

Unanswered Questions, Poetic Possibilities

Introduction by Anna Carter Florence
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Poem by adult members of Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Reading and interpreting scripture is a collaborative, imaginative process. There are so many unanswered questions that the text leaves for us to ponder:

Why (for example) did Lot's wife ever turn around for a last look at Sodom, when she had been commanded not to? Why did Peter go to the tomb on Easter morning, when the disciples had already pronounced the women's story an "idle tale"? Few things are more enriching, enlivening, and just plain fun than a group Bible study that encourages us to freely consider all the possibilities to questions like these, rather than simply coming up with "the answer."

Sometimes, however, our collective imaginations need to be aired out and even shaken up a bit. Poets can be a big help in this: "Lot's Wife," by Wislawa Szymborska, is an excellent example. Instead of settling for the standard, flat answer that Lot's wife turned around because she did not have faith (an answer, by the way, that many of us were taught in Sunday School), Szymborska's poem shakes things up by listing dozens and dozens of reasons—some humorous, some serious, all feasible—that Lot's Wife *could* have had for turning around. The poem frees us to engage the text differently, with greater depth.

Last fall, on an all-church retreat, the adults of Central Presbyterian Church decided to follow Szymborska's lead. In small groups, we gave ourselves four minutes to brainstorm all the reasons why Peter might have decided to go to the tomb on Easter morning (Luke 24:12). We didn't edit ourselves; we just wrote everything down on a piece of paper, no matter how ridiculous or implausible our responses. After four minutes, the leader collected the papers and read them aloud, to great peals of laughter. Yet we were also astonished to find that our collaborative, imaginative "poem" also had the ring of truth to it: some of our responses brought us to tears. In the discussion that followed, we went deeper and deeper into the text, encouraged by the all the possibilities unleashed by our "poem."

This is an exercise I recommend to church groups of all ages and sizes. You will be surprised at the wisdom generated by the collective body of Christ.

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So Why Did Peter Go to the Tomb, After All?

(Luke 24:12)

I went to see for myself.
I went because I felt guilty.
I went because I was too embarrassed
not to believe them.

I went out of a sense of duty, because I'm the leader.
I went to pay my respects.
I went because I was curious.
I went because I wanted to be the first *man* to get the story.

I wondered if
I was the reason Jesus was alive!
I wondered if the women might be right.
It was possible their story wasn't
lyros after all.
I went, hoping to see Jesus.

I went because I was bored.
I went because I was just passing by.

I knew I would only believe it if I saw it with my own eyes.

I went because that's what you do when you grieve; you go to the tomb.
I went to help out with grave care.

I went because I needed to believe more than anyone else.
Because I wanted to prove the women right.
Because I wanted to prove the women wrong.
Because I wanted to be part of the "in crowd."

I wanted to make sure.
I wanted to squelch the rumors.
I sort of believed them; I even hoped they might be right.
I was looking for closure. For valid proof.

I was overcome with grief.

I was out on my morning run.
I got lost and took a wrong turn.
I was an investigative reporter.

I went because
someone had to explain what happened.
I went to take charge, because I'm the rock.
I went because I was jealous that God spoke to the women first.
Something in the women's story struck a chord, and I remembered what Jesus said.

I was perplexed. I was crazy.
I was afraid I would get in trouble.
I was beginning to wonder.

I had to do *something*—I couldn't just *sit* there!
I thought their story had the ring of authenticity.

I went for the same reason that Lot's wife turned around.
I went because I have more faith than any of the others.
I went because I knew I'd be a more believable witness than the women.
I had to make sure Jesus' body was okay.

I had to apologize.

The Holy Spirit sent me.

I felt alone.

I went to say goodbye.