

Easter 3C

“The Hardest Question(s)” © Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

A couple weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, we spoke of the Absolute Mystery that God is. At that time, I proposed to you there are Relative Mysteries - mysteries which are unanswered but have the likelihood of being answered someday. An Absolute Mystery is a mystery which will never, even when we are with the Lord after death, have a solvable, concise answer. An Absolute Mystery is a mystery which always remains a mystery. The Resurrection is one of those Absolute Mysteries. It is just something God did with Jesus and will do with us. The difficulty for us, as followers of Jesus, as those who welcome the opportunity to participate in the Great Mystery, is how do we live in this world, at this time, with the knowledge and experience of the Resurrection. How do we live more deeply into an Absolute Mystery?

What this means, it seems to me, is a willingness to live a life of asking questions rather than always expecting answers. It means being comfortable with a high degree of ambiguity and the possibility that our minds might be changed radically by what we discern, experience and learn. There are some really hard questions out there. Some are solvable. Some are asked but never have a good answer. Science is always a fun place to go for questions that appear to be relatively easy but become increasingly unanswerable the more we know.

For instance, did you know that no one knows why we sleep? And did you know it might be possible to live without sleep without any apparent harm? This is good news for those of us who are light sleepers. There are plenty of suppositions as to why we sleep - a condition all living things share - but no known reason for it. Trees sleep - that is why they lose their leaves in the fall. Plants sleep. Bears hibernate. And we sleep. But no one knows why. The best sleep researcher in the world says the reason we sleep is because we get tired. And that is all he knows after decades of research, conferences, tests and articles.

Or how about this? Why is ice slippery? You would think this is easy to answer. But there is no answer. By all research and study, if ice is slippery, it should be in the form of a liquid, not a solid. Water is weird anyway. There is virtually no other substance that can occupy four different states of being on its own - plasma, ice, liquid and solid. To the point, though, there is no reason for ice to be slippery. More so, no one knows why it is slippery.

My favorite unanswerable science question is this: What is gravity? Gravity exists, kind of, because we say it exists. All the other known forces of the universe have measurable and identifiable waves. Electro-magnetic waves. Nuclear forces. All these exist in and of themselves. Gravity, though? What is it? No gravity wave has ever been measured. No graviton has ever been found. The only reason we know gravity exists is because of the relationship of big things to other big things. Otherwise, gravity is too weak to have any influence whatsoever. At the level of atomic physics, it completely disappears because it is so weak. This is why Einstein and Neils Bohr considered quantum physics to be a kind of esoteric study akin to mysticism. So when you leave here today and you step outside, consider that no one, anywhere, for the past 500 years or so, has any idea as to why you don't just float off the planet.

The great thing about those questions is that they lead to more questions. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus asks Peter three yes/no questions. It is the same question. But Peter's yes to each of Jesus' "Do you love me?" questions only leads to more questions. They are relationship questions that have consequences. They have real world effects. This is why Jesus has breakfast with the disciples. He is showing them that the Resurrection is a real-world event and has real-world consequences. But it is a mystery. It is a mystery which demands questions. And the questions create relationships which create more questions. Notice I did not say 'answers'. Faith life, a life lived in the Spirit, is a life which is constantly seeking and asking of God and Christ questions.

Asking good questions requires a solid foundation from which to ask those questions. If we don't know where we are standing, we have no way of understanding the information we receive from having asked the question in the first place. So during this Easter season, as we consider what it means to be people of the Resurrection, I want us to think of Jesus' Resurrection not as an answer to a question, but a foundation from which to ask very good questions. We have to have some confidence and trust in the foundation we are asking questions from and that is what is happening in our reading from Revelation. The foundation is being set for all eternity. And once it is in place, even the angels and all the creatures of God's creation recognize that

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13)

The foundation is solid. The foundation is immovable. The foundation is the Absolute Mystery of God who has raised up Jesus Christ to be the "all in all". As Paul says in 1 Corinthians:

"When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all." (1 Cor 15:28)

When we consider our lives of faith, there are some very deep and hard questions we must ask. If we know our foundation, and trust that foundation, we can ask those questions with an expectation that the Lord will lead us ever deeper into a greater relationship with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Jesus asks Peter his question three times, it is said, to reverse out Peter's three-time betrayal of Jesus at his trial. I also think Jesus is solidifying Peter's foundation for the rest of his life and ministry.

Just as science has its hard, unanswerable questions, so also do we in our Christian walk. There are three very hard questions I can think of in our life in Christ: Who am I/are we? Why did this happen? and What does this mean? There are others, I am sure.

1. *Who are we/am I?* The first question the Resurrected Jesus asks Simon Peter after breakfast on that day is "Peter, do you love me more than these?" I don't really know what the *more than these* are in this question. It could be the other disciples. It could be the massive amount of fish the disciples have hauled in. It could be all the worries and fears the disciples now have in this new life. But the question of *identity*, who Peter is, who we are, is always important. How we answer the question of who we are as Christ-followers together matters, not just to us but to those who have no idea who we are or what we do. And how we answer as individuals matters, especially if we are serious about claiming God and Christ as the foundation of our lives and being.

When we answer questions of identity, we need to be careful so as not to answer in such a way that we find answers which allow us to lord it over others. Questions of identity, like other questions of mystery, should always lead to more questions. We are seeking depth and relationship with one another and with God. This is why Jesus asks Peter a relationship question. “*Do you love me more than these?*” may be a yes/no question, but the answer we give will define how far we want to go into the Absolute Mystery of a life with Christ. A *no* answer shuts down the relationship. *No*, in this case, is a definitive, terminal answer. A *yes*, however, means you are willing to trust the foundation of the angels and the foundation God has put into place with the advent of the Resurrected Christ and enter into ever deeper, more meaningful relationships with God and with one another. This is how we *feed the lambs* of the world. My relationship with you and our relationship with one another and the world is guided by the foundation of the Resurrected Christ. Peter thusly answers, “*Of course I love you, Lord. You know I do.*”

Who are we and who am I, then? I am one who loves and trusts the Absolute Mystery of the Resurrected Christ to lead me into ever deeper relationships with others. Do we love Jesus more than these?

2. *Why did this happen?* The second question the Resurrected Jesus asks Peter is more straightforward. Very simply, Jesus asks Peter, “*Peter, Do you love me?*” Let’s review for a moment what has brought Peter and the disciples to this point. After three years of following a miracle working prophet who willingly stands up to Roman and religious authorities alike, while at the same time honoring the God and God’s creation, the disciples bear witness to the condemnation of their teacher by those authorities. All of Jesus’ predictions, all of Jesus’ teachings, all of Jesus’ commandments, are made meaningless in the space of a few hours and then demolished on the Cross. In the shadow of the Cross, the disciples walk the lonely road of desolation. They ask *why?*

Why did this happen to Jesus? Our beloved teacher who claimed he was from God has died. The one who heals and releases the lowly from judgment and bondage has been killed. The one we loved so much and devoted our lives to has died a horrific and terrible death. *Why Jesus?* Many of you in this room know this line of questioning. Those of you who have lost sons and daughters. Those of you who have lost parents and grandparents. Those of you who have watched spouses suffer and die.

Why did this happen to me? It is *the* question for many of us. It is what is going on with the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. It is the question Mary Magdalene is wrestling with when she goes to tend Jesus’ body, but instead discovers angels and a gardener in John 20.

Why questions are often not quite the right questions given the situation. Peter answers Jesus’ second question the same as he did the first time. “*Lord, you know that I love you.*” What is the answer to the *why* question that would be most satisfying to you, given the tragedy you have faced in your life? In what way, does *why* have meaning for you? Like the *identity* question, *why* questions always lead to more questions. But what *why* questions lead to in the face of tragedy and suffering are really *how* questions.

Jesus' answer to Peter's answer is to say "*Tend my sheep.*" *Why did this happen?* is really a question of how, in the shadow of the Resurrected Christ - rather than the shadow of the Cross, we will tend to one another. *Why?* is an opportunity to tend to our love of Christ and our love of one another. Like Mary Magdalene, *Why did Jesus have to die?* is answered by her desire to tend to his body. Peter's guilt and despair, both effects of asking too many *Why?* questions, is answered by Jesus' tending to his soul after a breakfast of fresh fish. Will we allow Jesus to tend to us? Will we tend to one another in the face of all the *Whys?* that confront us? Do you love Jesus?

3. *What does this mean?* Jesus asks Peter yet again, "*Do you love me?*" Now Peter is frustrated. When I was part of a self-development group in Minneapolis, the teacher always had a habit of asking leading questions - questions he had a specific answer to, but no one else could fathom what it might be. He would ask the question and the more extroverted would spout out answers. They were never right. Then the teacher would answer his own question with the correct answer, which only he knew. It was beyond irritating. It was part of why I left the school because I perceived it to be a way of lording knowledge and power over others. This may be why Peter is frustrated, but Jesus is not doing what my teacher did.

Jesus is instead building a solid foundation for Peter. If Peter is going to face a future in which he no longer is able to make his own decisions about his fate, which is what Jesus means when he says, "*Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.*" (John 21:18), then Peter needs to know how his life has meaning and where that meaning comes from.

When our meaning is built on a solid foundation of Christ's love and our love for Christ, we are capable of walking into situations that seem meaningless to others. We still feel the pain, the sorrow and the despair that is present in the situation, but we trust the foundation. We know that the meaning made from the experience will lead us ever deeper into our relationship with the Absolute Mystery of the Resurrected Christ. Loving Christ is a way of making meaning that is not dependent on answers or clarity. Rather, the meaning available is born of the eternal foundation of the Absolute, the strength and power of God. *Even though I walk in the valley of Death, the valley of Shadows, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me* (Ps 23).

Peter answers Jesus, saying, "*Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.*" Jesus tells Peter to "*Feed my sheep*" and "*Follow me*". For our purposes today, the answer to *What does this mean?* is to *Follow Jesus* and to *tell others what you have seen and experienced by following Jesus.*

All three of these questions - *Who am I/are we?*, *Why did this happen?* and *What does this mean?*- are answered by the foundation Jesus has created for us in his Crucifixion and Resurrection. None of the answers, though, are really answers in the way we are used to. The answers are dependent on our love of God and Christ, but the love of God and Christ leads us always into more questions and deeper relationship with one another and

with the foundation of our being, God. The answers are dynamic, progressive, ever-changing. The answers to these hardest of questions press us forward into relationships with God and with one another, which changes the questions and alters how we perceive previous answers to those questions.

This is how it should be as we live into Christ's Resurrection, a deepening of love and relationships as we deepen our love and relationship with the Absolute Mystery, where our questions become better questions and the answers we receive lead to more questions. We enter life as new beings, transformed and with new eyes and minds. We no longer seek definitive answers, but instead we seek better questions. And then, when we are in our private moments, when we are with the Lord in prayer or when we are worshipping together, we stand on the strong foundation of the great *Yes* we have said to the desire to follow the Resurrected Christ in this world, right now, today. It is in those moments when we join the elders and angels in heaven and share the Absolute Mystery with the writer of Revelation when it is said,

"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped." (Rev 5:13-14)

Amen.