

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Saints Triumphant*
Service Theme: *We Feebly Struggle; They in Glory Shine*

Sermon Theme: *Grasp the Fullest Joy! (November 6, 2022)*
Luke 20:27-38

I heard a great story recently, but I can't remember who told it to me, so if it was one of you consider this my apology for not properly citing my source. It was about two parents who announced to their young children that their Christmas gift would be a trip to Disney World in a few months! As the weeks passed by, the kids grew increasingly excited as the parents talked up how fun and magical Disney World is. Until finally, Disney day arrived. As the family loaded into the van in the darkness to start driving to the Magic Kingdom, the parents assured the kids that when they woke up, they'd be at Disney World.

About an hour from Orlando, they stopped for gas, potty breaks, and snacks, and got back in the van for the final leg of the drive. But when the mom glanced back at her kids, she noticed that her son had a strange look on his face—a mixture of excitement, confusion, and disappointment. When she asked what was wrong, after a long pause, he slowly asked, "Was...that... Disney World?" With a sympathetic laugh, she assured him that Disney would be a much more joyful experience than the gas station!

Because the boy wasn't exactly sure what Disney World would be like, his grasp of the joy he'd have there was too small. Don't get me wrong, road trip gas station snack runs are great. And going to a Buc-ee's-- or for anyone from Wisconsin-- Kwik Trip, can feel pretty magical. But if that boy believed "gas station joy" was the best he could expect, he'd miss out on the Most Magical Place on Earth!

On Saints Triumphant Sunday, we remember, celebrate, and thank God for all those who have finished their race of earthly life and

crossed the finish line into eternal life. But I wonder if sometimes our grasp of the joy our Christian loved ones are experiencing, and the joy we'll someday experience, is too small.

Think about it. When a Christian dies, many people try to comfort the family and friends by saying, "At least they're reunited with (fill in the name of spouse/family member)." "At least they're not in pain anymore." "At least they're in a better place." "At least you'll get to see them again someday." And those things are true. But if we don't understand the greatest joy that heaven will bring, we could end up with a "gas station joy" view of it. Joyful maybe, but not **Grasping the Fullest Joy** of Heaven.

So let's let God's Word show us the full picture of the greatest joys of Heaven--both to fill our hearts with peace as we miss those Saints Triumphant, and to fill our hearts with joyful, eager anticipation as we look forward to joining them someday!

In our sermon text today, Jesus was getting close to his own death. After his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his enemies ramped up their efforts to try trick him into saying something they could use against him, or discredit him to his followers. That's what the Sadducees were attempting when they approached Jesus with a hypothetical.

The Sadducees were one of the two main religious groups in Israel, the opposite and enemy group of the Pharisees. The Sadducees "***say there is no resurrection,***" didn't believe in an afterlife, and only considered the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, to be authoritative. So when they bring their question to Jesus, we know what they're trying to do.

"Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife with no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection,

whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?” With their preposterous hypothetical, they were trying to make the whole idea of the resurrection look ridiculous, and to make Jesus look ridiculous for believing in it.

When the Sadducees mentioned what *“Moses wrote for us,”* they were referring to a societal law God had given the Israelites called the *Levirate Law*, which basically commanded that if a married man died without a son, the man’s brother was to take his brother’s widow as his wife. And if they had a son, he would carry on the dead brother’s name and family line. In a culture where family lineage and legacy were vital, and where women were dependent on husbands and sons to care for them, God was ensuring that a man’s family line wouldn’t disappear from Israel, and that the widow would be protected.

But the Sadducees crafted their hypothetical in epic proportions, as this Levirate scenario happened to all seven brothers. First, that would never happen. And if it, there probably should been a True Crime investigation into this woman with 7 dead husbands!

The Sadducees asked their question out of mockery and skepticism, but it does give us insight into what people think about heaven: that eternal life will just be a continuation of our earthly life and relationships, only better. Like I said earlier, people often comfort themselves that their loved one is reunited with a spouse or family member, as if the most joyful thing about eternal life is the continuation of our earthly relationships. It’s not surprising we think this way, because, well, it’s all we know! But is that what will give us the fullest joy in Heaven?

Not according to Jesus. He didn’t answer the Sadducees ridiculous hypothetical, because he didn’t need to. Instead, he teaches them the truth. *“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.”*

But wait a minute...that doesn’t sound joyful, does it? A couple is married on earth for 60 years, and then when they get to heaven, there’s no marriage? What gives? Maybe that thought breaks your heart, or makes you angry. Many people take great comfort from the thought of someday being reunited with their spouse in heaven, so Jesus’ words sound more like a punch to the gut than a reason for the fullest joy!

First, we need to be reminded of the purposes and blessings God gives through marriage, the three “C’s.” One C is children. Through marriage, God brings the next generation into the world, important for people’s family line, legacy, and livelihood! And yet, as Jesus tells us, those in heaven *“can no longer die; for they are like the angels.”* In Heaven, we won’t need children to continue our legacy and family line, because we’ll live eternally!

Another C is chastity, or sexual purity. Through marriage, we’re blessed with sexual pleasure, and a God-pleasing way to satisfy our sexual desires. But in heaven, we won’t need that benefit of marriage, because our thoughts, motivations, and desires will always be God-pleasing, and we’ll have perfect, constant, unending joy and pleasure in Heaven just by being there!

The third C is companionship. In marriage, God blesses husbands and wives with a one-of-a-kind union that no other relationship can match. That’s probably the primary reason that people look forward to being reunited with their spouse in heaven—because they miss their best friend. And that’s OK, and understandable! Companionship was the main reason God created Eve for Adam, and it’s the essential blessing of our marriages too.

But in eternity, we won’t need our spouse to be that primary source of love and companionship anymore. Because we will literally have a perfect relationship of love and companionship with everyone in Heaven—from the total stranger, to your worst earthly enemy, to your co-worker or classmate who drives you up a wall. Even your spouse! In heaven, for the first time ever, you will love your spouse perfectly, like you never have before.

It sounds impossible, but in Heaven, you will have a more perfect, pleasurable, loving relationship with your worst earthly enemy than the love, pleasure, and companionship you enjoyed with your spouse on earth. Because no matter how joyful our earthly relationships are, they're always flawed by sin, selfishness, unfaithfulness, pain, and sadness. But in Heaven, sin and all the ways it messes up our relationships will be gone forever!

While we're on earth—give thanks to God for the gifts of marriage and family, because through it, God blessed your earthly life with the next best thing to Heaven! And rejoice, because in Heaven you're going to love your spouse, and they'll love you, better and more than ever before.

As hard as it might be to hear, I think Jesus tells us this truth because he knows the dangers of not knowing it. Thinking that being reunited with another person is the greatest joy of Heaven can rob us of the fullest joy! It sets up potential “gas station joy” about Heaven, if we think, “If so and so won't be with me in Heaven, I won't be able to be joyful.” Or “If so and so will be in Heaven with me, then I don't want to go there.” We can be robbed of the fullest joy of Heaven if our view of heavenly joy is too small!

So what then is the fullest joy of Heaven? It's understanding who will be there with you. “But, you said!..” I know, hear me out. Look again at what John highlights in his vision of Heaven in Revelation 22. ***“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. On each side of the river stood the tree of life.”***

The water of life. The tree of life—a return to the Garden of Eden and the invitation to feast on the fruit that gives eternal life, lost after the Fall into Sin. In Heaven, there is life. Life eternal. The final, unending eradication and destruction of the death that breaks our hearts when a loved one experiences it. The ugliness, sadness, and unnaturalness of death that washes over us as we stand next to caskets occupied by loved ones.

But it's gone. Crushed, defeated, powerless forever! And right now, those Saints Triumphant who death seemed to rob from us are experiencing the fullest joy of heaven, because death...is...done.

That's what Jesus tells the Sadducees in our sermon text. ***“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”*** If there was no afterlife or resurrection, then why would God tell Moses from the burning bush, ***“I AM the God of Abraham...Isaac...and Jacob,”*** the present and ongoing God of these men who had been dead for hundreds of years. Why “I am” instead of “I was,” unless those who fall asleep in Jesus live eternally with him!

And like I said, the fullest joy of Heaven can only be grasped when we understand who will be there with us. Notice in Revelation where the water of life flowed from. ***“From the throne of God and of the Lamb.”*** The Tree of Life was again accessible for all to enjoy because the curse of sin that blocked our access has been removed.

Removed by the one who once told a woman at a well that only through him could she drink the Water of Life. The Lamb who was slain for the world as the ultimate sacrifice on the cross so that ***“no longer will there be any curse.”*** In Heaven, Jesus won't be some nebulous idea, unseen Savior, or far off brother. No, the fullest joy of Heaven is grasped by knowing that there the Saints Triumphant ***“will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”*** Faith becomes sight. Tears of sorrow become tears of joy. Death becomes life for all those who are ***“children of the resurrection”*** because Jesus is ***“the firstborn from the dead.”***

So for all of the names listed in this worship folder, for all the Saints Triumphant memorialized by these flowers of victory, to grasp the fullest joy of heaven, don't celebrate because they're “Watching over you,” or because they're “back with Grandma Ethel.” Those aren't bad things—but there's something better! Rejoice that right now, those Triumphant Christian saints are standing eternally at the side of the one who has made them Saints!

That's why I really like this picture. It's called **"First Day in Heaven"** by Kerolos Safwat. Notice who she's hugging. It's not her relatives or friends—those will come later. The first moments in Heaven are spent wrapping our arms tightly around our Savior Jesus. It's my prayer that picturing the Saints Triumphant doing that right now allows you to grasp the fullest joy until the day when all of us who trust in Jesus will join the Saints Triumphant in wrapping our arms around the Savior who has had us tightly wrapped in his... all along. That's Heaven!

