

Questions, Questions...

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Luke 24:1-12



“Are we nearly there yet?”

“How long is a piece of string?”

“Wie komme ich am besten zum Bahnhof?”

These are all questions that we may have encountered in our lives before. Certainly, the last of these forms a large chunk of my knowledge of the German language (various responses including “*an der ampel*” and “*um die ecke*[\[1\]](#)” are useful to know as well), particularly pertinent should I ever wish to visit a train station while there. The cry of the frustrated passenger longing for release from their seatbelted captivity and the rhetorical catch-all suitable for any unspecified quantity (the answer “twice as long as when it’s cut in half” is useful but likely to end any fruitful relationship between those conducting the conversation) account for the other two.

They have their uses, and may well be important questions for any given moment. However, they are not as significant as the question that we encounter in our reading today, which is another Gospel account of the events on that first Easter Sunday morning:

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

As questions go, on the face of it, it could be seen as a bit of a daft question. The women have visited a garden tomb, expecting to find the body of Jesus lying on its stone slab, as dead and lifeless as when he had been laid to rest two short days ago. If there was any doubt about their expectations, then the blend

of spices (taken from the latest line of “Embalming Spices for your nearest and dearest” – available from any Jerusalem market stall) should have sealed the deal. They were there to make the body presentable and the air more pleasant, as the odour from a sealed tomb won’t have been the freshest; a first century air freshener, as well as useful for anointing.

So, to be asked about “the living” is nothing short of preposterous and presumptuous. Of course they are not looking for a sentient, breathing person; Jesus had breathed his last on the cross and that’s who they were seeking out.

There is, no doubt, some consternation when they find the stone rolled away, the body vanished, and this impertinent youth in its place asking daft questions. Or that’s how it might have seemed.

Except it isn’t a daft question, and the angel (if we take it that this character was such) is no way being impertinent. What he’s asking in effect, is, “Weren’t you listening?” It’s not like Jesus hadn’t told them that it would turn out like this, as he goes on to explain to them.

At this point, we ought to pause in our narrative and weigh up the evidence to see if there is any way that those poor women should be any less confused or terrified than we would be had we been there in their place. Jesus had previously predicted that he would be killed and rise again sometime later: two examples are Luke 9:21, serving as a warning in case people thought that he was about to overthrow the Roman occupiers; also Luke 18:31-33, though it is unclear whether the women will have been told this as Luke tells us that Jesus just told the Twelve. Should this have been a surprise then when it came true?

Equally, it’s not as if Jesus wasn’t capable of this sort of thing. The miracles of Jesus are recorded extensively and, though Luke doesn’t have John’s account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11), he does record the raising to life of an unnamed widow’s equally unnamed son, who had been dead for an unspecified amount of time. If resurrection was proven to be within Jesus’ scope, so again, were the women right to doubt?

To be fair to them, and putting myself in their sandals for a moment, I would have to say “absolutely!” I’m not at all sure that I would go to the tomb in confidence that Jesus was going to be alive – if I were, then I would have taken a flask of tea and a couple of hot cross buns (or the first century equivalent) rather than a basket of spices. I would have gone expecting to share in breakfast with my newly risen Saviour, not to anoint his body. But that would have looked weird, morbid, and not exactly tasteful.

So, yes, I side with the women on this; there is no way that I would have put two and two together and come to the conclusion that just because everything else that Jesus said and did happened, so too would his prediction come true about his own death and resurrection.

Which goes to show that I’ve still got some distance to go when it comes to faith...

But then again don’t we fall into the same trap time and again when we hear of God doing stuff in and through people’s prayers? Why should we be amazed when God responds in love and mercy to the cry of his children? And yet we are. Well, I am. And I’m probably not alone in this.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” should be replaced with our faith-filled question “Why do you still call this place a tomb?” – if we believe in Jesus’ power to heal the sick, to increase the size of a picnic, to raise the dead, then why should we doubt his promise to rise from the dead?

Equally, we shouldn’t be surprised when God answers our prayers. We should, instead, pray in expectation that God will answer. Whether the answer is what we’re asking for remains to be seen; after all, there were plenty of Jesus’ followers (and many more besides) who were expecting him to kick out the Romans and reclaim the nation for them and that didn’t happen. Each prayer for the long-awaited Messiah

was answered at the cross and in the garden, not on the battlefield; with nails and wounded hands, not with swords and clubs. What did happen was world-changing; not just a footnote in history but a defining moment that restarted history.

God didn't answer their prayers in the way that they expected; he probably won't answer ours as we ask – when he does it's amazing, though it probably shouldn't be. It's all rather confusing – our instinct is to be surprised, shocked and awed by acts of God in the world. And yet for Jesus it was an everyday occurrence. I think that the disciples learned this; let's face it, they had enough experience of the miraculous after Pentecost (read Acts for plenty of examples from the remaining disciples and others).

Maybe today's lesson is to expect the unexpected with God; to pray with the intent to see God act in ways that everyone else would class as surprising, shocking and awesome, but that we understand as being part of his nature.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

“Are we nearly there yet?”

“How long is a piece of string?”

“What is the best way to the railway station?”

“How is God going to show his love, grace and justice today?”

Take your pick, and live in expectant hope of a meaningful, if unsurprising, answer...

Amen.

[\[1\]](#) “at the traffic lights” and “round the corner” – eminently helpful for any inquisitive tourist.

(Image by [Arek Socha](#) from [Pixabay](#))
