

## “Silly Questions”

Luke 20:27-35

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I love the silly questions. The conundrums. Can God make a rock so big that he can't pick it up? How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Did Adam and Eve have navels? If Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, how is it that in the book of Numbers we read that Moses was the most humble man on earth? Would the most humble man on earth have written that he was the most humble man on earth?

These are marvelously rabbinical questions. Talmudic questions. The rabbis used to entertain and take seriously these questions that lead the serious student of the Bible to the very absurdly mysterious center of faith.

And so in this great rabbinical tradition already established by the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Jesus gets this question that we read this morning. A woman married 7 husbands—all brothers—each of whom in their turn died leaving the woman a widow. Which of these brothers would be her husband in the resurrection?

Such conundrums have a way of getting us to the heart of the matter by taking an odd and often circuitous route. It gets us to the very heart of what we mean by resurrection and what plans God might have for us in the life after our earthly life is over.

So, which of these brothers will be her husband on the day of resurrection? The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, but the Pharisees and Jesus did. So, the question was a way of getting Jesus to develop this strange idea of the resurrection of the dead. It's the kind of question that rabbis love, and the answer usually leads to more questions. Silly questions have a way of allowing us to enter into the very heart of mystery while maintaining the very mystery it seeks to explain.

The simple answer is that the resurrection is not a continuation of the life we currently live. It is something entirely new in which all—including all the generations before us—are alive to God; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all alive, and alive in a fundamentally new way. This is a *new* thing, it is not just an extension of an old thing. Is that clear?

Of course not. It remains a mystery.

The Hebrew word for heaven is “Shamayim.” It contains the Hebrew words for water and fire. “Esh” in Hebrew is water and “Mayim” is fire. It’s a place, therefore, where both fire and water can coexist. It is a place of absurdity when measured by the world in which we live. The old rabbis taught that if God can heal the extremes of fire and water, so also can God heal the divisions between us and all our differences.

Because heaven, or the kingdom of God, or the resurrection of the dead, are all ways of talking about things that are fundamentally different from, and in some ways opposite to, the world in which we live. It’s a place where they will study war no more. It’s a place where there is no death, nor mourning, nor tears, nor pain, anymore. Which means that it is a place very different from the place where I live out my life. It is a very different place indeed.

So, what relevance does such a place have to the life I live now? Again, a rabbinical question.

I asked a similar question of an African American preacher when I was in seminary. He was there to tell us mostly white seminarians about the African American religious tradition. He lifted up the role that African American preachers and congregations played in the struggle for freedom and civil rights.

But, to be the devil’s advocate, I asked, “Didn’t the African American tradition also preach a kind of ‘pie in the sky by’m by’ sort of faith; an escapist religion?” The preacher was deeply pastoral and patient in his response.

“Let me tell you a story,” he said. It was about a group of civil rights demonstrators, a mixed group of blacks and whites, outside a greasy spoon restaurant in Memphis, Tennessee. They were ready to move into the restaurant to take their seats at a lunch counter to which Negroes were not allowed to sit or be served. Before they went into the restaurant, they sang, “I’m Gonna Be at That Welcome Table.”

“Now,” the African American preacher patiently said to our class, “on the one hand this song is about a time beyond death when everyone will be fed at the great messianic banquet. All fed equally regardless of color or race or clan. It *is* kind of about ‘pie in the sky by and by,’ a reward for innocent suffering on earth. But then, get this, they move from singing that song about a time after the resurrection of the dead to take their places at the lunch counter. Rich and poor, black and white, eating together in a way that they would not have dared to do. So, the black faith tradition was partly about ‘pie in the sky by and by.’ But it was and is a faith that empowers the hard work for justice in the world in which we live.”

It is this essential discontinuity between the world in which we live and the world to which God calls us that the Church of Jesus Christ tries to live.

And it is this discontinuity into which little Marcos has been born, and to which he has on this day been baptized. Marcos was born on October 4<sup>th</sup> of this year, just 24 days after the horrendous acts of September 11<sup>th</sup>. We will tell him the stories about all that as he grows up, when he is old enough to understand such things, as if the ways of a broken world can be understood at all.

But he was also born on the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the anniversary of the death of Saint Francis on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October in 1225 at the age of 45. St. Francis was a man born of nobility in the days of the great crusades, in which the Christian Church was at war with Islam over the possession of the Holy sites of Jerusalem. Sounds like a strangely modern world to me!

Francis bought himself a fine suit of armor as was befitting his noble rank and his father's wealth, and he set off to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> Crusade against the Moslem infidels who had taken over all our holy places in Jerusalem. But Francis was only a day's journey outside the city of Assisi when he had a dream in which God spoke to him and said that this is not what he had intended for Francis. Francis immediately sold his suit of armor, gave the money to the poor, and became a man of peace and poverty living in utter dependence upon God, who will provide for him, rather than his father's wealth.

The saints are people who live in this life as if the day of resurrection has already come. And they are always thought of as just a bit crazy. For once you get a vision of the way things ought to be in the life and economy of God, the world in which we live seems just so inadequate and incomplete.

In some ways, I don't wish for Marcos a life of sainthood. But I do wish for him an impatience about the way things are, and a hope that, somehow, with his help, this world can be a world without war, without tears. A world of hope and justice, transformed by God in the lives of those who live as if God has other plans for us. Which indeed, God does.

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