

Heaven on Earth  
Luke 20:27-38

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Alison Thatcher

Too often, women of the Bible aren't given voices, or even names. For this story I am about to tell, I gave the narrator the name Elizabeth, just like Mary's kinswoman. For that Elizabeth, the impossible was made possible even though her husband didn't believe. The name means "oath, or fullness, of God."

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We all waited to hear how this new rabbi, Jesus, would answer the Sadducees' ridiculous question. I held my breath, hoping that he would not fall into the trap, praying that he would find some new way through this antagonistic encounter, a way that would liberate us all.

The Sadducees have been trying to humiliate Jesus since he came to Jerusalem. I was there when he arrived in the city. He came in on a donkey! Isn't that hilarious? He was clearly making fun of the pomp that Roman leaders trotted around with on their fancy horses. It was a breath of fresh air to laugh openly at our oppressors. They are so full of themselves, they didn't even know they were the butt of our jokes. But not everyone was laughing. Of course, those who weren't laughing were those who aren't suffering like the rest of us. Those who are doing fine, or at least telling themselves they're doing fine, under this never-ending Roman occupation. One of those groups of people are the Sadducees, the \*elite\* temple leaders. So elite, that they're totally out of touch with the rest of us. They were certainly not laughing. In fact, I think they're threatened by this Jesus, and that's why they're trying to trap him.

"Now, Rabbi." The lead Sadducee said "rabbi" with such sardonic disdain it made me furious. He went on with overly feigned deference: "There were seven brothers and the first married a woman and died childless. So then, according to Moses' law - as you well know - the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. If the resurrection is real - as you have been preaching - then at that time, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." The other Sadducees didn't even try to hide their smirks. Some people in the crowd laughed.

Because it was an absurd question. The example is hyperbolic and unrealistic. And not only are the Sadducees snobby and out of touch, their strict beliefs are totally outdated. Most people don't even practice levirate marriage anymore, thank goodness. I've only given my husband two daughters. If he died before I could give him a son, yeah, I'd have to find another husband who could take care of us, but I wouldn't get passed around to all my husband's brothers. Hopefully. A woman can never really be sure, I guess. It's frustrating that we're still not allowed to be as economically and legally independent as men are, even though we're completely capable of it. If the resurrection is just like this life but longer, *does* that mean I'd be married to my husband for eternity? And if that's true, then will I be required to provide babies for eternity? Will I have to cook for everyone for eternity? Make myself small to please others and protect myself...for eternity? I mean, our marriage was a reasonable choice for our families, and my husband is kinder than some, but to him I will always be...a tool. A means to an end,

which is his own progeny and name. If I have to spend eternity with someone, I want it to be my best friend, who I've chosen to spend years cultivating a loving, trusting relationship with.

She and I imagine a world where our gender doesn't keep us from being independent. Where we are equals with men. Where a woman's whole identity isn't limited to daughter or wife or mother. Where it doesn't matter who our fathers or husbands are, or what their economic standing is. We could all be equal. But that's a wild dream that she and I don't dare share with other people. I mean, could the world ever actually be like that? I don't know. Just as I don't know how Jesus is going to win this spar with the Sadducees. We who know our scriptures know that through God's will Ezekiel raised the dry bones and Elijah raised the widow's son. We know that if justice will not come in this world - unlikely given the grip that Rome has on our people - then justice will come in the next. But that won't help in a debate with the Sadducees. They only hold the Books of Moses as sacred, not the prophets or the wisdom or the poetry. Which serves them fine, since they are not suffering in this world like the rest of us.

But Jesus has a mischievous look on his face. Not a disdainful smirk like the Sadducees, but a playful sparkle. What does he have up his sleeve? "My fellow rabbis," he begins. "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age, and in the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." The Sadducees look unimpressed, but Jesus isn't finished. He continues, "The fact that the dead are raised, Moses himself showed - as you well know - in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive."

No more marriage? No more death? Children of the resurrection? He is speaking of our dream! Not only that, but he has shown that this truth comes from the Books of Moses just as much as any of our other sacred texts. Oh, the Sadducees are not happy. The leader's face is red as he mumbles something under his breath and turns from Jesus back to his colleagues. Jesus sits down among his disciples and the crowd murmurs and buzzes with his words. My own heart is buzzing with excitement, I feel like I'm seeing the world with brand new eyes. Of course, we know we are all children of God, but Jesus has just assured us that that is the only parentage that matters in the resurrection. It won't matter who our earthly fathers are, we will have the same inheritance! There will be no death so there will be no need to make children just to pass down a name! Our standing in God's eyes will not rely on our gender or ability to produce sons!

All of a sudden I see how limited our earthly view has been. Of course our earthly institutions can't be imposed on the everlasting resurrection! And thank God they won't be. But - and maybe this sounds crazy - could the justice of the resurrection inspire the way we live together in this life? Why wait for the resurrection? Levirate marriage hasn't been practiced just to produce heirs, it's also - supposedly - to care for the widow because she cannot care for herself. But what if we changed the whole system? Just like the daughters of Zerophahad! (Another story the Sadducees should honor.) The daughters went to Moses to demand their father's inheritance because he had no sons. And Moses went to God and God said, "Change the law." What if widows and unmarried women could care for themselves just like men? What if men didn't have total power over women the same way we all long for Rome to not have total

power over our people? Is this not what it truly means to all be beloved children of God, to all be equal children of the resurrection? Could the possibilities that my friend and I dream of be real? Could women decide how many children we want to have? Could we decide when we want to have them? Could we decide *if* we want to have them at all? Could we be temple leaders? Could we own property and manage our own finances? Could men not have to be lone providers? Could they be soft-hearted caregivers like this Jesus seems to be?

I don't know if we will see Rome pay for its countless injustices in my lifetime. But for the first time I know that the glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven that I've seen breaking into moments of our everyday lives are real: the mutual caring of neighbors, the joy of deep compassionate love, the hope for a new way. For the first time I have faith that my friend's and my dream could be realized on Earth as it is in Heaven. And for the first time, I have hope for my daughters' future and that of our granddaughters and so on. If it is possible for the everlasting life of Heaven to inspire today's life on Earth, what more yet-unimaginable things are possible?

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As an afterward to Elizabeth's story, I acknowledge that, while this passage is not ultimately about whether or not we will meet our loved ones in Heaven, it is impossible for that thought to not come to the surface of our minds when we read it. Especially for those who have recently lost a loved one, or for whom significant anniversaries are near. Jesus says there will be no marriage in the resurrection, which is unimaginably good news for those trapped in abusive relationships. Exploitation, manipulation, and violence have no place in the Kingdom of God. But what of those relationships that are characterized by offering and honoring mutual trust, by compassion and empathy, by forgiveness and reconciliation? I don't know what those individual relationships will look like in the resurrection. Probably we are not meant to know. But of the trust, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and reconciliation that we have experienced - the ways that Jesus taught us to live with everyone - I thank God for these glimpses of Heaven on Earth.