

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE TRUE LIFE

*“Everything’s gonna be alright.
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-Bob Marley, “No Woman, No Cry”

“So, what are your thoughts about dying?” This was the last question that George Yancy asked his father as he lay on his deathbed. Though a lover of wisdom and conversation, Yancy’s father could muster only a single answer through the haze of painkillers: “It’s too complex.” This would be the last statement Yancy would hear from his father prior to his passing.

“All that lives must die,” wrote Shakespeare. And indeed, death is truly one of life’s great equalizers, an experience that is both universal yet terrifyingly personal. During the pandemic, as the global death toll reached staggering numbers, Yancy published a series of interviews with *The New York Times*. Each interview approached the subject of death from varying religious viewpoints. What Yancy found was that death is a universally-important subject, yet one that has prompted a dizzying array of responses from leading world religions:

“The Buddhist scholar Dadul Namgyal stressed the importance of letting go of habits of self-obsession and attitudes of self-importance. Moulie Vidas, a scholar of Judaism, placed more emphasis upon Judaism’s intellectual and spiritual energy. Karen Teel, a Roman Catholic, emphasized her interest in working toward making our world more just... Leor Halevi, an historian of Islam, told me that an imam would stress the importance of paying debts, giving to charity and prayer...The atheist philosopher Todd May placed importance on seeking to live our lives along two paths simultaneously — both looking forward and living fully in the present.”

Yancy concludes that perhaps his father had been right all along — that indeed, the question of death is simply “too complex” to arrive at an absolute answer.

Christianity doesn’t treat death as a riddle to be solved, but an enemy to be defeated. Already, John has described how Jesus overcame death in the raising of his friend Lazarus. There, Jesus declared that he is “the resurrection and the life.” But after witnessing Jesus’ agonizing public execution, many believed that his movement was over. All that was left to do was grief. What they never counted on, was that true Life was about to unfold before their very eyes with all the radiance of Possibility.

SAD THINGS COME UNTRUE

Three days have now passed since Jesus' death. But note that John opens the story of the resurrection with an important clue:

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (John 20:1-2)

John had opened his biography of Jesus with a nod to the pages of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word." In the creation story, God had completed his work in six days, resting on the seventh. It seems no accident that Jesus was crucified on the sixth day (Friday). God had completed the work of the *new creation*. After resting on Easter Saturday, a new day is dawning — the first day not just of the week, but the new creation itself.

Think, for a moment, about the very worst day of your life. Maybe it's the day of your divorce. Maybe it's the day that you lost your spouse, or a parent, or — worse — even a child. Some years ago I lost something — *someone* — irreplaceably precious. And I couldn't stop crying. I came to understand King David who said that "day and night my tears are my only food." And it was like that, I think — for God, I mean. On the sixth day he made man. On the seventh he rested. But on the original eighth day, he couldn't stop crying. There had to be another "first day." There had to be the promise of a new creation, one that would wipe clean the agonies of the first and cultivate hope among the rocky soil.

It was customary for Jews to visit the tombs of the recently deceased, in part to confirm that the loved one was truly dead. Now, after the extraordinary pain of the cross, there could be no doubt that Jesus was laid to rest as a genuine corpse. So Mary Magdalene is shocked to discover that the tomb has been disturbed, and that Jesus' body is missing. Naturally, Peter and John ran to inspect the scene for themselves:

³ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.

⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Mary had initially suspected grave robbers, but too many details were out of place. Who would have had the strength to remove the massive stone at the tomb's entrance? Why were Jesus' grave clothes

neatly resting in place? John tells us that he and Peter “saw and believed,” but he just as quickly notes that they didn’t fully understand what had happened. Mary herself would be the first to actually witness the resurrected Jesus:

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"-and that he had said these things to her. (John 20:11-18)

For Mary, this is too much. Jesus had shown her honor that she’d never experienced in first-century society. Who could dishonor the grave of the man who’d loved her beyond reason or measure? She doesn’t seem to recognize the two men as angels, still reckoning with the possibility of grave robbing. Even when she sees Jesus himself she mistakes him for the gardener. It’s only after he calls her by name that she realizes that this is no hired hand, but Jesus himself.

Jesus has returned from the dead! Such news would have been unfathomable to every Jewish mind. Yes, the Bible spoke at length about the possibility of future resurrection. But to the Jewish mind, the resurrection was something that would happen to everyone at the end of human history — not to one man at the center of human history.

Like the cross itself, the resurrection was God’s plan all along. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the sound of victory over the forces of death and darkness. And it also explains how this could truly be the brand new day of the new creation. Back in Genesis, Adam’s disobedience had plunged the world into chaos. Now, Jesus’ perfect act of submission to his Father’s will brought the world back to life. It’s ironic, then, that Mary mistakes him for the gardener. Because in Genesis, through the first Adam, the Garden became a graveyard. Here, in the presence of Jesus, the graveyard becomes a garden. And that’s the promise God makes for the whole of creation.

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s beloved *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam witness the tragic death of their mentor, Gandalf. But at the book’s climax, it is Gandalf himself who comes to rescue the pair during the destruction of Mordor. “Gandalf!” cried Sam. “I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue?” The resurrection of Jesus Christ greets this question with a resounding “yes.” It’s not just a single empty tomb. It’s not just a single garden. The whole world’s about to change. God’s future has come splashing into the present with disorienting force. Mary Magdalene’s tears of grief are transformed into tears of joy as the greatest tragedy she’s ever known turns into triumph.

What does this mean for the world today? It means the whole of creation is abuzz with promise. Martin Luther famously said that “Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in the books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.” The beauty of the present world is only a hint of the greater glory to come. New Testament scholar puts it this way: “The beauty of the present world...has something about it of the beauty of a chalice, beautiful in itself but more hauntingly beautiful in what we know it’s meant to be filled with; or that of the violin, beautiful in itself but particularly because we know the music it’s capable of.” Or, imagine the happiness of a young couple who’s just been given their first sonogram picture. The baby isn’t here yet, of course, but the black-and-white image is proof that new life is coming, it’s real, and soon joy will come to true fruition once a mother’s tears have been shed. That’s hope. That’s the reality of the resurrection. The resurrected body of Jesus is the sonogram picture of God’s future kingdom — a kingdom that is not yet here, though a reality that will one day come to life at Jesus’ return.

TRUE FAITH

Understandably, Jesus’ disciples were in hiding following their Master’s death. After all, they could just as easily be the next victim of their religious adversaries. They had likely already heard the news from Mary Magdalene that Jesus had risen from the dead, yet imagine their shock when Jesus came to stand among them:

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19-20)

²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:21-23)

Jesus’ body is both the same and different than it was before. Somehow, Jesus has the power to enter through locked doors. And yet, his body still bears the marks from his crucifixion. For the disciples, there could be no doubt: that this was indeed Jesus Christ, risen to new life.

All except Thomas, who gets a bad rap as “doubting” Thomas. Having not been present at Jesus’ first appearance, he doesn’t trust their testimony. He has to see it with his own eyes, he insists:

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place

it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:24-29)

Thomas would more accurately be called "Believing Thomas," because he's the only disciple in the entire gospel of John that finally declares what Jesus has been saying all along: that this is the Son of God.

Like Thomas, there are some today who express doubt over the church's testimony about the resurrection of Jesus. After all, aren't these simply the legends of a primitive, unscientific culture? Surely modern readers should take care to hear these stories as merely symbolic. But don't you see? Downplaying the resurrection doesn't modernize our faith; it guts it. It strips the gospel of its electrifying power and reduces it to a set of moral standards. Writing in *The New York Times*, Tish Harrison Warren observes that such a religion is ultimately unsatisfying:

"It would be so much more acceptable if Easter were merely a ritual communicating religious ideals, teaching us to cultivate the better angels of our nature. But if Easter is only an abstraction, it doesn't mean much to me. I'm with the Apostle Paul who wrote and the billions of Christians around the world who profess, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile." If Jesus wasn't actually resurrected, then Easter is less real than the budding buzz of spring, less real than a dying breath, less real than my own hands, feet and skin. I have no interest in a Christianity that isn't deeply, profoundly, irreducibly material."

Here's the good news: there is every good reason to believe that the early testimony of the church is more than mere legend. As William Lane Craig points out, "The fact that the Christian fellowship, founded on belief in Jesus' resurrection, could come into existence and flourish in the very city where he was executed and buried seems to be compelling evidence for the historicity of the empty tomb." For that matter, Rome had every reason to squash this fledgling movement lest they risk a rebellion. To do so, all they would need to do would be to produce Jesus' dead body. And the shocking thing of all is that they never did.

I say "shocking," because the resurrection of Jesus tells us that reality can no longer be "safely secular," as Dallas Willard once put it. The resurrection of Jesus Christ forces us to confront our doubts about the Christian faith, and to re-order our views according to the Reality that stands before us, nail-marks and all. That's why the central message of Christianity is not simply "Love thy neighbor," but "Christ is risen."

Put differently, the resurrection of Jesus changes our way of knowing. Consider how you would answer questions like: "Where was Abraham Lincoln born?" or "What is the atomic weight of table salt?" Such questions can be answered through well-ordered reasoning and the scientific method. But how would you answer a question like: "Does your wife really love you?" Such a question can't be answered by appealing to the scientific method. It requires an entirely different sort of reasoning.

But the resurrection brings unity to these ways of thinking. If the resurrection is an actual, verifiable, historic reality, then suddenly the question: "Does God love me?" can be answered in the same way that we would answer any other question about history. If you want to know that God truly, deeply, loves you, then you have only to look toward the empty tomb.

A NEW MISSION

Let's rewind for just a second. Prior to Jesus' encounter with Thomas, he comes to the disciples to give them a new mission:

²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:21-23)

Careful readers will likely pick up a final nod to the creation story in Genesis. There, God formed man from the dust of the earth, then breathed into his body the "breath of life." Here, Jesus breathes the life-giving Holy Spirit into the believing community, giving supernatural animation to the body of Christ.

More significantly, however, Jesus tells his followers: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." N.T. Wright observes that we can devote a great deal of our spiritual lives to unpacking just the words "as" and "so." Every follower of Jesus is sent into the world in the exact same manner that Jesus was sent into it. The paradigm of the Father sending the Son is now repeated in the Christian community. Only now, the Christian community is emboldened with the message of the resurrection and the supernatural enablement of the Holy Spirit. Lesslie Newbigin, a former missionary to India, explains:

"Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving."

Indeed, a few weeks after the resurrection appearance, Peter delivers a sermon in which 3,000 people come to know Jesus. What happened between Easter Saturday and the day of this revival? Two things: the reality of the resurrection, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Listen carefully: it's far too easy to fret and worry about the state of "The Culture" today, and how Christians might find our place in it. But I promise you, if we stay huddled away, locked within the safety of our sanctuaries and church buildings, then we are acting as though the resurrection never happened, or that the Holy Spirit is on vacation. According to this story, the greatest barrier to the gospel was the rock that blocked Jesus' tomb, and we see exactly what God did with that. *Get out there.* As the Father once sent the Son, so now the body of Christ is sent into the world to continue his life-giving mission.

BECAUSE HE LIVES

What does the resurrection mean for us today? Absolutely everything. Jesus' resurrection is not merely a piece of religious trivia or the basis for coloring eggs at Easter. Jesus' resurrection is a firm reminder that death and despair will not always grab the greatest headlines. It's a reminder that our future is grounded not in optimism or pessimism, but in the assured hope that one day all things will be made new. The New Testament elsewhere speaks of being united with Christ in both his death and resurrection (Romans 6). This means that the Life that's in Jesus can also be at work in us.

One of the darkest questions that have plagued human thinkers for centuries is a brutally simple one: Is life worth living? In his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus draws from the ancient story in which a man is condemned for all eternity to push a boulder up a cliff — only to have it roll right back again. Camus concludes that life is ultimately an endless struggle, but that the struggle itself is what gives life meaning. Camus couldn't have been more wrong. Hope gives life its meaning. Jesus' resurrection shatters the illusion that the horizon is all there is. A famous gospel song puts it best:

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!

Because Jesus lives, our greatest fears have been wiped away, and we can have security and trust in God's future. He lives. He is true Life. Death itself has been erased. And life indeed becomes worth living, just because he lives.