

## What If? November 6, 2022

The Internet is a strange place. One of the more interesting and amusing corners of the Internet is a question-and-answer column called “What If?” Readers submit crazy “what-if” scenarios to the author, Randall Munroe, who is an engineer, has worked at NASA, and has a background in physics and computer programming. Munroe then researches the science in the scenario and writes up an amusing explanation of what would happen.

To give you an idea of the type of questions asked, the very first posting looked at the question, “What if a baseball pitcher could throw the ball at close to the speed of light?” Munroe’s answer: a ball traveling that fast would actually cause a reaction of nuclear fusion with the air molecules in front of it, which would result a nuclear explosion. Thank goodness Justin Verlander can’t pitch quite that hard.

Other “what-if” questions submitted include:

- What if everyone on earth got together and jumped at the same time? (Nothing would happen)
- What if all the rain in a thunderstorm fell as one large drop? (The earth would be destroyed)
- What if you tried to fly a regular airplane on other planets in our solar system? (It would not go well)
- What if cows could perform photosynthesis, like plants? (There’s not enough surface area to make a difference)
- If you pick up the phone, dial a random sequence of ten numbers, and then say, “God bless you,” what are the odds that you called a person who just sneezed? (1 in 40,000 – a lot better odds than winning the Powerball)

Randall Munroe. “What If: Serious Answers to Absurd Questions and Absurd Advice for Common Concerns.” xkcd. Last modified November 1, 2022. <https://what-if.xkcd.com>

These questions and answers have become so popular that Randall Munroe compiled them into a book called *What If?*, which reached the top of the NY Times Bestseller list the year it was published.

There is something in us that likes to imagine completely absurd situations, isn’t there?

Well, it turns out that even very religious people who lived 2000 years ago had the same impulse. What if?

In fact, there was a group of Sadducees who come to Jesus with a ridiculous “what-if” situation as a way of challenging the idea of the resurrection or life after death. “What if,” they ask, “a woman marries 7 different brothers, and each of those brothers dies without producing a child?” As Phoebe said, “Imagine being the 7<sup>th</sup> brother!” He knows what’s coming.

The Sadducees are asking because, as Luke tells us, they don’t believe in any kind of life after death. The Sadducees formed to a sect of Judaism that only considered the first 5 books of the Old Testament to be scripture. Those were the books thought to be written by Moses and thus

the most reliable. And in those first 5 books of our Old Testament, there is no mention of resurrection.

Of course, Jesus, as you might know, believed pretty firmly in resurrection. He believed that there was life after death, that God raises us from the dead.

So we have this what-if scenario of a woman with 7 husbands. And the question is: If she is resurrected, if she experiences life after death, which of those 7 men will be here her husband?

Jesus gives an answer that is very typical of Jesus – it’s indirect and confusing. What he seems to say is that life after death is completely different than life on this earth. There’s not the same institution of marriage in heaven as there is on earth.

And that might be a bit disconcerting. Most people I know want to see their beloved spouse after they die. Is Jesus saying that we are no longer connected to our beloved?

No, that doesn’t seem to be the case. Jesus goes on to say, “Those who are resurrected will be children of God.” Which means that in the next life, everyone will be our brothers and sisters. We will be family, including with your spouse and with all your loved ones from this world. That’s a beautiful image and gives us some comfort.

One of the most meaningful descriptions of heaven (or really a way of imagining heaven) is by an author named Orson Scott Card. In a book called *Gatefather*, he tells of a young man who dies along with his romantic partner. The two enter a world of souls, countless souls. None of the souls have bodies, so they don’t take up any physical space, and they are all together in a place where there is a sense of peace.

The young man who died, Danny, in some way holds on to Pat, his beloved, until a Presence, brighter than any of the souls, invites him to let go of her. Danny does, out of trust, and Pat seems to glow brightly, so that no matter where she goes, Danny is always aware of her presence. Love, it’s explained, makes our souls grow brighter. And so in this imagined afterlife, the ones we love glow brightly so that we are always aware of them, always with them, joined together with our whole being.

Orson Scott Card. *Gatefather: A Novel of the Mither Mages*. New York: Tor, 2015.

It’s a lovely image, isn’t it? Again, that is one person’s wonderings about heaven. But I think it fits with Jesus’ teachings that those who have died are like angels, are children of God. They are one family, and marriage is not a structure that is needed to connect people anymore. Love is the source of connection.

So Jesus ends his lesson to the Sadducees with a comment just to drive the point home. He quotes the book of Exodus (which is in the part of the scriptures that the Sadducees read). Jesus says, “God calls himself God of the living, and God calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That must mean that those 3 men are living. Therefore, there must be life after death.”

All of this is good news on this All Saints' Sunday, when we remember those who have died. We believe that those loved ones are still with us spiritually, if not physically. And we live in hope that we will see them again one day when we leave this earth.

I'll close with a poem by Rumi, one of my favorite poets, a Sufi mystic who lived in the 1200s. It gives a picture of love in this world that continues into the next.

### A Moment of Happiness

A moment of happiness,  
you and I sitting on the verandah,  
apparently two, but one in soul, you and I.  
We feel the flowing water of life here,  
you and I, with the garden's beauty  
and the birds singing.  
The stars will be watching us,  
...  
You and I unselfed, will be together,  
indifferent to idle speculation, you and I.  
The parrots of heaven will be eating sugar  
as we laugh together, you and I.  
In one form upon this earth,  
and in another form in a timeless sweet land.

Jalal-al-Din Rumi, "A Moment of Happiness," All Poetry. Accessed November 3, 2022. <https://allpoetry.com/a-moment-of-happiness>

Amen.

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