

Strange New World

[Luke 20:27-38](#)

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

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My grandparents' favourite TV show was Star Trek: The Next Generation. They would record every new episode on VHS tapes, and then when my sisters and I would go and visit, we would all watch the shows together. And every episode started with the Captain's voice introducing the purpose of the show – these are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before. That was the promise of Star Trek – tune in every week, and you would go to strange new worlds and meet new life and go where no one had gone before.

And as a kid, that was amazing – and I still have a soft spot for Star Trek all these years later. But watching the show now, all these years later, and you start to realize that the show didn't really keep that promise. They promised strange new worlds, but every week the planets that they visited looked an awful lot like the scenery around Southern California, or else a whole lot of spray painted Styrofoam. They promised new life, but all the aliens they met just looked like kind of weird humans – they might have pointy ears or wrinkly noses or anger problems, but they still had two arms and two legs and wore pants, just like us. They travelled all across the universe to find new life and new worlds, and everything and everyone they encountered looked mostly the same as us. And I understand that there's only so much you can do with 1980s technology and a low production budget, but it's still a little disappointing that when you're trying to imagine what a strange new world would look like, what a new kind of life would look like, your imagination ends up

just thinking of our world, with a few little tweaks and surface level changes, but nothing really fundamentally different, nothing really fundamentally new.

And this is the same problem with the Sadducees in the passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke. For most of the history of the people of Israel, they believed that there was no afterlife – when you died, no matter what you had done with your life, the same thing happened to everyone: you went to Sheol, the place of the dead. After all, God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all promises to make their descendants a mighty nation that would bless the whole world, so as long as the nation continued, as long as the people as a whole prospered, the fate of the individual members of that nation didn’t seem to matter that much. Your role as a faithful follower of God was to live a good life: follow the law, get married, have a family and teach your children what it means to be part of the people of Israel, so that when you die, the nation will endure, and grow, and prosper. And that worked, as long as the nation was flourishing, but when the good times came to an end and their kingdom was conquered, their people carried off into exile, it became harder and harder to follow God’s law and pass on God’s ways under foreign rule. And as the world was falling apart around them, God’s prophets brought a new promise for the people: the blessings God wanted to give them were not just for this life here on earth. Death would not be the end for God’s people. Prophets like Isaiah promised “your dead will live – their bodies will rise. Those who dwell in the dust will awake and shout for joy.” God gave Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones coming back to life in front of his eyes. Daniel received a vision of the end of the world, when “the people shall be delivered, and those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.” To a hurting, broken-hearted people, God revealed a new promise – death was not the end of the covenant. God’s people would be brought into a new, everlasting kingdom, a new, everlasting life.

But not everyone believed this new promise was true. Not everyone was ready to leave the old ways behind. The Sadducees were one of the most powerful groups of leaders and teachers in Jerusalem during Jesus' time, and they continued to insist that all this talk of resurrection, life after death, it was all nonsense, false hope for naïve dreamers. The Sadducees supported co-operation with the Roman Empire because if the nation's survival was all that mattered, instead of wasting your one precious life fighting against enemies that had conquered Israel over and over again, you should just keep your head down, and do what all your ancestors did – follow the law, get married, have a family, teach your children what it means to be part of the people of Israel, so that when you die, the nation will endure. For the Sadducees, resurrection was nonsense, wild promises that just led to people throwing their lives away for nothing.

So when this hot-shot teacher and miracle worker named Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, a teacher who has been teaching some radical things about the resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees think they've got an opportunity here to humiliate him, to demonstrate to all his so-called disciples that their leader doesn't know the scriptures as well as they do. And so they casually approach him in the temple with a casual question, one that they clearly think is so very clever. Seven brothers all married the same woman, one after the other, and they all died childless, and eventually the woman dies too. So in the resurrection, in the kingdom to come, whose wife will she be? It's a ridiculous question, and the Sadducees know it's ridiculous, because they think that it proves that the idea of resurrection is ridiculous. But Jesus answers their question by showing them that they don't actually understand what the resurrection that God has promised will truly be like. They have assumed that life in the resurrection will be the same as life in this world – that everything will be more or less the same, maybe a little better. They have assumed that life in the resurrection will follow the same rules as life in this world – that

people will continue to get married, have families, teach their children about the law, just as the people of Israel have been doing for thousands of years. And Jesus makes it clear that this just isn't true. The resurrection life – life in the coming kingdom of God – it isn't going to be like this life in this world. It isn't going to be just a fancier, nicer version of life here on earth. The problem with the Sadducees is a lack of imagination – they are thinking of the life to come and thinking it will be like our world, with a few little tweaks and surface level changes, but nothing really fundamentally different, nothing really fundamentally new. The resurrection life will be completely new, a strange new world, a new kind of life. All the things that make this life good – all the joys that we can experience here in this world, all the good things that God has blessed us with here, we will still experience those good things in the kingdom to come, but we won't experience them in the same way. God gave us marriage here on earth as a way to help us structure our lives and our relationships, to help us experience love and community and mutual self-sacrifice in a safe and structured way, because without those boundaries and protections in place, we end up hurting each other, using our relationships to control and harm one another, but in the kingdom to come, in the resurrection life, all those protections will no longer be necessary, because we will be free from sin, once and for all – for the first time, we can understand love the way God always wanted us to experience it, without boundary, without barrier. In the resurrection life, we will experience all God's blessings directly, without needing to safeguard ourselves and protect ourselves against the possibility of others using those blessings to hurt us, because in that kingdom it is impossible for anyone to hurt or harm or destroy what God has blessed

And it is difficult for us to understand what that will look like now, because just like the Sadducees, we usually struggle trying to imagine what the resurrection life will look like, what the kingdom of heaven will truly be like. So often when we

talk about heaven, we talk about it as if it will just be like this life, but a little bit better – as if we will spend all our time there doing all the things we didn't quite have time for here on earth. I can't tell you how many funerals I've attended where someone says something like "He's golfing in heaven now! He's drinking whiskey with St. Peter," and I think somewhere along the line, people got heaven confused with an all-inclusive resort in the Bahamas, because heaven is going to be so much better than that. The resurrection life we have been promised will include all the joys that make this life meaningful, but those joys will be experienced in a way so far beyond anything we could possibly imagine. In his essay *The Weight of Glory*, CS Lewis wrote that "we are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." Here in this life our joys have been constrained and limited by our sinful natures, here we can only experience joy in the briefest glimpses, in the tiniest sips, one toe dipped in the water, but in the resurrection life, we will experience joy to the fullest, we will drink the cup dry, we will plunge ourselves deep into the fountain of life and let joy soak into the deepest reaches of our being. Here we struggle with sin and pain, and even the best things we experience here are touched by that pain, but in the resurrection life we will finally understand what joy truly is – we will finally understand the fullness of being called children of God.

And that doesn't mean that the joys we experience here don't matter. Just because human relationships will be completely different in the resurrection doesn't mean our relationships here don't matter – our marriages and families are still good places for us to practice love and to enjoy being part of God's creation, and we should do our best to make them resemble God's love and joy as much as we can, trusting that God will bless us in our efforts and make them more than they could

ever be on our own. But we should never mistake any earthly joys for our ultimate purpose. We should never value what is finite over what is infinite, prefer the temporary to the eternal. The blessings that God has promised his children start here in this world, but they do not, they can not end here. We cannot start thinking this world is all God has in store for us, and lose sight of the glorious future that is on its way. We can give thanks for the gifts God gives us and always remember that there is so much more than this – that a new world, a new life, fundamentally different from everything we have ever known, that resurrection life is waiting for us, for all those who belong to Jesus Christ, and in the light of that world, in the light of the joy that waits for us there, the very best things of this world will seem fake and hollow, Styrofoam props and sound stages, when we have been invited to experience something truly real. Today and everyday, we give thanks for the blessings God has given us in this life, but we keep our eyes focused on the life that is coming, the resurrection life where God makes all things right, all things new, all things joy. Today and everyday, may we pray for God's kingdom to come, so that our joy may be truly full. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.