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## Wrong Question, Right Answer

Acts 2:36-41

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 8, 2011 by the Rev Bruce Puckett

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A good friend of mine recently gave birth to a child. Though her pregnancy was quite uncomplicated, as far as pregnancies go, her interaction with her coworkers and the children with whom she works was filled with, shall we say, some misguided moments. Of course, some of them were quite adorable like when one child asked, "Did you swallow your baby to get it into your tummy?" But others were not so adorable. For example, one day one of her male coworkers saw her walking, and simply said, "Uh, baby? Or Fat?" I'm sure you've heard it said there is no such thing as a stupid question. Well, I'll let you make the call on that one. Not only was it a bad question because it's a terrible idea to ask a woman "or fat?" but what's more is it doesn't acknowledge the pain or anxiety or fear that often comes with infertility or unexpected pregnancies. This quite possibly was a stupid question.

Of course, the intention behind such a statement as "there is no such thing as a stupid question" is good. It is meant to make people feel free to ask whatever is on their minds without fearing humiliation. The statement is meant to open the door for communication and clarification when understanding and learning are lacking. Yet, the desire to encourage learning doesn't limit the possibility that a question is simply the wrong one.

One might accurately define my entire seminary experience as an effort in learning to ask the right questions: learning to ask the right questions of a scriptural or historical text; learning to ask the right questions about social situations or happenings in the church; learning to ask the right questions of people struggling through life and death. Overall, it seems like a wise thing for someone pursuing ordained ministry to learn because much of our life with God is about learning to ask the right questions and much of ministry is learning to sit with people in the midst of their questions.

Yet the reality of human life, and therefore the reality in the church, is most of the questions we ask turn out to be the wrong ones. The fact is it has been this way since the earliest days of the church. Our scripture text from Acts presents a prime example in the church's infancy of a grand adventure in missing the point. Remember with me what has been happening prior to our scripture lesson for today. Here's the scene. The disciples had just received the Holy Spirit, and this caused quite a stir. Those who received the Spirit were speaking in many languages so that Jews from every nation could understand what they were saying. Now, the obvious conclusion outside observers drew from this experience was the disciples had begun celebrating, the last day of class's style, you know, quite early, and therefore, they must have been drunk.

After being accused of such a thing, Peter stands with the other disciples and begins a dramatic sermon. Peter cites scripture, builds an argument, and focuses on the work and action of God culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter proclaims that what happened to the disciples was that about which Joel had prophesied: the day when God's Spirit would be given for the salvation of all who call on the Lord's name. Peter testifies to and emphasizes over and over and over and over again that *God* was the one at work in and through Jesus. *God* made Jesus known to the people through the deeds of power, wonders, and signs that *God* did through him. It was even *God* who was at work handing Jesus over in accordance with *God's* plan to those who would crucify him. And in an event that was never the anticipated outcome of death, *God* raised Jesus up, freeing him from death and its power, making Jesus both Lord and Christ. And following Jesus' ascension, *God* delivered on God's promise of giving God's Spirit. In Peter's account, one thing is quite clear: God is the acting subject. This sounds like a pretty stellar sermon to me. Peter sure knows what he's doing. Maybe we should look into getting Peter to come to the Chapel to preach. I'll speak with the Dean about it.

Peter doesn't stop his sermonic mastery there. He concludes with a homiletic trademark: a zinger last line. "Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus whom *you* crucified both Lord and Messiah." And, just like every sermon I have ever preached, those listening were deeply moved, cut to the heart, convicted to the point of physical pain and were looking for a way to respond. Just wait, that part's still coming. So they ask a straightforward question: "Brothers, what should we do?" To get the full force of this scene, we must listen to Peter's last line zinger a little more carefully. Peter says, "God has made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah." The word translated "made" can also be translated "do," as in the question, "What should we do?" After hearing about all that God has done, and after hearing Peter's relentless emphasis on God's doing, the crowd recognizes their culpability and ignominious position in the unfolding of God's plan and cries out, "Brothers, what should we do?" It's not that this is a stupid question. It's merely the wrong one. The question reveals the mistaken assumption that the crowd could and should "do" just like God had "done."

For all his preaching fervor, Peter doesn't condemn the crowd for missing the point. Rather, he answers this misguided question as someone who has been caught asking the wrong question himself. He answers as a person who had walked and talked and ate with Jesus for several years and repeatedly didn't get it. You remember Peter, right? He is the guy who in Luke's Gospel when Jesus invited three disciples up on the mountain with him to pray and they encounter Moses and Elias, Peter's the one who said, "Surely it's good for us to make (that is to do) dwelling places here for the three of you." Good idea, but Peter had missed the point. Peter was the one who in John's account of the Gospel insists that Jesus not only wash his feet but his whole body as well. Again, not a bad idea, but Peter had missed the point. Recognizing in those standing before him the same misguided effort he had experienced himself, Peter offers the right answer to their wrong question.

Peter's answer comes in three parts. First, he says, "Repent." The word for repent here means a changing of the heart and mind, a redirection or reform of life; it is a total reorientation of one's sensibilities. "What should we do?" the people ask. Change your entire way of thinking and imagining. Exchange your old ways of believing for belief in the one who God raised from the dead. Let the reality of God raising Jesus turn all your former ways of thinking and knowing upside down. If you want something to do, do that.

Then, Peter says, "Be baptized in Jesus' name that your sins might be forgiven." This is Peter's way of saying, "Have your body marked and reshaped by the story of Jesus' death and resurrection." Peter encourages those standing before him to be drawn into the community whose life is characterized, molded, and formed by Jesus who God made both Lord and Messiah. Peter is saying, "Be baptized into the presence and power of Jesus that creates a people among whom sins are forgiven, a people among whom debts are cancelled, and a people among whom murderers, people just like you who crucified Jesus, are pardoned. Be drawn through the baptismal waters into this bodily reality." It is as if Peter is saying, with your mind changed, let your body be changed as well.

The final part of Peter's response is less of an exhortation and more of a promise. Peter concludes, "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." He is saying, "With your mind and body changed as part of the new reality of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, you will receive the Holy Spirit; you will receive God's gift of God's presence and power for this new life. You will receive the source for your participation in the new reality of Easter."

Peter invites those listening into a changed mind, a changed body, and a changed spirit; that is, he invites them into a whole new life marked by the resurrection reality. The crowd wanted something to do in response to their guilt and grief over crucifying Jesus, but Peter instead offers them an invitation to new life within the community of the resurrected Lord of all.

Maybe you've heard this invitation to new life within the church. Maybe you've heard Peter's message of transformation before, and maybe you have been changed. Maybe you're like Shannon.

Shannon's entire vision for a good life was turned upside down by her faith in Christ. This change of mind led Shannon to start using her basketball talents to build relationships with at risk youth, so their lives could be changed as hers had been. Shannon's mind and body have been made new. Yet anyone who knows Shannon recognizes that she is still a hot head with a combustible temper and little in the way of self-control. Maybe you, like Shannon, are alive in faith and active with your body in service of your neighbor, but you can only see your constant failures to produce patience and gentleness and joy and self-control. So your continual question is, "What should I do?"

Or maybe you're like Zach. Zach is an intellectual. He is able to understand and explain the matters of the faith clearly and coherently in profound ways. Zach is also the kind of guy whose intimacy with God seems to grow daily. His life is a beacon of love, and kindness, and goodness. Zach's mind and spirit have been made new. Yet, Zach has bounced from one painful relationship to another. Zach seems stuck in his latest relationship, and as much as he has tried he can't get out of what has long ago passed the point of being too physical. Maybe you, like Zach, have a mind sharp in matters of the faith, a spirit being changed by God's Spirit, but all you can see is your inability to have your body shaped and formed in godly ways. So you are always wondering, "What should I do?"

Or maybe you're like Rochelle. Rochelle's love of God and neighbor is deep and wide. Rochelle has patience and joy that surely testify to her long life in the Spirit. These gifts are most obviously on display in her care of the patients with dementia in the care facility where she works. Rochelle's spirit and body have been made new. Yet, if you asked Rochelle, she would say she isn't a person of strong faith. She lives with perpetual doubt and often prefers not to recite the Apostle's creed in worship because she isn't sure she believes all of it. Maybe you, like Rochelle, radiate with the fruits of the Spirit and give yourself selflessly in caring for people in need, but you haven't seen anything like a change in the ways you think about or imagine your life. And because of your doubts about God and the life of faith, you constantly ask, "What should I do?"

The good news from Acts today for Rochelle and for Zach and for Shannon and for you and for me is we are God's resurrection community. If Jesus' resurrection is working well for you in your mind and your body but not your spirit, or in your body and your spirit but not your mind, or in your spirit and your mind but not your body, be encouraged because the reality of the resurrection is already at work within you. And furthermore, be encouraged because God's resurrection community needs you just as you need it. To be a community that fully witnesses to the resurrected life of Jesus Christ in body, mind, and spirit, Zach and Shannon and Rochelle and you and I need each other.

So the new question, the better question, the question that frees us who are cut to the heart by our continual need for renewal is "With whom should we be?" Asking, "What should we do?" assumes we all need transformation in the same way, but that is not true to our life experience. Asking, "With whom should we be?" acknowledges that the new reality created by Jesus' resurrection takes shape differently in each of us, so we need others in the church. The answer to this new question is we should be with God's Easter people; that is, we should be with one another. Individually we proclaim a limited resurrection reality. Individually we testify to a partial transformation in body, mind, and spirit. But, together... Together we proclaim the fullness of the resurrected life. Together we testify wholly to a transformed body, mind, and spirit. Together we are Christ's body. Together we are the church of the resurrection. Alleluia. Amen.