

# ***Children of the Resurrection***

Luke 20:27-40

Hidden amidst all the pre-election drama of this past week, as well as the joy in Mudville over the Cubs' win, down the road from here in Hamden CT, award-winning writer, Natalie Babbitt, quietly passed away at the age of 84. Her name may or may not be familiar to you, but she is known to elementary and middle-school aged children who have read her works, as she was one of the more celebrated authors of children's books of recent time. Babbitt's novel, *Tuck Everlasting*,<sup>1</sup> has become a literary classic, mainly because she addressed a topic not usually found in this genre, i.e., death and eternal life. According to her obituary, she wrote it fifty years ago in response to what she perceived to be her daughter's fear of death.

The story is about eleven-year-old Winnie Foster, who met a mysterious young man, Jesse Tuck, who (along with his family) is living a life that will never end as long as they continue to drink from a magical spring that offers eternal life. The Tuck family happened upon this discovery when they settled on the land in the 1800s. Since then, the family has been living in seclusion in the same stage and age as when they first drank from the water—a veritable fountain of youth (104-year-old Jesse remaining as he was at 17).

The plot develops around this tension—the wonder and the frustration of living in an eternal state, especially once an unnamed man in a yellow suit enters the picture—an ambitious entrepreneur who had discovered the truth about the spring and wants to sell the water as an elixir to people longing for everlasting life (a Baptist form of Poland Spring

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<sup>1</sup>Natalie Babbitt, *Tuck Everlasting*, Square Fish, 2009 ed., original 1973.

Water). The story goes through twists and turns with poignant wisdom punctuating the narrative throughout, pondering the meaning of life and human existence. Toward the end, Winnie has the choice of whether or not to drink the water—to have a natural life cycle or one that would suspend time and eliminate death. If you want to find out what she chose, you'll have to read the book!

The beauty of this story is that it takes a broader view of human existence than merely measuring its length in years. It imagines human life without a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. What is life apart from the boundaries of time as we know it? Does immortality even exist? If so, is it better than what we experience within the natural cycle of birth and death?

To be sure, these questions have been around since the dawn of human civilization. What happens to us when we die? Do we cease to exist—is the death of our body the conclusion to our existence as a human being? Or is there something more? Do we continue in some form to another dimension of life—one we cannot see or know on this side of the grave?

Religion and philosophy down through the ages has supplied answers in one form or another, typically offering some description or portrayal of an afterlife. For many of us, religious ideas, traditions, and sensibilities shape our thinking about this topic, even though there is no consistency or absolute certainty about them. Beliefs about the afterlife, in particular, end up being little more than hopeful speculation. Without personal experience to verify it or satisfy our curiosity, our conception of the afterlife is based on what we learn from tradition or teachings, anecdotal remarks or

imaginative speculation. Yet, there appears to be no universally definitive description or, for that matter, proof of an afterlife.

So, apart from religious dogma and persuasion, on what basis might we believe that there is life beyond the grave? We could turn to philosophy, from Plato's dualism of body and spirit to Descartes' emphasis on the eternal primacy of mind or consciousness, reflected in his famous declaration: *Cognito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am).

More recently, though, I would think science is entering the debate, based on what astrophysicists project from quantum theory to eternal inflation in the multiverse. Frankly, this is quite complicated and mind-bending to unpack, but an essential point is this: energy never ceases to exist, even when its material or particle form does; if not particle, then energy exists in wave form. Since all matter is energy, our mortal bodies by their nature will die, but the energy that defines our human existence will transform into some other state—material or nonmaterial. It has to, according to the laws of thermodynamics. It does not cease to exist.

Whatever this ultimately means, I can't say. Nevertheless, I find it intriguing and associate it with something I can better grasp, i.e., the notion that we are spiritual beings on a human journey—we possess this material form for a while, but at our death we are transformed “in the twinkling of an eye” to a state of being that is nonmaterial—perhaps even a body which is more wave than matter, or perhaps a dimension of consciousness which exists beyond description. I liken this to the Apostle Paul's portrayal of immortality in I Corinthians 15 (perishable/imperishable; physical body/spiritual body; mortal state/glorified state), and it appears consistent with how Jesus described the “children of the resurrection” in our text for today from Luke 20:

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 of 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.

Interestingly, this is one of the few, if not only, reference we have of Jesus commenting on the afterlife in the context of his ministry. What we seem to have from him is a description of another way to exist—of being like the angels (or messengers) of God, in some form of immortality, since they no longer will die. In other words, Jesus' own words here point to a state of being beyond death that exists in an immortal, eternal form that doesn't cease—perhaps a dynamic bodily form of energy which could be consistent with the way energy and matter are theorized to exist throughout the quantum universe. Because a wave of energy will take different forms based on the observer, it might explain the varying eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection. It stands to reason that in this quantum universe, resurrection makes perfect sense.

As intriguing as it may be, this imaginative speculation on the nature of the afterlife has less to do with Jesus' understanding of resurrection in this story than we might think. What I mean is, before we assume that Jesus' response to the Sadducees is merely a first century attempt at describing quantum physics or the afterlife, the point of his message actually is quite different. Waxing philosophical about the afterlife wasn't even a primary purpose for Jesus as his poignant retort to his questioners had more to do with this world than the next. Let me explain.

The Sadducees were central actors among the religious and cultural elite within Judean society. Like their cross-town rivals, the Pharisees, they too wanted to put Jesus in his place. The social and moral authority of both parties were challenged by Jesus' populist mission; he regularly called them

out on their hypocrisy, while at the same time showing little regard for their institutional authority, particularly as they cast a blind eye to Judea's unjust society of unequals. This is what lies at the heart of this particular confrontation, which was only presented as a theological inquisition on the afterlife. True to form, Jesus could see through this and took on the religious establishment using their own foil against them, i.e., marriage in the resurrection—resurrection being a belief the Sadducees didn't share.

For all intents and purposes, the Sadducees were practically agnostic about the resurrection of the dead. They adhered to a view that mortal life is all there is, so debating the nature of the afterlife wasn't all that relevant or of high interest. However, confounding Jesus with a legal absurdity about the resurrection would be, making it more a form of mockery than serious discussion. Their hypothetical conundrum was of seven brothers who died childless by a woman who, by familial law, had to become the wife to each of them, in order not to be left on her own, destitute and vulnerable (their "profound" question being, "Whose wife would she be in the resurrection?").

Instead of getting caught in their philosophical snare, Jesus turned it around, putting his inquisitors on the defensive by highlighting their tradition's cruelly unjust assumptions about a woman's place, relative worth, and status. He surprised them with the response quoted earlier, i.e., in the resurrection there is no marriage. Your standard legal rules don't apply!

As an aside, I recognize this verse often has been a source of consternation for many married couples; they worry it means their marital love will no longer exist beyond death. Honestly, no one knows, but I don't think this was Jesus' point. Gender relations today are viewed quite

differently than what was the norm in ancient times. In the biblical world, marriages were arranged and women's identities and roles were defined by a patriarchal social system, which limited women to childbearing and domestic roles, and routinely shamed them for being childless (not fulfilling their procreational duty), often leaving them callously treated by men, vulnerable, and insecure for much of their adult lives.

If we recall in Luke 4:18-21, when Jesus launched his ministry (citing Isaiah 61), the message of his gospel was not really focused on the afterlife—it's emphasis was on social and spiritual transformation in the world, where injustices in society would be rectified and all oppression ceased (religious, social, economic, political, domestic, etc.). This applied, as well, to the traditional norms and customs, including the institution of marriage (which factored as well into his teaching on divorce, i.e., being about injustice to women more than anything else). Even though much of Christianity down through the ages has downplayed any application into the present in favor of making the proclamation of the Gospel only about attaining a place in the afterlife, with a gospel devoted more to self-preservation and "fire protection" after death than anything else, Jesus' emphasis was on seeking accountability for injustices and addressing the oppressive sins in this life, which have as much, if not greater, impact and influence on individual lives and souls. Besides, the Sadducees weren't interested in talking about the next world, so Jesus was making the case for the present.

Addressing injustice in the present was Jesus' impact in this story; he countered the Sadducees' cleverness with a startling declaration that, in the resurrection, no longer will traditional marriage rules apply—why? because relationships in the spirit of Jubilee are no longer based on patriarchy,

power, or domestic purpose. In fact, it's a state of life where there are no social hierarchies, where victims are delivered from their suffering, where the last shall rise up and possess the same value and worth as the privileged—all souls being equal in the eyes of God. Practically, it also made sense, since in an immortal state, women wouldn't need to bear children or require protection or be limited in purpose. In the resurrection, the oppressive norms of this world would change and the religious and legal bases that institutionalize injustice in society no longer apply.

Of course, this fit with Jesus' overarching Jubilee message. In the resurrection, in the realm of God, the lion and the lamb lie down together with no threatening power one over the other. In the resurrection, there is a liberation from all the fatal and consequential sins of mortal life—social hierarchies, territorial instincts, lust for power, bullying and intimidation, great gaps between wealth and poverty, corruption and fraud, lies and cheating, along with all the gender, racial, ethnic, and social layers that discriminate and divide—all the selfish pursuits and injustices that perpetuate structural violence and oppression in this world. None of that exists in the realm defined, not by human power and greed, but by God—an ever-developing realm portended and symbolized by Jesus rising up from his unjust grave! Those who follow his way in the present live in anticipation of this eventual fulfilling of God's realm, representing its noble aspirations as “children of the resurrection”—born not for flesh and blood, but of this new Spirit directly from God!

Mind you, this message means a lot to me two days before the election; I need to believe this—I need to envision Jesus' type of world—one that heals, not harms—one that is fair and just—one that is not defined by a

corrupt establishment or one that provokes the worst instincts and behavior in people. That is the world I want to embrace and aspire to!

I want each of us to remember that we are called to this higher place—a higher plane—to the vision of the resurrection—that we are Children of the Resurrection—and drawn into the empowering faith that lies in the hearts of inspired and hopeful people, who are part of Christ’s ongoing movement transforming this world with hope and goodness on earth, as it is in heaven.

This, my friends, is our mandate in these times—to proclaim and act upon the good news of Jesus Christ that brings justice, fairness, equality, mercy, redemption and deliverance from all that oppresses the human condition—and then equips us with the inspiring Spirit Jesus brings to us in this life—a spiritual presence that will remain with us well beyond the end of time.

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