



The Trinity Pulpit



Questions and the Resurrection

John 20: 19-31

Dr. Jeff Roberts

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The Community for Critical Thinking is an organization whose goal is to reform education by training teachers and students how to use a question. This organization believes that our questions are as important as our answers. On their website they make this statement:

Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions. Had no questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field — for example, Physics or Biology — the field would never have been developed in the first place? Furthermore, every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate our thought.

Questions define tasks, express problems and delineate issues. Answers on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such. This is why it is true that only students who have questions are really thinking and learning. It is possible to give students an examination on any subject by just asking them to list all of the questions that they have about a subject, including all questions generated by their first list of questions. That we do not test students by asking them to list questions and explain their significance is again evidence of the privileged status we give to answers isolated from questions. That is, we ask questions only to get thought-stopping answers, not to generate further questions.¹

What is the role of the questions? How important is the question not only in academics but in our spiritual journey? I think many of us have thought that you are not suppose to question what you read or what you read at church. We live sometimes by the old sound bite “God said it, I believe it and that settles it.” Well of course if God said it I am going to believe it by faith, but there are still questions which arise in the thought that “God said it.” I am going to ask if God said it and I believe it, but now

what does that mean for my life? What does this word from God mean in regards to my attitude, actions and thoughts? Questions are not the enemy of faith in so many ways they become the new path, which leads us deeper into communion with God.

Today we are on this side of Easter. We have celebrated Easter and we know that Jesus is alive. We know that death could not keep Jesus. We know on this side of Easter that Jesus is God just like he claimed to be. Jesus’ resurrection is the proof that Jesus is God’s one and only unique Son that has come into the world. We know all of this by the declaration of resurrection. Yet, even with this good news we have questions. There are many questions which arise from our text today. Some of them are obvious and some of them are vague.

It is the evening of resurrection day. The disciples’ minds must have been spinning with questions. Jesus had been arrested, tried and put to death that they knew. Now there was a new word, another word, a word of possibility that must have shocked them. That word was the women had been to the tomb and it was empty. Not only had they seen the empty tomb but they had been told by an angel that Jesus was alive. Mary claims to have actually seen the risen Lord. Peter and John had run to the tomb and found it empty just like the women had reported. Yet, they had not seen angels, nor had they seen Jesus. All they had at the moment was an empty tomb, the words of Mary and a lot of questions.

That is how Jesus finds them that first evening. They are in the upper room with some information and some questions. We are told they had the door locked because they feared the Jewish authorities who had plotted against Jesus. They were still afraid that Jesus would not be the only one put to death, and now that his body was gone they were not sure what that would mean for them.

It is in that upper room and in their fear and questions that Jesus first appears. We are told that Jesus came and stood among them and spoke “Peace be with you.” Then He showed them His hands and side. When they saw Jesus and His evidence they were overjoyed. Again Jesus said “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that He breathed on them and said “receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins they are forgiven, if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven.”

Later there is another encounter with Jesus. This time it is in the upper room and Thomas is present. Thomas had not been there that first evening. When he heard the witness of all the other disciples he was still not willing to believe, until he saw Jesus. It was a week later when Jesus appeared to Thomas. Again the doors were locked and Jesus stood among them and said “Peace be with you.” Then He tells Thomas “put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas believes and then Jesus says “Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

There are some obvious questions which arise from these stories. Questions like:

- What type of body does Jesus have to pass through walls?
- Why are the disciples still locked away when Jesus is alive?
- Where is Thomas on the first appearance?
- Why did Jesus wait a week between each appearance?
- What does it mean when John says “Jesus breathed on them?”

These are just a few questions from this resurrection story that as they say, “inquiring minds want to know.” Yet, let me suggest there are some bigger questions that emerge from this resurrection story. Three questions that I want to briefly consider with you.

The first question is does God seek those who do not seek God? Does God search for those who have yet turned to God? I think that is the question of Jesus’ two appearances in this story. In both instances the disciples and Thomas are not seeking Jesus, but Jesus is seeking them. The disciples have heard the stories of the women. They know according to Peter and John that the body is missing. Mary adds to the evidence by claiming that she has seen and spoken with Jesus and she becomes the first gospel preacher. Yet, with the evidence, their history of Jesus’ miracles and the recalling of Jesus’ words and promises, they still are locked away that

first evening. They are not out looking for Jesus with the hope of seeing Him like Mary did. The description of the disciples is that they are locked away in fear. They are exactly where they were 24 hours before resurrection. All this day has brought them is more confusion and more questions.

That is when Jesus appears. We are not told how Jesus does it, or a description of this resurrected body. We know that it is not bound by locked doors, but yet there is still evidence of his scars and crucifixion. There is mystery around His appearance but here is what we know for sure. Jesus comes to them. Jesus comes to them when they are not looking for Jesus. Jesus comes to them to speak peace and power to their lives.

What is described here in John 20 is known theologically as theophany. A theophany is a moment in the Bible when God breaks through. Most of the time there is fear of God’s presence, there is a question which is asked and there is a time when God speaks peace or do not fear. A theophany is the moment when the thin veil between what we see and what we do not see is removed. It is the moment we experience God in a new and wonderful way. The Bible is filled with such moments. Most of the time these moments occurs not from human effort, but from God’s initiative. Now that does not mean we cannot be prepared and seeking God. Jesus does say seek and you will find. There are Biblical stories where men and women are seeking God and God speaks. When we daily prepare our hearts to experience God we do so more often than when we are not looking and prepared. Yet, our lack of preparation does not lock God out of our lives.

Our question is does God seek those who have yet sought him? The answer is, yes. Brian Rebolts writes in one of his sermons “God helps those who help themselves.” I imagine most of us have heard this phrase before. Historians like to attribute this theology to Ben Franklin, but he was merely repeating an old and popular idea of God — one that continues to resonate with American culture to this day. Pollsters estimate that roughly 75 percent of Americans believe this saying is found in the Bible. I even found a citation for it on the Web: “God helps those who help themselves” — Hezekiah 6:1. The problem is that the book of Hezekiah doesn’t exist. But I can imagine why someone would make it up. The notion that God helps those who help themselves affirms the deeply American myth that individuals should get only what they deserve, and that God blesses the successful and punishes failures. But the God revealed in John’s gospel has different priorities. Our story opens not with strength but with weakness. The disciples are fearful and confused; they are unable to do anything except sit in a dark room and dwell on their

despair. And still, they are richly blessed. The doors are locked, but Christ enters. The room is dark, but Christ gives light. The disciples are sinners, but Christ gives them the power to absolve sin. The message of the true Gospel is that God's blessing belongs to everyone: even to those who are unable to help themselves.²

There are times that even Christians do not seek God. It might have been a long time since you really prayed. It might have been years since you opened your Bible any other time but Sunday School. Your daily life might be filled with everything but thinking about God and God's will for your life. Even so, God is seeking you. The Apostle Paul would put it this way, "there is nothing in heaven or earth, nothing that has been or that is, or that ever will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ." I want you to know that even when we are not seeking God, God is still seeking us. There is not any room of our life where we can lock our self away in fear, doubt, pride or even sin that can keep Jesus from seeking us with His love.

The second question that I find in our text is do we need all the information to have faith? The obvious answer from scripture is, no. We do not need all the facts or all the information to have faith in Jesus. When Thomas demands his own evidence Jesus grants it too him, but then Jesus says "blessed are those who have not seen and yet still believe." Blessed are those who believe by faith and not by sight. Blessed are those who muster faith against all evidence to the contrary. Blessed are those who just keep on believing when others loose faith. Blessed are those who believe even without all of the information.

To make this point even further don't miss John's last statement of this chapter. In verse 30 John writes, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples who are not recorded in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Let's get this straight! John writes that we don't have all the stories. John states what we don't have all the information. John tells us that there is more, but that is not included in the Bible. We don't have all the information but John reminds us that we don't need all the information we just need what we have, so that we might believe.

We don't have to have all the information, but we don't need all the information to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing in him we might have life in his name.

I know so many people who say when this happens then I will believe. If God would do this I would believe. If I could just have these questions answered then I would have faith. There are those of us who are scientific minded and we can't make sense of the Bible in scientific terms, although increasingly in the scientific world the conclusion that mystery is a constant companion is accepted. Some of us are morally conflicted. We just can't come to faith when there are so many questions around evil and suffering in our world. If God would just answer some questions for us we would believe.

Yet, Jesus says blessed are those who have not seen and yet still believe. John tells us that we don't have all the information. However, we have enough to know that Jesus is God and the purpose of what we do know is that we might have the kind of life that God intends for us through a relationship with Jesus.

Francis Collins stood in the East Room of the White House with President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair. Unfolding a map of the human DNA, President Clinton suggested that this map was as important as the map that Meriwether Lewis had unfolded and presented to President Thomas Jefferson, nearly 200 years before. Mapping the human DNA would be the next great adventure. Collins would be the leader of the Human Genome Project and would be responsible for science and process of this great endeavor. Collins, in his book the Language of God, writes that what President Clinton said that day surprised many but not him. Clinton commented, "Today we are learning the language in which God created life. We are gaining ever more awe for the complexity and beauty and the wonder of God's most divine gift." Many would have thought Collins, a renowned scientist, would have been offended or surprised at the President's statement, but not so. For Collins, of course, is a devout Christians as well as a gifted scientist. Collins commented himself that day, "it is humbling for me that we have caught the first glimpse of our own instruction book that was previously known only to God."³

Francis Collins repeatedly maintains that science and faith are not at odds. On the contrary, they both come with a great mystery and awe and one only supports the other. Collins is an example of a man who seeks knowledge and proof his whole life, but whose faith came without all the information.

Faith is hoping in things that are yet to be experienced. It is the belief in God's word, even with all of our questions. We will never have all the information we think we need but this is the gospel, God loves you and Jesus has come to us and all He desires is that we choose a relationship with Him. Will we still have questions? Of

course, but we will ask them in the security of our relationship with Jesus.

There is a third question from our resurrection story. The question is what are the qualities of a person who has met the risen Jesus? Let me mention three qualities that Jesus' resurrection brings the believer. First there is peace. Every time Jesus appears the first word and quality is peace. The word peace here is the wonderful deep word Shalom. It means more than absence of conflict, but it means wholeness and a sense of well being. We know that we can have a sense of well being in the most tumultuous times. Jesus promises us a peace that is not like the world's peace. It is a peace that is present, no matter our circumstances or the understanding of our circumstances.

A second quality is that of purpose. Jesus tells his disciples like the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. What Jesus reminds us is that His mission did not end at the cross, nor did it conclude at the empty tomb. Easter in many ways is not the end of the story, but the beginning of the story of God reconciling the whole world through Jesus. You and I as believers in Christ have a new purpose for living. We are here to live out our lives in a way that the message of God's love is known.

Thirdly, there is the quality of forgiveness. The statement by Jesus that if we forgive others of their sin they will be forgiven, but if we withhold forgiveness they will not be forgiven is a hard saying. Is Jesus suggesting the he gave to his disciples and even to us his followers the ability to choose who gets forgiven and who does not? That cannot be what Jesus means. Most scholars suggest that what Jesus is saying to us is that we have been given the enormous responsibility of sharing the forgiveness of Jesus. The statement is more about responsibility than privilege. It is more about the concept that if we do not tell others about forgiveness, how will they experience it? Our lives are to share the forgiveness of Jesus.

It has been said that faithful actions follow faithful questions. Our questions bring us to a place where we have the actions of peace, forgiveness and purpose.

Elie Wiesel suggests that to ask God a question raises one's self to God. That is what we do. We ask and God answers, and in that moment we grow and mature. Wiesel concludes, "I pray to the God within me that I might ask the right questions."

¹Community for Critical Thinking Website, criticalthinking.org

²Brian Rebholtz, Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, *All Souls Episcopal Parish*, April 19, 2009, allsoulsparish.org.

³Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Simon and Shuster Press, 2006) p.3.

