

God of the Living  
Luke 20:27-38 Crossroads Christian Church  
Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21 November 10, 2013 Pentecost 25C  
By Michael E. Dixon

Gotcha!

You're cruising down the street in your car, mellow and relaxed, and not watching your speed, and then you hear the cry of a siren and see the patrol car in your rearview mirror. Gotcha! thinks the officer.

A rookie comes up to the majors, and seems to be hitting every baseball that comes near him, and his batting average keeps rising. Opposing coaches study his every at-bat. Then they notice. The guy can't hit low and outside breaking balls. Gotcha. The rookie's average plummets.

A beloved and well-respected politician has a huge lead in the polls. Then, at a garden club luncheon, she says something off-the-cuff that comes out wrong. The film clip goes viral on YouTube, and the opponent's media gurus make sure you see a distorted version of the remark again and again. Gotcha!

Whether you're playing a competitive game, having a "discussion" with your spouse, or you're in a court of law where opposing attorneys are going at it, you can usually recognize a Gotcha! Moment, when someone shows a weak spot and the other pounces ruthlessly on it. Gotcha!

After Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, after that last, fateful, trip, after he overturned the money-changers' tables in the temple courtyard, he became involved in a series of Gotcha! games. He had become popular. He had people stirred up. His charismatic power of personality and wonderful deeds threatened the institutional power of the authorities. So, those in power fought back. Here was a rube, a hick from Galilee. What could he know about their faith traditions? What could he know about the Holy Scriptures? How could his learning stack up against the scribes in the temple and the rabbis who spent their whole lives studying and arguing the meanings of the Torah?

At first, they questioned his authority by asking what he thought of John the Baptist. Any answer he gave could be turned against him. He questioned their authority back. Then the scribes

and chief priests, perhaps knowing of the dinner he had with Zacchaeus that we talked about last week, asked, "Does the law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar?" If he said yes, people would think he was soft on the Romans. If he said no, he could be turned over to the Romans for breaking their laws. You probably remember how he answered. He asked for a coin, noticed the likeness of the Roman emperor on it, and said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Give to God what belongs to God." They played Gotcha! and got Gotchad themselves.

Now it was the Saducees' turn. The Saducees were the priestly elite. They were sophisticated and cultured, they had money and economic power, but unlike the Pharisees and some of the lower-ranked priests, they got along with the Romans. They didn't want to upset the apple cart. They also were unlike the Pharisees in that they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Why? Because they only accepted the first five books of the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy as fully scriptural. All the rest were helpful, but they wouldn't base core beliefs upon them—sort of like the way we Protestants view the Apocrypha, which is part of the Catholic Bible, but not ours. And the Torah didn't say anything about the Resurrection of the dead. After you died, they believed, you went to Sheol, which wasn't heaven and wasn't hell, but a shadowy, wispy, dreary half-life—not much to look forward to. So the argument that they brought to challenge Jesus was also one which would embarrass the Pharisees.

Their trick question, their Gotcha, was based upon a law found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. It was called levirate marriage, and it was designed to help a family keep its name through the years, and to help widows, to keep them from starving. If a husband died and there were no children, his closest kin would marry the widow to keep the family line going. That happened in the book of Ruth that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. So, the Pharisees said, there was a man who died childless, and his widow married his brother. Same thing. Next brother. Same thing. Next brother, etc., down through seven brothers. Whose wife would she be after the Resurrection of the dead? Dean Lueking describes it this way. "That clincher question was asked

with a deliberate slowing of the words, each one poison-tipped. It was spoken with eyes narrowed, arms folded in an accusatory pose and an unmistakable sneer across the face. Gotcha is not a game: it's a weapon."<sup>1</sup> Gotcha, Jesus.

But Jesus wasn't to be gotten so easily. Instead of the Saducees demonstrating that the resurrection of the dead was an illogical and naïve concept, Jesus showed that the Saducees' understanding of the resurrection of the dead was illogical and naïve. Jesus said that life after the resurrection was of a different order than life today, and he went back to their own beloved Torah, to the story of the burning bush, where Moses reveals himself to God. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." And if God is—present tense—a God of the living, so Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive in God's presence.

That's pretty good argumentation, and pretty good theology, but the whole story would be irrelevant day, except for one thing. Jesus discussed the concept of resurrection and defended his viewpoint with words to show the Saducees the error of their ways. But a few days later, Jesus went from talk to action. He demonstrated the power of the Resurrection by rising from the dead himself. He became, as Paul said, "the first fruits of the resurrection." So he took a silly question, an abstract argument, and made it very, very, real.

Ever since Jesus rose from the dead, people have been arguing about it, speculating about it, denying it, affirming it, or just plain trying to sort it out. It's an audacious claim, more audacious than many people can swallow, but without it, what's left of our faith? As Paul says in that wonderful chapter on resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15 (vs. 19), "If we have a hope in life only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else."

After his wife died of cancer, C.S. Lewis said, "You never really know how much you believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life or death to you."  
(repeat)(unquote)

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<sup>1</sup> F. Dean Lueking, "The Gotcha Game," Christian Century, October 28, 1988, quoted in Textweek.com.

It isn't just a matter of wishful thinking, a hope that something more than memories remains after we're dead and gone. Believing in Christ's resurrection, and the resurrection life that comes to us as a gift from God, is at the very heart of our faith. Whether we argue physical, bodily resurrection or spiritual resurrection is speculation, and we can't prove it until we experience it. But God created us in love and to love, and God's love never, never lets go. Believe what St. Paul said: "Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created." (Romans 8:35-36,38-39 CEB)

God is the God of the living. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God who calls us by name when we're baptized, and the God who welcomes us home when our earthly life is over. Jesus Christ, who lived, who was crucified, who rose from the dead, invites us to new life, to eternal life. And do you know what? That new, resurrected life doesn't begin after our death. It begins in this life. It comes to fullness in the resurrected life after death, but it begins on this earth, as we live day to day in trying to be the children of a loving God—a God whose love never, ever lets go or gives up. Amen.