

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
The Rev. John Sampson
“The Opening of Everything”



“Resurrection” by Monastery Icons.

Luke 16:19 – 31
September 28, 2025

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.

We've been traveling the road to Jerusalem with Jesus for many, many weeks now. And along the way, Jesus has been telling these stories, which we call parables. And they're fictions. Although they seem like they could be true. And even though they are fictions, they

do tell us a deeper truth. Many deeper truths. Because in each of these stories, there are many ways in which we can understand what Jesus is trying to tell us.

Along the way, we've talked about coins and sheep, masters and servants, vineyards. And today, we hear a tale that can be a little rough to hear, can't it?

Now, Jesus fills this parable we hear this morning with characters that we might recognize from our lives, as true today as they were back in Jesus' time. Rich people who don't use their riches generously. Poor people who so desperately need a helping hand. And although these may not be real people, they certainly are recognizable to us.

But is the way that Jesus talks about heaven and a place called Hell, is that true? Is it true that there is a place called Heaven? And it is a place filled with bliss? Is it true that there is a place called Hell, and it is filled with eternal torment? Is it true that what we do here in our lives today influences where we end up when we die? Is it true that the chasm between the two can never be broached, except through word and through sight?

Often, we name our faith tradition "Christianity" as if there is a unified identity, that we all believe the same things, we all worship in the same way, that we all look to the same doctrines of the church to follow the path of Jesus. I would venture it's probably more accurate to talk about "Christianities," plural. That there are actually many ways to follow Jesus. And we all know this.

If we weren't here this morning and we went to a Catholic church, things would be different. If we went to a Greek Orthodox church, things would be different. If we went to a synagogue, things would be different. And yet for many of us, we believe that although these are different paths, they're blessed paths that lead to deeper relationship with God.

And so, in response to the parable we heard today, I want to share with you a different understanding of what the afterlife might look like. And this comes from our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox Church. I'm going to show you this icon. This is the icon of the resurrection. And it comes from the Orthodox Church. There's an image of a very similar icon on the cover of your bulletin. So, if you're sitting in the back, or your eyes aren't so great and you can't really see what is going on in this icon, take a look at your bulletin.

What we have here is called, in some communities, the harrowing of hell. This is the moment after Jesus dies on the cross, is buried in a tomb, and we think is resting peacefully in that tomb. In the Greek Orthodox Church, this is the Easter icon. It shows us an active and resurrected Jesus between two mountains in Hades. And below him are crossed planks. Those are the doors of Hades, which he has broken down. In the parable we heard from Luke, we are told that no one can bridge the gap between heaven and hell. But in this icon, it tells us something different. It tells us that that gap can be bridged, and it has already been bridged by the Christ.

Below Jesus is a bound figure. That is Death. Bound and subjugated under Christ's glory of resurrection. On either side of Jesus he is reaching over, grasping the wrists of two people, pulling them out of their coffins. Those are Adam and Eve. This icon tells us that resurrection is not just for Jesus, but that Jesus will break into the places of death and will resurrect us together with himself. It tells us that through Christ's love, there is never a one-way final ticket to one realm or the other. Christ reaches out and pulls us into the new life he promises us. Adam and Eve are the symbols for all of humanity, including each one of us. Christ is offering to break down the doors where we find ourselves, even if in this life, we are paralyzed, almost death-like.

But there are more figures than just Adam and Eve. On one side is David and Solomon and John the Baptist. On the other is Abel and Isaiah. And I never know who that sixth person is. This resurrection is for all of us. The gates of Hades and of death are broken for all of us. The mountains of the underworld are parted for all of us.

This is a different kind of parable, a visual parable, that tells us a different kind of truth about the extent of God's love, of Christ's love, than the parable from Luke. A love that will go to the ends, to the heights and the depths of creation itself to redeem all of us.

I have to say, I like this parable better than the one we heard, in which the Blessed look down in pity and judgement on those who suffer.

This icon is a visual parable of what happens in the afterlife, but perhaps this is also a map for what could happen in this life. That we could receive Christ's love even here and now. That we could be Christ's love to others who are imprisoned even here and now.

Which parable makes more sense to you?

Which parable would you choose based on your knowledge of God's love, of the vastness and the reach of Christ's promise to each one of you?

Amen.