that reflects their overall attitude in the contrast between the long description of the case and then the question and the reason for the question, "All of the brothers had married the woman." Their question is a fast rehearsal of the facts followed by a pointed question. The degree of polarization and hostility that leads to violence in the Acts story is probably reflected in the degree of hostility and disdain that Sadducees expressed here.

Jesus is more moderate than the Sadducees. He teaches them in a manner less confrontational than what they initiated. There is a similar dynamic of tempo in Jesus'

two responses. In each instance, there's a long and therefore fast-paced sentence first, with a shorter and slower sentence that follows to conclude his case. Jesus' last words are the shortest and the most emphatic: "He is God, not of the dead, but of the living. For to him, all of them are alive."

This is a clear instance of Luke retelling a story from Mark in a way that is clearer and makes more sense. Luke's Greek is better, the statements are clearer, and there is no denunciation of the Sadducees for ignorance about the Scriptures. Unlike Mark, Luke does not have Jesus condemn the Sadducees as being "utterly wrong."

Luke's version also reflects a different understanding of the resurrection than in Mark. In Mark, the resurrection is understood as a general resurrection in which everyone will be raised, both the good and the bad. Here it is understood as a special gift reserved for the righteous.

There is also a clear statement about the resurrection as a dimension of the New Age. The interpretation of Moses speaking about the resurrection is clearer, in that the patriarchs are alive because they are all alive to God. Luke doesn't imply that they are up and walking around in Capernaum, but rather that they are alive to God.

This story reflects a controversy between Sadducees and Pharisees regarding the hope of resurrection. To set it in context, the Sadducees were strict constructionists, like the strict constructionists on the American Supreme Court. They didn't believe in anything that was not in the written Torah—the five books of the Law. In contrast, the Pharisees accepted as valid the traditions of the oral law, the interpretations of the Torah that had developed in the oral traditions of the Pharisees. Resurrection was one of those beliefs that developed in the exilic and post-exilic periods. Most Pharisees believed in the hope of the resurrection, but Sadducees did not. They were tough-minded and would have none of that speculative nonsense. The Pharisees then were persons with whom Jesus agreed in relation to this central issue. And, of course, this story is an anticipation of Jesus' resurrection.

The original impact of this story was to establish Jesus' authority in the debates with the various sectarian groups who attacked him. It introduces the theme of the resurrection in its traditional form that would have been understood by anyone in Luke's audience who was sympathetic to the Pharisaic beliefs. It establishes the background for the story of Jesus' resurrection as the initiation of the New Age. The implication of this story, which in turn prepares the way for the resurrection story, is that with Jesus' resurrection, the New Age has begun.

What is exciting and interesting about this story is the conflict about the resurrection. So I recommend that you tell it with significant conflictual energy. That will give a context in which the level of conflict can be interpreted, understood, and related to the kinds of conflicts that are often highly intense in religious communities now.