
Jesus and the Resurrection of Hope

JESUS AND THE RESURRECTION OF HOPE

— Finding the Life You Were Meant to Live

by

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As I sit here writing today I am unsure of many things. The past year, for me, has been a seemingly fantastic one. By all outward appearances, at least I am told so, one would think that I have got life by the horns. In the last year I have published a book, traveled the country, been interviewed on radio and television, and done a lot of neat things. People make comments like, “It must be good being you”, or “Man, you really have a good life”, or “You are such an inspiration”. People make reference to what they assume to be *my* ability to raise three “well adjusted” and beautiful kids as a single parent, *my* ability to care for a home on my own, *my* ability to carve out time for working out and playing tennis, *my* ability to volunteer in the church, and so on. One guy recently said to me, “Bruce, you really have it all good don’t you? Beautiful kids, autograph signings, travel, good hair, you’re in great shape, chicks dig you...no problems...man, it must be good being you”. All the while I was thinking to myself, “Why does life not feel that way to me?” The comment made to me was ironic in many ways, especially as it pertains to the hair (it has started to thin)! I am aware of what is really going on.

The reality is, despite all appearances, I have an enormous amount of stress and uncertainty in my life. While I am certainly aware of and amazed at the blessings in my life, I spend a good portion of each day, and night, trying to figure out how I am going to keep the bottom from falling out. I don’t meet the call of all of my responsibilities, I am not the friend I should be, I am an imperfect father, I lack organization and planning prowess...I just don’t measure up. My life, most days, just does not feel like the life it should be. As I have wrestled with this reality and searched my heart, I have come to realize that the inner struggles are all about *purpose* and *hope*. I need to know that I am living this life with some sense of direction and *calling* and yet most days, I wonder if I am anywhere close to being

and becoming the person I am supposed to be. Likewise, I need to know that regardless of how this day or the days ahead unfold for me on this earth, hope is certain.

As I look at my life and consider people’s comments, I am all too aware that the picture from the inside feels much different. I know my body, despite all my efforts and maintenance, is breaking down (too many injuries to list), I know my wonderful and beautiful kids have much they are struggling with (not the least of which is living in a “broken home”), I know that for every chick that “digs” me there are several who don’t care if I ever existed, and I know all too well that my first book is not a best seller and probably never will be. More critically, I recognize that I am a sinful human being who wrestles with battles against darkness, failure and temptation every day.

As I write, it is the Easter season and these issues have become heightened for me. Walking into the season this year, I am surrounded by my own uncertainties and questions (Will my kids become what God wants them to be? Will I become what He wants me to be? Will I be able to keep my kids in good schools? Will I be able to send them to college? Will I find my life’s calling and know it when I do? Will I ever have the desire to know, trust and love a woman again? Will a woman of character and grace ever care to know, love and trust me? Do women of character and grace exist? Am I a person of character and grace? And on and on it goes about my life and my future.

Essentially, this is about the disconnect between my aspirations for what I want my life to be and what it really is at this point. In assessing my dreams against my realities I am left with a longing and desperation for a fix. Does my life have a purpose? Is life worth living without hope for the future?

So many around me are in the same boat. Lately, it seems I have met and interacted with many people, beautiful people, who have lives which are just missing something or lives that have been wrecked by choices they have made. Others I know are living lives which are in chaos due to unfortunate events they had no control over. Still others I know are living lives of quiet desperation hoping that “something will change”, sooner or later. These people have inspired

my thoughts lately, and have me asking and thinking about a number of questions our lives beg.

The questions which arise each day are vast. Our own lives, television news, and the lives of people around us continually beget big questions. Do we, as human beings living on this turbulent sphere, have any cause for hope? Is there any sure purpose for life on this planet? Why are we here and how did we get here anyway? Is there a way to make my life truly fulfilling? Everyday it becomes clearer to me that these are the questions of our day, the questions of every day and every age.

Some recognize that these are indeed the questions they must have answers to. Others do not yet know if these questions are even important. All of them, however, are subject to the same realities of life on planet earth; the realities of emptiness, broken dreams, broken relationships, dashed hopes, security, abandonment, fatigue, abuse, and the hunger for knowing and being known. It is these realities that the resurrection of Jesus addresses head on. Further, these questions and these realities, it seems to me, find their answers in the resurrection alone. That's right. One man, one death, one answer.

Why the resurrection? How does the death, and supposed resurrection of one man some 2,000 years ago have anything significant to do with my life today? That is a question worth considering. Perhaps, the answer to this question answers all the questions of the human heart. If indeed this is the case we ought to give a good deal of time and effort to the exploration of this historical moment. The Jesus event, his life, death and resurrection, may hold the key to helping us navigate the world we live in, both our physical world and the inner world that exists within each one of us. What we do with the historical Jesus very well may determine what we do with our lives and how we live them. If he was who he said he was his life story has soul altering implications for us. If he was not who he said he was, and if he did not rise from the dead, let's, "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die".

Eat Drink and Be Merry

As I have observed my life, the lives of others, and the testimony of still countless others, I have found over and over again that those living for the moment, for merriment alone, are missing something. We live an age of affluence, here in America, and we have come to believe that the quest for pleasure and plenty is what life is about. Yet, day in and day out, the video footage of lives lived toward that end offers us ample evidence that this thirst for pleasure does not complete us. The tragic deaths of Anna Nicole Smith and her son have certainly demonstrated the depth of despair associated with an all out pursuit of pleasure. Sex, drugs, partying, and romance will never bring rest to the soul of an individual. No human love is sufficient, no drug lasts forever, and no amount of money soothes the ache of the heart.

Recently, I have thought much about people's pain. People would typically, I think, refer to me as someone who views life with optimism, a "glass is half full" kind of guy. I have never been a depressed person, and I strive to live life to the fullest. Yet, I tend to think deeply about how life is and is not journeyed as it was intended. Someone recently asked me, "How did you wind up doing the ministry thing?" My reply was simply that over time I came to recognize that to be a thinking and fully alive person, it seems to make sense that one ought to give intelligent and critical thought to the reason and purpose for which one was created. To do anything less just does not make sense.

Over time and through study and consideration I have come to find that we are all created with a purpose and created by a personal being who has our best in mind. If a being beyond us took time to create us, it seems logical that such a being would have a plan for us, and that the plan would be for our best. That is to say that an optimum life, a life lived in the best way possible, can and will only be found and pursued as one surrenders to the purposes of one's creator. The *optimum* (from the Latin "the best") life begins and ends with a desire to know how we ought to live and for whom we should be living. And so, my desire to "minister" to others is really a desire to help others

find out what life is really about. I want people to live the best life possible.

In observing my own life and through watching the lives of others, I have seen with vivid clarity, that lives lived for self always turn out to be filled with heartache and end in carnage. Shakespeare's Hamlet bears this out, as do the lives of so many others in the media. Likewise, and more personally, the lives of people we know and love bring this reality home.

As a single father, divorced, with three children, I am aware of how deeply a life lived for self sears people. While the last few years have been filled with an overwhelming sense of the grace of God, the wounds remain in the aftermath of broken promises and a broken family. The quest for "greener pastures" beyond the boundaries set by a loving God has ripped open so many hearts in our generation. Yet, somehow, we live in a culture that is so addicted to sex without boundaries or commitment that it is difficult to meet anyone who has not been scarred by this kind of assault. Beyond the pain that has been brought into my own family, I have many friends who have been rocked by infidelity, abuse, and mistrust. Our society wants to embrace the idea that one can eat, drink and be merry without thought or consequence. It just does not work out so well despite how alluring it may appear on HBO, network television, and the big screen.

The selfish pursuit of pleasure touches everyone. Despite what one wants to believe, it must be recognized that we cannot escape the truth. One individual's quest for pleasure without limits effects many lives. The husband or wife, mom or dad who breaks wedding vows does not just enjoy the merriment of a sexual fantasy between two consenting adults. He or she brings the pain of that excursion into the life of everyone within reach of that relationship. Everyone within the network (family, friends, co-workers, onlookers, etc.) is affected in some way. In all of our actions we "pay it forward" for good or for ill.

So what's the point? What an honest look at my life and the lives of others I know and care about has revealed to me is that we are all on a search (recognized or not) for a place of belonging and love.

We thirst to be in the arms of another because we need to be assured we are treasured, valuable, wanted. We thirst for pleasure because amidst all the brokenness of this world we desperately need to know there is something we can feel and experience which we enjoy, which elevates us beyond the tedium and background noise of everyday reality.

What I hope to help people realize is that this search for a place to belong and a place to be loved is found in the arms of one person in history. This one life, the hinge event of recorded history itself, is where we must look to find our place. Interestingly, it is in the death of this individual that we find the key to life. In contrast to our lives, this man, Jesus, lived his life looking toward his death, knowing that life would be given to all of us as he experienced the grave. As history tells us, however, and as Easter reminds us, this man, unlike any other, had the power to overcome death itself. The message in this event is what offers us direction in this life.

And so, just as all of our lives are lived internally, and it is here we uniquely experience life, I would like to look at how a few of Jesus' followers processed his life, death, and resurrection. One woman in particular, a "woman of the world", offers us a glimpse of what life is and is not about.

An Optimum Life

In the days following Jesus' death, his followers went into hiding. Scared, left alone, and with no certainty about the future, they were convinced they would be the next to die a horrible and excruciating death. Yet, as history bears out (not just biblical history), these frightened followers of "the way", in a matter of days, were totally transformed from hidiers to seekers. The testimony of history bears witness to the reality that the disciples of Jesus were so inspired after their leader's death that they were willing to lay their own lives on the line as they went about telling everyone about the risen Christ. The *best* thing to do now was not to hide but to shout, "The Man is for real".

This soul awakening in the disciples which transformed them from cowering figures into martyrs can only be accounted for by one thing. The testimony of their mouths was simply, “Christ is raised from the dead”. The message was simple—this changes everything!

The resurrection of hope in the lives of the previously defeated followers of Jesus offers us, I think, a vivid picture of how radically our lives can be altered in light of the knowledge of God. Just as the disciple’s countenance and courage were infused with hope, so to our lives can be infused with new focus when we turn from the pursuits of a pleasure obsessed world and embrace a fuller life found in God alone. These followers of Jesus who had heard him teach others about “living water” and “abundant life” only to see their master put to a miserable death and thrown into a tomb, and who had given up all hope, were somehow inspired to embrace the message anew and to proclaim it to others with new found vigor.

Can you imagine how this must have affected so many of those who had been impacted by Jesus’ life and words during his time with them? Think of the woman at the well. The scriptures tell us in John 4 that this woman of Samaria (despised by the Jews) came to the well to draw water. What happens amidst this humdrum chore, in the flow of daily life, set her journey on an entirely new course. The *best* life was opened up to her for the first time. Here at the well she encounters a man, literally, like no other she had ever met. In the past every man she seemed to encounter wanted her, not for what she was, but rather, wanted her in some way, to use her. Likewise, most men she encountered she also wanted, physically. We see this in the text because she confesses it herself. Her relational history was a mess. Marriage after marriage. Her heart in shambles. She both loathed and lusted for men in all likelihood. She was far from the *optimum* life.

In approaching the well, she finds a man there. In recognizing he’s a Jew she is startled he would even speak to her. She would not have expected to be addressed by this Jewish man, let alone be addressed in any way that would be encouraging. Yet, her entire life is turned inside out by the time The Man reveals himself to her and thereby reveals her to herself for perhaps the first time.

What we find as the incident unfolds, is a man who loves her, for the first time, like she ought to be loved. We also find a woman, who having encountered real love is given the opportunity and empowering to love others for the first time. Jesus, telling her the truth about herself (which is real love at work), leads her to acknowledge that she has broken the boundaries of marriage and love over and over again in her life. He does not stop there however. In revealing her sin, Jesus opens the door for forgiveness, restoration, and hope for the future. For the first time, a man tells her she is worth something. For the first time she desires to give her heart and soul where it ought to be given. For the first time she seeks to abandon a false sense of meritment, and for the first time she embraces a desire to be clean and innocent. For the first time she finds living water, soul cleansing water, and real love. The best that life has to offer is opened up to her.

Jesus tells the woman, using a metaphor that must have cut right to her core that she came to the well seeking water, but that he offered her living water that would quench her deepest thirsts forever. To a woman that lived a life drowning herself in “stolen waters” Jesus offered waters that would restore, heal, comfort, and encourage.

Now, picture for a moment, this woman hearing of the death of the One who had totally transformed her life and sent her in a new direction. Picture how many of her former “friends” must have ridiculed her for her new found “faith”. So many must have said, “It’s a season. Call us when you are done with it. We miss you at the parties.” As we all do, she must have, despite her change, questioned at times if it was all for real. “Maybe my friends are right”, she must have thought. Knowing of the death of the one who claimed to be able to offer living waters, she must have thought for sure, “It was all a false hope”. She would have been no different from the disciples in this regard.

Amidst this scene, another word of hopes springs eternal as the rumors of the risen Christ began to spread around the area. Just when she and so many others must have thought all hope was gone when Jesus was shoved into a cave and the stone was rolled in place, another twist to the story rises up from the ashes of destruction and hope is

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resurrected once more! News of Jesus appearing before many of his followers after the resurrection must have spread like wildfire in the surrounding communities and in the hearts of so many. This message of Jesus overcoming the grave must have established in the heart of this woman, once again, that true love does indeed exist and life is worth the living. Just as she had formerly gone out and told everyone in her community, “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did”, so now too, she must have desired to share the love of this man who had triumphed over the cross and the grave. “That man, he changed me”! Can you hear her? “I thought I knew what life was, but Jesus showed me what life was really about”.

And so, we must recognize, along with the woman at the well, the one who once lived for sex, relationships, and pleasure, that the answer to our search for love and belonging is found not in hiding from the reality of who we are. Rather, sanity in this life and energy to live life to the full come from standing in the light of truth and being washed clean in the forgiveness of God. Standing in this light of truth, and being washed clean in these waters, we find a passion and a direction for living. The reality of the empty tomb is that Jesus, who said he was the way the truth and the life, is indeed who and what he said he was. The resurrection establishes that we have the hope of a life which has a purpose, a goal, a meaning. The message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is simply this: God knows our loss, our need for love, our pain, our sorrow, our lust for pleasure without boundaries, and our desire to know we have a place in this world. Just as he turned the tables of death for Jesus, He can turn our life around.

Jesus’ life demonstrates that in dying to self we live and in living for him we find rest. His resurrection, as Paul suggests, is what establishes his divinity and our faith. If we have hope in him, if we surrender our selves to him, we find our power over all this life brings our way. In so doing, for the first time, we can see what it means to live life full of joy, passion, energy, and hope. In embracing Jesus’ message of love the boundaries we are prone to run past lose their allure in light of the boundless love of God which transforms us from day to day. This is how the best life, the optimum life opens up to us.

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The message of Easter begs us to consider how we live our lives. The fact is, and it is historical fact and not fiction, that one man who lived over 2,000 years ago, who claimed to be able to forgive sins, and who lived in relationship with others better than anyone else in recorded history, who claimed to be the only source for a relationship with God, He really is who He said He was. If one simply considers the historical, medical, archeological, and other vast sources of evidence which establish the resurrection as a reality, then we must embrace the truth that Jesus was and is able to offer us the best game plan for life that could be offered.

This life has much to offer, no doubt. The beauty of creation, the wonder of the human body, passion, pleasure, music, art, and so on. However, if we are honest with ourselves, just as the woman at the well was, we all have need of something more. That something more is beyond our selves, its more fulfilling than any temporary pleasure, and offers what no other experience here on earth can offer. That craving to know and to be known, and loved, finds its fulfillment only in the God who is love and is revealed in the resurrected person of Christ. As Augustine suggested centuries ago, our hearts do not find rest until we find our rest in Him.

And so, if you have had the same thoughts and experiences I have had and you have the same questions, thoughts, and desires that most people have, you may want to consider a trip to the well today. Perhaps, as you go about your life as usual, you might do so praying that God would meet you in the midst of your day, that He would meet you this Easter, and that you would be open to considering that your best life may lay ahead as you embrace His plan.

Consider the words of C.S. Lewis,

Among the Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. ...when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God". That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic...or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon: or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

--The Case for Christianity

If Jesus was who He said He was the implications for our life are soul altering. The implications for us, like the woman at the well and like the transformed disciples, are nothing less than thrilling. If you are anything like me, and parts of your life are filled with questions and uncertainty, you should find great hope in the words of Jesus as He began His ministry here on earth. In Luke 4:17-21 Jesus quotes the Old Testament scripture written in Isaiah. Here, at the beginning of His ministry, He gives His mission statement and reveals His identity. It is the message that was confirmed by His life, death and resurrection. This is the message in which we find the life we were meant to live. The passage reads,

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to proclaim
good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing".

Jesus, the lover of souls, who healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons, rebuked the self-righteous, and conquered the grave, is the one who is able to make good on His promise to give to us the life we were meant to live. If we find ourselves in spiritual or material or relational poverty, He offers hope. If we find ourselves held captive by greed, lust, and illicit pleasure, He offers freedom. If we find ourselves unable to view life as it should be viewed, He offers renewed vision. If we find ourselves oppressed by the weight of this world, He offers liberty. And where we find ourselves on the short end of the stick of life, He offers His favor. Indeed, the life we were meant to live is found as we sit before Him and received His words which are a spring welling up unto eternal life. We find our place, and we find our heart's desire met as we accept His offer to drink from a well which offers to us the quenching of our strongest thirst, and the provision to settle our deepest longings. Jesus, at all appearances to the onlookers at the cross, was a loser in death, yet, days later, reveals the power of the life He was meant to live. The resurrection settles the questions of the human heart. We must ask ourselves if we are asking the right questions, and if we are willing to hear the answer. Are you ready to live the life you were created to live?