

“He Is Not Here, But Has Risen”

(Luke 24:6a)

Rev. Dr. Alfonso O. Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Buddhism teaches that all desire leads to suffering, thus a basic goal of this worldview is to learn to eliminate all desire. If desire is gone, then you won't feel loss, sadness, or suffering when something bad happens. If something is taken away (like your health, or a person you love) you will not suffer if you've managed to eliminate your desire for health and your desire for your loved one. With all desire eliminated, you will arrive to the Buddhist version of peace. So goes the hypothesis and I pray that none of you ever become Buddhist. The devil, however, uses this idea which is extremely popular to distract people from a very important biblical teaching: God wants you to pursue the most important desire. *God has designed you to be desirous*. The devil would love to mess this up by getting you to stop desiring!

But if that doesn't work, the devil has another approach (and this one seems more “American” and less eastern). He says, “Well, if you're going to desire, then let's make your desiring all wrong.” Thanks to the philosophical ramifications of full-blown Darwinian Evolution, not only is it perfectly natural to desire, it is also perfectly natural to desire *above and beyond* moral restraints. The reason for this simple: if philosophical naturalism is true then there is nothing beyond the material realm, and if there is nothing beyond the material realm, then there is no God and morals are therefore figments of the imagination. If materialism is true, then people

should pursue whatever they desire (regardless of anyone's standard of morality).

So goes the hypothesis and I pray that none of you ever become a lover of naturalism. The devil, however, uses this idea which is extremely popular to distract people from a very important biblical teaching: *God desires that you desire according to His will*.

It may not sound like a very religious thing to say, but it is 100% biblical and gives glory to Jesus Christ: *God has designed you for desire*. Psalm 145:16 says, “*You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.*” Verse 19 of the same Psalm records, “*He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.*” The only qualification to this rule is that we cut off the desires that are evil and contrary to the will of God. Saint Paul puts it simply, “*Put to death therefore...evil desire...*” (Colossians 3:5).

So what is the greatest God-given and God-sanctioned desire? It is simple, glorious, and holy: it is *life*. God has designed you to desire life *more than anything else*. And you know what? Everyone – no matter how hardened they are against God and life via Buddhism or naturalism or any “ism” – knows that this is true at the core of their being: *we desire to live*. This is why we respond to tragedy the way we do. This is why these things cause us to flinch and to feel discomfort while we know it could happen to us.

This is a challenging theology, because I am not saying that we are incapable of not fearing death. Athanasius wrote powerfully about the state to which the Christian arrives: “*A very strong proof of this*

destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this: all the disciples of Christ despise death; they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as on something dead.” (On The Incarnation, SVS Press, 57)

But what if a person does not know the eternal life that Jesus has won? This is also why I hesitate to believe the person without hope that they have no fear of death. I believe often what we hear people say is a desperate psychological coping mechanism in the face of the inevitable. Perhaps the professional Green Beret or Ranger or Seal gets to the point where they know a psychology that can stare death in the face without flinching, but to say that this is the natural response? You may just as well say that you have no fear of cutting off your arm. The point is that at our core we want to live more than anything else.

So we recoil when we hear accounts of suicide, when we get those reports of American soldiers who die in war, when we are shocked time and again by the senseless acts of rage and insanity when someone enters a school or a movie theatre armed with weapons. But you don't have to go far to be aware of Satan's campaign to destroy life. While we talk about the rights of women in the face of the abortion debate, we forget that about half of the all the babies aborted are little women whose rights were never consulted. And the culture that kills its unborn will slowly but surely turn on its elderly and it's weak. Ours is a culture of death in the face of God's creation of life and that life which strives for and desires life. You want to live and that is good!

But if the evil one is not successful to get you to become an advocate of Eastern religion so that you would eliminate all desire; or become a full-blown materialist letting your animal instincts control your life with the potential of having your conscience seared as with a hot iron (as Scripture frightfully mentions as a possibility in the lives of some, 1st Tim 4:2), then the evil one still has one more recourse: join the ever-growing, “At least I believe in God!” club.

This is the best of both worlds (at least according to Satan's agenda). In this club, you can keep your conscience soothed by saying that you believe in God (as if that were the same as saying that you believe in the Gospel, and of course it isn't, because the Scripture says that even the demons believe in God, James 2:19). All the while one can still not desire life as you ought to. In the “At least I believe in God” club, you can desire and advocate all kinds of religious things, but the evil one keeps you away from desiring the One thing needful (Luke 10:42). He keeps you from desiring Jesus who *is* Life!

O the devil is delighted when people come to believe in God, because if he can just keep them believing in God and being satisfied with that, then they will forego the Word of God, they will reject Christ's Church and her sacred ministry, they will have no desire for the Sacraments, and at the end of the day, they will have no priority for being faithful to Christ. It won't matter what Christ says, because they will take great confidence in just “believing in God”! To live this way will mean that one can die a very religious person without hope and without life; going straight to hell.

Hear this people of God: It is impossible to properly desire life if one does not know the One who *is* Life. To simply say that you “believe in God” and totally ignore what God Himself has done about your greatest desire: 1) conducting the essential ministry of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection to save you from sin and death; and 2) conducting the essential ministry of keeping you in Christ through the regular and frequent administration of Christ’s Word and Sacrament which keeps your faith alive not by your standards, but by God’s standards.

To miss this visitation of the Risen Christ is to miss life. Instead, God desires that you have life. Jesus said, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10) St. John also writes, *“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”* The resurrection is not a religious story, it is not the myth of Christianity, it does not exist for the sake of the church to be one institution among many, and it is not asserted to cause an emotional response in you so that you feel “spiritual.” Instead, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s answer to your greatest desire even in the face of death.

So what did God do to give you life? What does God do about your greatest desire which He Himself put in you? Answer: He has given Jesus Christ, and if Jesus Christ did not come to conquer death, to actually, physically, bodily rise from death and actually, physically, bodily exist that tomb alive, then your greatest desire is a mere psychological disorder, or God playing a very cruel joke, or quite simply, the atheists have it right. But there is one way of knowing the truth: it is the resurrection of Jesus itself. I rejoice that many of

you have received the gift of faith and you know your resurrected Savior, but as a Christian you must enter this culture of death and be equipped to witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it is a resurrection that resonates with historical truth. There are four things to know for the sake of those who are still searching or for those having doubts:

Historical fact #1: Jesus truly died. If he didn’t die, then skeptics will continue to say that He didn’t truly rise. If Jesus was merely unconscious, then it was nothing to leave the tomb, because He was never dead. This position ignores the historical facts: after suffering from hematidrosis while in the garden of Gethsemane, being beaten before the Jewish court, undergoing the brutality of the Roman flogging, having the heavy wooden beam thrust on him on the way to the hill of the skull, then having seven inch nails pounded through his hands and feet, going through the excruciating torture of crucifixion which is essentially death by asphyxiation, and then the Roman legionnaire driving his spear through Christ’s pericardium that caused water and blood to flow out, to suggest that Jesus merely fainted (and then awoke from unconsciousness in the tomb to roll a huge stone uphill from its gully) stretches the limits of credulity.

Historical fact #2: People knew exactly where Jesus was buried because it was a tomb belonging to the Pharisee Joseph of Arimathea. Not even historic Jewish writings against Christianity dispute this historical fact. That is to say, there is no doubt that the location of Christ’s tomb was public knowledge. Furthermore, there was a guard assigned to the tomb, and this tomb was sealed by the enemies of the disciples of Christ. The great irony was that all of

these preparations were made by Christ's enemies, but their safeguards would end up giving even more historical evidence for the resurrection. Friend and foe alike came to acknowledge the historical fact that this tomb of Jesus Christ was empty on Sunday morning. There is no tenable natural explanation for this. The enemies of Christ would never have perpetuated exactly what they wanted to deny by taking Christ's body, and it is utterly ludicrous to suppose that the disciples would not only betray their master by living in deception by taking His body, but by living and being martyred for a lie. None of these options work, but what *is* known is that the tomb where Jesus was buried was empty on Sunday morning.

Historical fact #3: The disciples record and proclaim *on their life* that they saw the risen Christ. There are 12 resurrection appearances recorded in Scripture. They clearly describe Christ's actual body resurrected. Thomas is able to see Jesus' nail wounds and touch His physical body. (John 20:27) Later, the disciples ate breakfast with Jesus on the shore of Tiberias (John 21) and as we all know ghosts don't eat fish (what they had for breakfast that morning); and the field of psychology has proven that there is no such thing as mass hallucinations. Let me get to the really exciting historical evidence though: it is a fact of history that the earliest Christians knew the creedal statements which include the resurrection recorded by Saint Paul in 1st Corinthians 15 as that which was circulating some 3-8 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Legend quite simply does not, cannot occur that fast. This time span is rather the mark of true history when eye-witness accounts are shared in the face of enemies and skeptics alike who have access to those same, living eye-witnesses for cross-examination.

Historical fact #4: The disciples themselves were utterly transformed and there is no logical explanation for this outside of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter was a scared and inconsistent follower of Jesus who after his encounter with the Living Christ became a bold proclaimer responsible for converting thousands and faced his martyrdom knowing that Jesus was alive. James had been embarrassed by the outlandish claims of his half-brother Jesus, but after his encounter with the Living Christ, he was willing to be one of the first pastors and martyrs of the Christian Church. Paul was one of the most determined enemies against the Christian Church. He had committed himself to help murder Christians. Not only did he give up his prestigious position as a leading Pharisee, but he suffered in innumerable ways for Jesus Christ all the way to his beheading in Rome. What changed these men? What transformed their lives? It is one fact of history: Jesus rose from the grave.

This is the Gospel: Jesus lived to keep God's Law **for you**; He died bearing **your sins** upon Himself; He rose from death to win the victory over death **for you**. As a result of this Gospel truth, whoever believes in Jesus has not **some** of their sins forgiven, not **most** of their sins forgiven, but on account of this saving ministry of the Risen Lord Jesus, has **all** of their sins forgiven! This is the Good News! This is the Gospel: all of your sins are forgiven! All of your sins are forgiven! All of your sins are forgiven! And this Gospel truth is verified and confirmed on account of one historical fact: Christ is risen!