

TEXT: Luke 20:27-38  
THEME: To God all are alive  
SUBJECT: Resurrection  
TITLE: Forever

22nd Sunday after Pentecost  
10 November 2019  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

French writer Christian Bobin, describes the strange experience of going to the graveyard to visit a person you have loved. It starts as a gentle walk, nonchalant, almost dreamlike, until you are suddenly brought up short, faced by an insurmountable obstacle in the form of a tombstone. You were getting ready to meet someone and there's nobody there, indeed nothing at all, it's as though the earth was flat and you had absent-mindedly wandered to an edge.

Standing in front of my father's grave, he said, is like looking at a wall at the end of a blind alley. All I can do is to throw my heart up and over, the way children throw a ball over a garden wall to have the faintly alarming pleasure of entering an unknown property to get it back.

When I throw my heart over a gravestone higher than heaven, I have no idea what gravel it bounces on, I just know that it is not an empty gesture, for a few seconds later it returns to me, filled with joy and as fresh as the heart of a newly-hatched sparrow.

On the day of her mother's funeral Camille was stung by a bee. The courtyard of the family house was full of people. A friend watched the child in the infinity of her four years, between the shock of the pain and the welling up of the tears, scan the crowd urgently for her one sure source of comfort and then cut short the search, having learned at a stroke the meaning of absence and death. The scene, which lasted only a few seconds, was heart wrenching.

There comes a moment for all of us when a knowledge past consoling enters our soul and rends it. It is in the light of that moment, whether it has already come to us or not, that we should speak to one another, love each other and if possible laugh together.

19th century Italian philosopher and poet Leopardi, believed a time would come when this Universe and Nature itself would be extinguished. Of all that is or was there will remain not a single trace, but a naked silence and a most profound stillness will fill the immensity of space. Even this admirable and fearful secret of universal existence will be obliterated and lost.

What happens in life is either arbitrary and fundamentally anarchic or there is a "cosmos," understood as an ordering of things. If the universe ultimately comes to nothing and means nothing, how do we account for the creative and compassionate lives of those we love? How do we account for love, for beauty, for truth, for the longing for meaning?

Isn't it strange that Michelangelo's "Pietà," Mozart's "Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet in A major," Pascal's *Pensées*, arose from a meaningless abyss? Religion's essential intuition is that life is meaningful; that there is an order and an ordering of things in and through the divine act of creation.

The Sadducees belonged to the wealthy aristocracy, held only to the authority of written scripture (five books of Moses), rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees, were conservative in their beliefs, rejected the existence of angels as well as the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees disappear after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

While it is believed the practice of levirate marriage was replaced by the gradual imposition of monogamy in Jesus' day, the Sadducees appeal to it to reveal the irrational and ridiculous notion of resurrection. The only way to live on after death, thought the Sadducees, was through children. Thus "the man shall marry the widow and *raise up* children for his brother."

The word translated "raise up" is the same root word translated "resurrection" in verses 35 and 36. Behind the Sadducees question is a difference over the meaning of "resurrection." The Sadducees hold to the old system of real life on this earth and in this time. Death has the last word.

To counter the Sadducees argument based on the only authority they accept, Jesus quotes from the five books of Moses: The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive. The continuing life of the deceased is rooted in God's being and not in an uncertain human survival attached to memories, merits, or immortality of the soul.

Jesus bears witness to a God who is totally committed to what God has made and loved and worked with, whose actions and purpose are all directed towards our healing and flourishing, a God who will not let us go even on the other side of death.

What is at stake is the meaningfulness of life. Are we products of random chance or are we like angels, children of God? Neither answer is amenable to proof of the kind we learned in geometry. What we are given is story, is witness. The open question remains: which story, whose witness, will we trust?

Graham Ward is Regis Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford. He was entertaining a guest lecturer, a friend, from Moscow. Natasha was in her early fifties. She was an extremely able academic, teaching English literature. Her husband, a long term alcoholic, was no longer on the scene.

She struggled to bring up their daughter and to educate her well. At the time Natasha was putting her daughter through medical school. The only way to pay for that was to give private English lessons - a lot of them - to Russia's expanding middle class.

Natasha was an Orthodox Christian. She had spent some time in the hospital having a serious operation. On the Saturday of her visit she asked to see Ely Cathedral. She and Graham walked around the cavernous space and came to sit quietly beneath Ely's famous lantern tower, a complex wooden octagon high above the chancel, inset with paintings of angels.

Natasha sat quietly, gazing up through the lantern, and then she lowered her head, turned to Graham and said, very simply, "They don't look like that. Angels," she explained, as Graham stared at her. "They don't look like that."

Graham said nothing. What could he say? Later, driving back to Cambridge down the foggy, A10, she added, "They were standing in the operating theater. I saw them before they anesthetized me." And neither of them said anything further.