

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 27 (C) ~ 9 November 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17
Psalm 17:1-9
Luke 20:27-38

Suitcases from Home

When I was in seminary, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime: I was invited to take a year off from my studies to serve as Personal Research Assistant to the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace in London. Randy and I had only been married a few months – and had just gotten our first apartment settled – when it was time to prepare to pack up and leave. It was a bit like a home improvement show: We had piles of “stuff” to put in storage, piles to discard or give away, and piles of things without which we thought we couldn’t survive for the next 12 months.

I had not lived abroad before and was worried I would be homesick, so I carefully chose items that would be comforting – photos and trinkets and books. So many books. The results of my curation were staggering. We flew to Heathrow with two mammoth suitcases *each*, and we shipped a crate of other “essentials” that was meant to be delivered a couple of weeks after we arrived. Not surprisingly, two weeks turned into a month, and as the days wore on I found myself aching for the things in that shipment. It wasn’t the “stuff” that I needed (although I was ready for my winter coat...), so much as the feelings those things evoked. They reminded me of home.

What *is* “home”?

Theologian and spiritual writer Frederick Buechner describes it as “the place that off and on throughout your life you keep going back to, if only in dreams and memories.” Home, Buechner says, “is apt to determine the kind of place, perhaps a place inside yourself, that you spend the rest of your life searching for even if you are not aware that you are searching.”¹ Whether we realize it or not, we often seek

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

out the familiar when looking for a job, or a place to live, or even a spouse. As I have counseled couples for marriage over the years, I have been struck by how frequently one or both partners use language about “home” when speaking about the other. We are hard-wired, it seems, to long for that place – either temporal or spiritual – where we know we belong, where we know we truly can be ourselves.

Another famous theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo, draws on this same language of seeking and longing when talking about the human desire for God. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes, “You have made us for yourself [O God], and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (I.1.i). *Our hearts are restless until they rest in you*. Think about this for a second: How much of your life have you spent, or are you spending now, thrashing about, restlessly looking to “find yourself” – to find your purpose, to find your reason for being, to find your true “home”? What if that search, what if that longing, were really a quest for God?

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus makes it clear where our true home really lies. The Sadducees approach him with the implausible scenario about a woman who marries each of seven brothers in turn. *In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?* they ask. And Jesus answers, in effect, “You are missing the point.” According to Luke the Sadducees, who are one of the three main sects of first-century Judaism, do not believe in the Resurrection – so they ask questions to poke holes in the whole concept. If the dead really *are* raised, then what happens to the relationships that we forge here on earth? Is life in the age to come an extension of this life? If so, then how in heaven’s name – literally! – do the mechanics work?

Jesus’ reply is surprising and, for many of us, I’m sure, disturbing. “Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage,” He answers. What? Isn’t marriage meant to be one of the ways that we experience God here on earth, in life-long covenant together? (If it isn’t, then I have misled a lot of couples over the years!) How can Jesus so blithely dismiss the very institution that “was established by God in creation,” as the marriage liturgy reminds us?²

As is so often the case with Jesus, some explanation is in order here. Jesus is not, in fact, disregarding the importance of marriage, but He *is* reinterpreting it. Jesus invites us to think of marriage – or of any of the sacraments, for that matter – like

² BCP, 423.

the crate and suitcases that Randy and I took with us to London. When we travel far from home, we take familiar “stuff” with us – things we need, and things to remind us of the place we’ve left behind.

Most of us have probably had that anxious experience of waiting at baggage claim in our arrival city, watching the belt on the carousel go round and round, wondering and worrying whether our suitcases arrived with us on the flight. (If you’ve ever had a bag *not* make the trip, you especially understand what I’m talking about!)

Now, compare that anxiety to the feeling at baggage claim when you get home. Yes, you still watch the carousel with eager anticipation, but let’s face it: if your suitcase isn’t there at the end of the return flight, it tends not to be quite as disabling as it would have been had it happened on the other end. Once the trip is over, you don’t need the suitcases as much. Yes, it’s inconvenient and annoying if they don’t arrive on time, but by that point you have reached your final destination. You are home.

The Church teaches that the sacraments – Baptism and Eucharist, but also sacramental rites such as Confirmation, Ordination, healing, last rites, and yes, marriage – are like those suitcases. They are “reminders of home” that we carry with us here on earth, glimpses of our true identity, our true citizenship, as children of God. But once we return to our real Home (with a capital “H”), we will not need those reminders: We will be in the presence of God, in the presence of Grace and Love itself.

So what does Jesus’ conversation with the Sadducees have to say to us this morning?

For one thing, it suggests that when we gather for Eucharist, as we do today, or when we participate in any of the holiest moments in the life of the Church, we are reminded of who we really are. Worshipping together in Christian community, we catch a glimpse of what it will be like, in the words of St. Paul, to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). Sacraments are signs that point us to a larger spiritual reality about which we only have hints this side of the grave: the reality of being created by and for God, of being loved by God beyond all measure, and of belonging at home with God.

This morning's Gospel also puts our experience in this life, away from our heavenly home, in larger perspective. It relativizes the struggles of the here-and-now. As post-Easter people, *we* know what the Sadducees cannot: We know about the empty tomb. For over two thousand years, faithful people have staked their very lives on the central claim of Christianity, that the Resurrection is *real*. Many of us here also have experienced resurrection (with a lower-case "r") in our own lives – be it in recovery from illness, in the restoration of a broken relationship, or in a second chance after a poor life choice. And if Resurrection is, indeed, real, then the "baggage" that we lug around with us now pales in comparison to the freedom of our new life.

Recently I have heard a few folks here at St. Dunstan's express a sense of being in "exile" in the current political climate in this city and in this country. They use language of being estranged from the homeland they once knew and in which they once took pride. It's a terrible feeling, this estrangement. It is isolating; it is lonely; it is heartbreaking. And at times such as this it helps, I think, to remember that we are but sojourners traveling through this earthly plane. This is *not* our final destination – no matter how good *or* how bad things may be, here and now.

When it's doing its job, Church – and our life together as a community of faith – should be a rest stop in our journey, a way station where we recharge, check the map or GPS, and catch a glimpse of the glorious life up ahead. And Jesus is clear that, while anxieties and fears can preoccupy or even paralyze us in this world, in the age to come they will have no dominion over us. Put another way, that "baggage" will no longer be ours to carry; we can leave it behind.

May it be so.

Amen.