

Hope

The comedian George Carlin's best selling album was all about his adventures as a teenager in Catholic school.

There they would torment the priests with questions like "Uh Faddah, if God is all powerful, can he make a rock so big that he himself can't lift it?"

Today the Sadducees are riding the George Carlin train in their encounter with Jesus.

They take a law that was intended to ensure the people survive — by ensuring children are born into a family if a husband dies — and they use it to try and play a game on Jesus.

The Sadducees don't accept the idea that there is any life after this one.

And why should they?

They are the fat cats of the time; the billionaires and celebrities, living the good life, so things can't get any better in another life, or so they think.

They are sophisticated, educated, and wise to the ways of the world.

Which makes Jesus' reaction to them all the more amazing, since just last week he was all "woe to you rich, woe to you who are full and satisfied!"

Rather than take them to task, rather than humiliate them, he invites these Sadducees into the world of mystery, he invites them into the world of innocence.

What happens when we die?

Isn't that the greatest of all mysteries?

Who among us hasn't wondered about it, even more urgently if we are among those who have lost loved ones to death?

Who among us hasn't longed for some certainty, some absolute assurance that THIS is what happens when death comes?

And yet Jesus won't go there today.

How unlike us, who go there all the time!

A few years ago I got invited to a lunch where a Texas pastor was invited to speak.

It seems he was in a bad car accident and believes he died and went to heaven.

He wrote a book about it, describing golden sidewalks and gleaming buildings; something very much like the comic book scenes of heaven many of us encountered in Sunday school.

But Jesus won't go there.

He only says that all are alive in God.

What does that mean?

How are they alive?

What's it look like, taste like, feel like?

He leaves us with the mystery, perhaps because "genuine faith in God always has an element of doubt, of uncertainty." Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, 308, modified.

That "at the heart of faith is a humble not-knowing; which keeps us off balance and sometimes fearful; and yet, which also leads us to trust." Id., paraphrased.

It is perhaps the most famous agnostic, Albert Einstein, who says: "the mysterious is the most beautiful thing we can experience.

It is the source of all true art and science.

He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead — his eyes are closed.

The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, is what gives rise to religion.

To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, showing itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, even if our poor vision sees only in shadow, only dimly." paraphrased.

And so it is mystery that Jesus invites us into, not only today in his encounter with the Sadducees, but in his own resurrection as well.

Over and over the gospels tell us that Jesus appears to his friends, yet some doubt.

He walks miles with the disciples to Emmaus, but they don't know who he is — until bread is broken and shared — and immediately, he disappears.

Mary mistakes him for the gardener and Thomas demands of him a physical exam; while Peter dismisses as rubbish the tale of the women that he is risen.

Mystery and wonder, fear and hope.

These are the breath and mist of our faith.

Which is why, "I'm for mystery, not answers.

The answer is never the answer.

What's really interesting is the mystery.

If you seek the mystery instead of the answer, you'll always be seeking.

I've never seen anybody really find the answer, but they think they have.

So they stop thinking.

But the job is to seek mystery, evoke mystery, plant a garden in which strange plants grow and mysteries bloom.

The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer." Ken Kesey, quoted in Kurtz, *Experiencing Spirituality*, 54-5.

To be open to living with the uncertainties that mystery brings, we really do need to develop that sense of innocence and wonder that is too often left behind in childhood — because innocence and wonder are perhaps the most human of all human qualities.

Cultivating innocence and wonder reminds me of the story of the great artist Paul Cezanne, who had no idea that his paintings were masterpieces.

He spends years painting, happily giving his work away to friends and neighbors.

Not until a Paris art dealer stumbles upon his work and recognizes the brilliance of his talent does the world hear of Cezanne.

But just as the world is astonished to discover this master artist, so too the artist is astonished at the reception he receives.

“When he arrives at the gallery for the first public showing of his work, he’s leaning on his son’s arm, because the artist is now an old man.

And when he sees his work on display, he turns to his son and says: “Look, they’ve **framed** them!” Id.

Innocence and wonder allow us to be open to awe and mystery.

As the poet says, “...the unwanting soul sees what’s hidden, while the ever-wanting soul sees only what it wants...” Lao Tzu.

And so perhaps what Jesus is inviting us into in today’s encounter with the Sadducees is to encourage the two attitudes that innocence and

wonder create, attitudes sorely needed as we all of us are one day closer to our own deaths, these attitudes being "trust — and the capacity for surprise." Shea at 309.

I leave you with this story.

"A little boy wants to meet God.

He knows it's a long trip to where God lives so he packs his suitcase with Twinkies and a six pack of root beer and starts off.

When he's gone about three blocks, he sees an old woman sitting in the park, staring at some pigeons.

The boy sits down next to her and opens his suitcase.

He takes a drink of root beer when he notices that the old woman looks hungry, so he offers her a Twinkie.

She accepts it and smiles at him.

The boy is delighted.

They sit there all afternoon, eating and smiling, never saying a word.

As it grows dark the boy realizes he's tired and starts to leave, but before he's gone a few steps, he turns around, runs back to the old woman, and gives her a hug.

She gives him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy gets home a short time later, his mother is surprised by the joy on his face.

She asks: 'What did you do that's making you so happy?'

He replies: 'I had lunch with God.'

Before his mother can respond, he adds, 'She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!'

Meanwhile, the old woman, radiant with joy, returns to her home.

Stunned by the look of peace on her face, her son asks, 'Mom, what did you do that's making you so happy?'

She replies, 'I ate Twinkies in the park with God,' adding,

'You know, he's much younger than I expected.'" Kurtz at 58-9.

Is there life beyond death?

And if so, what will it be like?

Perhaps it will be a wonder, a surprise; a pure unknowable delight!

+amen

