

There's a comment I frequently hear at Catholic funerals. It's a comforting sentiment in the midst of so much grief. Often one of the mourners will say, "I don't know how people without faith deal with this." They are speaking about faith in eternal life. If you believe in life after death, you can more easily accept the loss of a loved one. It is always a loss, but we believers feel reassured that the ones we love have gone to a better place, freed of their pain and suffering, and we believe that one day we will see them again and enjoy their friendship. Our belief in the resurrection comes from the gospels: the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus afterward. We believe because of the testimony of the first Christians, because people we trust tell us about their faith, and because of a feeling deep in our bones.

Dealing positively with death is one of the benefits of faith. Those without faith in the supernatural accept death as a natural part of life, as a loss and an end. They grieve with less optimism.

Disbelief can have other negative consequences. It tends to focus people on the here and now rather than on the future. It promotes materialism and the idea that the one who gets the most toys wins the game of life. Disbelief makes people less likely to share with others because happiness comes from possessing things rather than giving them away. Those without faith are less likely to contribute to charities, less likely to preserve the environment for future generations, less fearful of debt and less concerned about the value of human life. In its extreme form, disbelief can drive people to abuse other human lives if it allows them to collect more for themselves.

In Luke's gospel, the Sadducees make only one appearance, and it is in the passage we hear today. They do not believe in life after death. So they pose a puzzler to Jesus about a wife who marries 7 brothers successively after each one dies. The Sadducees ask Jesus whose wife she will be in the next world. They believe the answer is none of the above because there is no next life. Jesus says they don't get it. Life after death is different from life before death. Marriage doesn't happen the same way.

This passage, incidentally, is used by the Catholic Church in defense of priestly celibacy. One reason priests and religious are celibate in the Church is to be a sign of the resurrection for others, to show that there is more to life than finding a partner. Marriage is good, but eternal life is better, and we need reminders every so often that we are living for the next world and not just for this one.

Our belief in the resurrection gives us comfort at funerals, but it also has an effect on the rest of our lives. It strengthens our respect for human life. It makes us less selfish and more generous toward others. And it helps us think twice about what gives us pleasure. The real joy in life comes not from the present moment but from doing what pleases God.