

# If, How, Why

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Sermon for Sunday, April 19, 2009 Luke 24:36-49

It is important to know the right answers. But asking the right questions is more important than knowing the right answers, because unless you start with the right questions, you can't arrive at the right answers. Indeed, if you ask the wrong questions, you are sure to arrive at answers which – however “true” they may be – do not promote wisdom and do not help create solutions to the problems we face.

Recognition of the importance of good questions is causing positive changes in how children are taught in school. Teachers today routinely push beyond rote memorization of “facts” to deeper understanding. And deeper understanding depends on the ability to ask questions about what you are learning. The process is more involved than traditional memorization approaches, but it yields much greater long-term benefits. Take, for example, the story of Nobel Prize winning scientist Isadore Rabi. He was brought up in the days when the emphasis was on memorization. However, his mother pushed him to think deeper. When asked why he became a scientist, Rabi said that it all started when he was in school and he would come home at the end of the day. His mother would be waiting, and she always asked the same thing. She didn't ask what he learned. She would say, “Izzy, did you ask any good questions today?” Rabi said learning to ask good questions was the basis of all his success. Since then, the value of being able to ask good questions have come to be recognized by nearly all philosophers of education. Emphasis on asking good questions is applied to all subjects. For instance, one new technique applied widely in elementary school language arts is to have children respond to a story first by answering the question, “What do you wonder about this story?”

That isn't a bad approach for grown-ups, either. When we approach a biblical text, “What do you wonder?” is a question that can engage our imaginations and invite us to discover new perspectives. Of course, some of our questions might turn out to be irrelevant or unanswerable, but we only find that out if we first ask them. And now and then we will come upon questions that truly open up a text for us.

What is notable about our text for this morning, an account of an appearance of the Risen Christ to the disciples, is that it is the disciples themselves who are asking the questions. It is the disciples themselves who are doing the wondering. You heard it, didn't you? “While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering . . .” And when we read that, it is only natural for us to start to wonder what it

was they were wondering about.

Here is what I think they were wondering about. I think they were wondering if, wondering how and wondering why. And I think that by wondering with them, we can get at the heart of this story.

The disciples had surely experienced what they thought at the time the biggest shock of their lives when Jesus was arrested and executed on a Roman cross. After all, they had followed him for years, seen him work wonders, and come to believe that he was the messiah, the one sent by God to set things right, especially for God's people, the Jews. But instead of conquering Roman power, he was conquered by it – or so it seemed. But the death of Jesus turned out to be only the second biggest shock of their lives. Even greater was the appearance of the Risen Christ in their midst. In Luke's account, they are gathered together discussing the rumors that Jesus has been seen alive by travelers he met on the road to Emmaus, when suddenly he is there among them. And the first thing they wonder, naturally enough, is if they are seeing things! Is this real or just an hallucination? I love how the text is honest about the reaction of the disciples; "They were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost." And even after he speaks and shows himself to the disciples, the disciples are described as filled with an odd mixture of joy, disbelief and curiosity.

If you think a moment, you realize that this is an entirely normal and natural reaction to incredible and unexpected good news. We have all seen those commercials on television that show the folks from Publisher's Clearing House knocking on someone's door to award them the multimillion dollar prize. The winner opens the door to find a television camera, someone holding balloons and someone else holding a huge check with their name on it. And just about every time, in spite of what is right before their eyes, the reaction is the same – disbelief! "Are you serious?" they ask. "Is this for real?"

So the initial reaction of the disciples is just what we would expect.

The first thing they wonder is if this is really happening!

The next thing they wonder is how – how can this be? How could such a thing happen? How does a dead man come back to life? Indeed, they assume first that Jesus hasn't really come back to life – real life, that is.

They think Jesus is just a ghost – a phantom, a spirit lingering on earth. Now even that would be incredible, but in Luke's gospel Jesus takes pains to show that he is no ghost, but truly and fully alive again. He says, "Touch me. See for yourself that I have flesh and bones, just like you." And when they still doubt, he asks for something to eat

– some fish. Ghosts don't eat!

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The point Jesus is trying to make to his disciples (and it is an important point for us to keep in mind also) is that the resurrection is something substantial. It is not a phantom existence. It is not a lesser life. It is a full and complete life. It is a rich and meaningful life. And it is a life that allows for people to interact in profound ways, to experience the richness of relationships.

Now, it must be acknowledged that Jesus never satisfies the disciples' curiosity about how this happened. The mechanics of the resurrection are never revealed. And scripture doesn't help much either. The resurrection itself goes unwitnessed. Nobody sees it. Nobody describes the process of a dead person becoming a living person.

So the disciples wonder but never learn how. This reminds us that faith doesn't mean getting the answers to all our questions. Some things we may never know, at least in this life. Some questions simply go unanswered. Part of faith is learning to live with the unanswered questions. And part of faith is learning not to let the things we don't know keep us from recognizing and acting upon what we do know – which leads us to the third thing the disciples were wondering about. They wondered if it was real. They wondered how it happened. And they wondered why it happened. That is something we do know, because the Risen Christ explains it to us.

And “Why?” is the most important question. Without the answer to “Why?” the resurrection is little more than a bit of historical trivia. Something unusual happened once upon a time. So what? It is like a trick in a magician's act – we react with amazement and wonder how it was done, but when the show is over, we return to our lives essentially unchanged. Life goes on just as it had before. Jesus wants to make sure that the disciples understand that his resurrection is no mere trick and that the last thing he wants them to do is go back to life as usual. “Thus it is written, that the messiah is to suffer and die and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”

The resurrection happened not simply to prove God's power but to inaugurate the mission of the disciples. Jesus was raised to inspire his followers to go forth with the message of hope – that sins could be forgiven, that a positive relationship with God was available to everyone who was willing to repent and believe.

That mission and that message is now ours, and every year at Easter we are called to remember. Easter comes at the end of each gospel, but it

isn't the end of the story. Indeed, for us it is just the beginning.

Like the first disciples, we are invited by the resurrected One to go forth with the good news, to enlarge the community of God's people.

I'm sure if we had been there, we would have reacted just as the disciples did. We would have been filled with shock, amazement, and questions. We would have wondered if it could possibly be real. We would have wondered how it could have happened. And we would have wondered why it happened.

In fact, we may still wonder all these things – if, how, why. And if the first disciples had trouble deciding if it really happened, then it's okay if we struggle with that, too. Like them, we may have to live with it a while before we can fully come to terms with it. That's okay. And if the first disciples never got an answer as to how it happened, then I think it is safe to say we probably won't figure that one out either. Faith isn't about having all the answers. It is about acting upon the answers we do have.

And without a doubt, we have the answer to the question, "Why?" Why was Jesus raised from the dead? So he could come back to those he had called and commission them for ministry. So he could send them out to tell the whole world of his grace and love.

When we who are Christians say we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we aren't merely saying we believe it happened once upon a time long ago. We are saying we believe it happened for a reason, and that this reason matters as much now as it ever did. Easter is our annual reminder that there is a whole world out there still waiting for God's people to come share the good news.

Amen.