

“Hope Is No Joke”
November 9, 2025
Scripture: Job 19:23-27a; Luke 20:27-38

We’ve all probably heard of the Sadducees over the years. They get mentioned a couple of times in the gospels. They’re portrayed as opponents of Jesus, but not very influential ones, apparently. The Pharisees are considered to be much more threatening. But the Sadducees were a class of people with a lot of influence. They were a priestly class, and are often described as aristocratic, so from the upper echelon of society. Think of them as the “one percenters.” Their name is derived from Zadok, who is a high priest mentioned in the days of David and Solomon. They’re believed to be descendants of Zadok, which means their status is inherited, not chosen.

That’s a key distinction between the Sadducees and Pharisees. Sadducees believed that because their role was inherited, it was conferred by nature. Their status was unquestioned and gave them a monopoly on power in the temple. They controlled everything that happened in the temple. Pharisees believed that a person’s religious status was a result of decisions that person made through study, resulting in their ordination. They rejected the idea that nature determines social standing.

So, you can see how these two groups might clash at times. Many Pharisees in Jesus’ day believed the temple establishment was corrupt, even though they continued to participate in rituals at the temple. The Sadducees were considered collaborators with Rome, who had control of naming the high priests. It’s in that context, while Jesus is teaching in the temple area, that this question about resurrection is raised.

The Sadducees famously did not accept the promise of resurrection. The Pharisees did, and it was a commonly held belief among most Jews at that time. The Sadducees based their rejection of it on their interpretation of Torah. They emphasized the first five books of the Bible as authoritative and there’s no mention there about resurrection, or even the afterlife. But this little exchange in Luke’s gospel doesn’t really make that argument. Instead, it’s meant to make the idea of resurrection seem absurd. This group of Sadducees seems to be trolling Jesus, like people do on social media today. For them, the resurrection isn’t just unsupported by scripture; it’s nothing but a big joke.

And that’s where they really fail to understand. The possibility of resurrection arises in a world where life is harsh and oppressive. It represents a longing for something new, something better. Resurrection is all about hope. And hope is no joke. When the Romans marched into a territory in overwhelming numbers with a destructive force far beyond anything needed to control the population, their real interest is to eliminate any hope of resisting. When a people have no hope, they’re easy to control.

One of my favorite movies in the Star Wars canon of films is called “Rogue One.” It takes place just prior to the first Star Wars movie we all remember from 1977. It tells the story of how the rebellion managed to get hold of the blueprint of the empire’s death star and found a way to destroy it. As the characters in “Rogue One” are discussing the mission to get that

blueprint, several of them are afraid and think it's too big a risk. In the argument a young woman tries to convince them it's time to fight. One delegate says, "You want us to risk everything based on nothing but hope!" She replies, "Rebellions are built on hope."

Resurrection is the hope that allowed people in Jesus' day to endure Roman oppression and continue to resist by living in ways that revealed God's kingdom in spite of the corruption around them. But the Sadducees, by collaborating and keeping their position of power had no need for it. Even while their neighbors were mistreated, often abused, they kept their distance. They laughed at the idea of resurrection because they had no use for hope. So long as they had control of the temple, they had everything they wanted. We shouldn't forget, though, what every person reading or hearing Luke's gospel would have known: in 70 AD the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple forever. And the Sadducees are no more. I don't mean that as a commentary on the validity of the temple or of that system, it was essential to Jewish life and its destruction was a tragedy. But if the future of Judaism had been dependent only on the faith of the Sadducees, it would have been wiped out by Rome.

A belief in resurrection, and the hope it gave, meant it was possible to envision a new life for Judaism, a future beyond the temple. And it meant they would continue to resist.

By referencing a popular movie, I don't mean to trivialize this idea of hope. There are many real-life, modern examples we can find. For instance, I have book of poetry titled *Threatened with Resurrection* by the Guatemalan teacher and human rights activist Julia Esquivel. In the introduction to her collection she writes: "This confession of agony and hope, of pain and struggle out of the Christian faith, is a small offering to the Guatemalan people who are facing the present military regime." She wrote in 1981, at the height of the military dictatorship's power in Guatemala. It was a time when many from there were coming north to escape the violence and threats. They were living under a regime that was bent on eradicating the political opposition and at the time was supported by our own government. So, it's hard to imagine a more hopeless situation.

In the poem "They Have Threatened Us with Resurrection," Esquivel reflects on the thousands of lives that had been lost since 1954 when the democratically elected government was overthrown and replaced by a military junta and the killings began. She writes: "Now six of them have left us/and nine in Rabinal/and two, plus two, plus two/and ten, a hundred, a thousand/a whole army/witness to our pain/our fear/our courage/our hope! What keeps us from sleeping/is that they have threatened us with resurrection!/Because at each nightfall/though exhausted from the endless inventory/of killings since 1954/yet we continue to love life/and do not accept their death!"

You can hear a hope expressed in those words that only a belief in resurrection can inspire. And no matter what the forces of hate and fear might do, they cannot extinguish the fire of hope that burns in the people's hearts. That's what resurrection means for people whose backs are against the wall, for people who live in circumstances beyond their control and are at the mercy of merciless adversaries. Those are the people Jesus spoke to; they're the ones who followed him into Jerusalem and cheered him on while he faced his opponents. They are people longing for hope who see in him the possibility of resurrection. An idea the Sadducees laughed at

but would be the only thing to keep their faith alive after Rome's destroys the temple and scatters the people.

Hope is no joke. It can topple regimes and bring down empires. It can give comfort in the most painful circumstances. When we find Job in this reading, he has lost everything: his family, his riches, his health. He is miserable and his "friends" have tried to tell him that his suffering must be the result of something he has done to offend or ignore God. But Job knows better; he knows he's done nothing wrong. He has every reason to reject God and walk away from his faith, yet here we find him insisting that God will redeem him. "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold and not another." Job will not give up hope, in spite of all that he's been through.

We don't know how his friends responded, but I suspect they laughed at him, probably thought he was naïve or delusional. Like the Sadducees they wouldn't understand the power of hope. But those of us who have experienced loss or have been intimidated by threats of retribution know that hope is the only thing that can sustain us. Resurrection is not some denial of death or a pipe dream for the future. Resurrection is what sustains us now. It instills in us a vision for a future we can attain, we can live now, even though all the evidence points against it. When we look at what's happening in the world today, when it seems like tyrants and authoritarian dictators have the upper hand, resurrection hope is what keeps us from despair.

That hope is expressed through our willingness to stand by those in the world who are targets of retribution and discrimination. It's revealed through the voices of people insisting on fairness and due process and in the votes of people who have decided they want a change. And wherever that hope is revealed, whether it's the streets of Budapest or Moscow, Hong Kong or Beijing, Los Angeles, Chicago or Washington, D.C., it strikes fear in the hearts of those in power who want to kill hope and will laugh at it, lash out at it, and do whatever they can to smother it. But we are "children of the resurrection," as Jesus says, and our hope cannot die.

The last lines of Esquivel's poem is an invitation to her people and to us all: "Accompany us then on this vigil/and you will know what it is to dream!/You will know/how marvelous it is/to live threatened with Resurrection! To dream awake/to keep watch asleep/to live while dying/and to already know oneself/resurrected!" That is Jesus' call to all those who long for hope, even to his opponents who don't seem to get it. Resurrection is for everyone. It's for all those who long for an end to suffering and for the promise of a new day.

Amen