

LOOKING FOR LIFE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

SERIES: HE IS ALIVE! AND HE IS STILL ALIVE!

By Ron Ritchie

There is an old song that keeps coming around, and I find myself from time to time humming the first line of the chorus after talking to people who are struggling with establishing or maintaining certain relationships. It is called *Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places*. Here are the first verse and the chorus:

I spent a lifetime looking for you.
Singles bars and good time lovers were never true.

Playing a fool's game, hoping to win,
And telling those sweet lies and losing again.

I was looking for love in all the wrong places,
Looking for love in too many faces.

Searching their eyes, looking for traces of one I'm dreaming of,
Hoping to find a friend and a lover.

I'll bless the day I discover another heart, looking for love.

The more I think about this quest for meaningful human relationships, the more I want to change just one word in that song. For in reality my friends, and certainly I myself at times, are looking for *life* in all the wrong places. If you live in this world you have been tempted, and may have even fallen into the temptation, to believe that life is fully experienced when you have obtained a few good friends, a good husband or wife, children, or certain pets. Many around us are looking for life in the relationships they hope to find through the New Age movement or the hundreds of self-help groups that are offered in this community. Others are looking for life in the relationships they could develop by joining a certain sports program and becoming a member of a team. There are hundreds of clubs offering some form of life in this community. And many are looking for life in churches that reach out to the lonely. On a recent vacation in Israel I was reminded once again that within the three major religions---Christianity, Judaism, and Islam---many have all succumbed to "a form of godliness [religion], although they have denied its power." (See 2 Timothy 3:5.) Those who focus on ritual, dress, culture, legalism, etc. are really looking for life in all the wrong places.

But before we become the judges of the whole world, we may all need to ask ourselves, "Are we also looking for life in all the wrong places?" Let's look at John 11:17-46. This passage should help us clarify the definition of life and then help us answer that question for ourselves, in a day when there seem to be so many voices crying out to us that they have the secret of abundant life.

Let's review the context of this passage first. John 10 tells us that in the winter months before Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem to celebrate his final Passover, he and his disciples could be found down by the Jordan River. According to John 11:1-16, a friend of Mary and Martha arrived from Bethany with the sad news that their beloved brother whom Jesus loved, Lazarus (He Whom God Helped), was sick. Jesus did not respond with a crisis mentality, but understood by the Spirit that Lazarus would die physically. He said to the messenger and the disciples, "This sickness is not unto death [death will not be the final outcome, but this sickness will be unto life], but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it." And he waited two days. Jesus then told his disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep, meaning he had died, but that he would awaken him. And he told his disciples why he had waited: "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." Then in spite of the death threats from the religious

leaders in Jerusalem, he followed the will of his Father, and with his disciples walked the fifteen miles from the Jordan River to the Jericho road, then followed it up to Jerusalem and into the community of Bethany.

Life can be found only in Jesus

John 11:17-27

So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him; but Mary still sat in the house. Martha therefore said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother shall rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world."

Martha's first words to Jesus in those moments of grief were, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This does not seem to be a rebuke, but rather a comment on reality filled with grief. If Jesus had been there four days earlier when their brother's life hung in the balance, they would have had the hope of his healing Lazarus from his deadly illness. You can hear in her remark the disappointment and confusion over what some would have called the untimely death of Lazarus.

Now, Jesus had known that Lazarus would die. There is no mention in this passage that Lazarus had died because of sin or a lack of personal faith in God. There were four spiritual reasons that God allowed Lazarus to die physically. Jesus had told the disciples two: "This sickness is not unto death, but (1) for the glory of God, (2) that the Son of God may be glorified [that is, the disciples as well as all the believers in the village would once again get solid confirmation that Jesus was the Son of the living God, as was about to be demonstrated by the reality that he was able to raise the dead]." (3) Lazarus' death enabled the loving, merciful, and powerful character of God, who was the author of life and had power over death, to be experienced by all those who believed in Him, so that their faith in him would continue to mature. So (4) that many would come into the kingdom when they saw Jesus raise the dead.

Martha continued, "Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Martha was not thinking of the physical resurrection of her brother, as we will see in a moment when she explains her resurrection theology. Rather, she was just hoping that Jesus would ask God to immediately comfort their broken hearts emotionally and spiritually.

But Jesus said, "Your brother shall rise again." Martha replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Martha had been taught that the Old Testament prophet Daniel had given insight into the final resurrection: "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people---everyone whose name is found written in the book---will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life." (Daniel 12:1-2; see Acts 24:15.) But Martha could not conceive of her brother's being raised from the dead at this point. After all, he had been in the cave some four days now, and the smell of death hung in the air.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me...shall never die." In these words our Lord uttered a most profound statement. Down through the centuries it has given his disciples and a confused and grieving world of onlookers the deep hope that in him is life both now and beyond the grave. How many times in your own experience, as you stood by a new grave, have you heard these words and not been comforted by that eternal truth? Each time I read these words at the graveside of believer, I find my own heart filled with peace and the hope that this life is not all we will ever live, followed only by final darkness.

In Jesus is eternal life, which he wants to give to all who place their faith in him: the Son of God, the only one who can save them from their sins and deliver them out of the enslavement of Satan and the kingdom of darkness. In the gospel of John we have many references to this wonderful hope:

John 1:1-4 "...And the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

- John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."
- John 3:35-36 "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."
- John 5:24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."
- John 5:26 "For the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself."
- John 10:10 "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Jesus had taught all this eternal truth to his disciples and the new believers, and now he needed to review it so that Martha would finally understand who he was and what he could do in the power of God. He was saying, "I am presently and forever the only resurrection, the only one who has been given the power to raise all who have physically died, some to the resurrection of life and some to the resurrection of judgment (see John 5:29; Revelation 20:5-6). And I am the life, the only one who can give those resurrected from the dead eternal life. He who believes in me---any person who places their faith in me as their Savior and Lord, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God; and then abides in that faith, has the assurance that they shall live spiritually forever. For they shall never taste eternal death, which is separation from the Father and the Son, even if they die physically. Neither Lazarus nor any departed saints nor anyone who lives and believes in me (including you, Martha, and Mary and the other believing Jews at your home) shall ever die."

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* wrote verses 24-26 this way:

Martha replied, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time." Jesus replied, "You don't have to wait for the End. I am right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?"

We can get some additional glimpses of this spiritual reality elsewhere in the Scriptures. David tells us in Psalm 23:4, the sheep look to their great shepherd and say,

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for Thou art with me."

We are encouraged by the story of the great prophet Elijah, who on the last day of his life on this earth saw a chariot and horses of fire and was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind (see 2 Kings 2:11). And then seven hundred years later there is the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. When he stepped into eternity and assumed his former glory, he talked with the risen Elijah, as well as the risen Moses, who had died fifteen hundred years earlier, about his forthcoming Ascension (see Luke 9:29-36). We get more hope after our Lord's own physical resurrection from the grave: Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him." (Romans 6:8-9.) Finally, Jesus in his great prayer before the cross said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). We can draw the conclusion that if you place your faith in Jesus

Christ, you will never lose consciousness when you die physically. You will be continuously aware of his presence, love, and power. The difference is just that you shed your "tent" and put on your "mansion" (2 Corinthians 5:1-5).

Martha affirmed that the foundation of her faith was the fact that Jesus was the resurrection and the life by saying, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ [Messiah], the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." That is, she was saying, "I have believed and continue to believe [perfect tense] that you are the promised one of God, the Christ of God, the Son of God, the one coming to this earth to offer salvation." She confessed his full deity and humanity as the God-Man (see Philippians 2:5-8). And based on that confession she was ready to move to the next step: that belief in Jesus as the resurrection and the life also meant that death had been conquered---not only in the future but in the immediate present.

Randy Shilts was the gay author of *And the Band Plays On* and a *San Francisco Chronicle* writer who, through his articles and books, helped lead the national debate on the gay rights movement and AIDS. He died of AIDS just last month. In a TV interview on *60 Minutes* a few weeks before his death, he was asked how he felt about his life and his impending physical death. He replied, "At forty-two I'm at the pinnacle of my career, and you feel like your life is over before it was completed." From all reports he died without a relationship with the Resurrection and the Life. There are so many around us who are still looking for life in all the wrong places.

Life is found only in Jesus, and part of that life is his present comfort: being with us, weeping with us, grieving with us, and in time answering our prayers.

Comfort is found only in Jesus

John 11:28-37

And when she had said this, she went away, and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, "The Teacher is here, and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she arose quickly, and was coming to Him.

Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. The Jews then who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. And so the Jews were saying, "Behold how He loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have kept this man also from dying?"

Mary also fell at Jesus' feet and cried out, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Both sisters used the same words, but Jesus saw that Martha's faith needed to be increased, while Mary's heart needed to be comforted.

Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit, and...troubled," which in the original Greek has the meaning of deep anger. He saw the tears flowing out of the eyes of the brokenhearted Mary and their friends, and he became angry with sin which brought forth death, and with all that death did to the human spirit and the joy of life.

I will never forget an experience our staff had some twenty years ago when we were all taken to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem. We walked around the hall viewing in silence the many horrible pictures of the gas chambers and saw in the glass showcases the clothes, eyeglasses, teeth, and hair of some of the millions of Jews who had been slaughtered by the Nazis in World War II. Suddenly the silence was broken and we all were deeply shaken when Dave Roper with fist raised yelled out in intense anger, anguish, and tears, "Satan, you murderer!" That is the emotion that Jesus felt here.

Then with Mary and the Jews who were also weeping, Jesus walked over to the cave where they had laid Lazarus four days earlier, and he wept with them.

"He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering."
(Isaiah 53:3.)

The word weep here is not the one for wailing; these were real tears from our High Priest who knows our hearts, especially at moments like this.

Some of the crowd saw his tears as an indication of Jesus' great love for his friend Lazarus, rather than for Mary and Martha and the others. Others could not understand why Jesus, who could open the eyes of the blind, could not have kept Lazarus from dying.

Many times on my way home at the end of a day I will take a back way that avoids some traffic lights and eventually gets me onto Page Mill Road. As I approach Page Mill Road there is one traffic light I have to wait for, and right there I always look to my left at the white house on the corner. Several years ago in front of that house Ed and Kathy Woodhall and Anne Marie and I got out of our car and walked toward a wonderful Christian friend. She was the widow of a man who had been accidentally killed in a freak accident the month before, and that day her nine-year-old son had been killed in a freak accident at the Great America amusement park.

I know I will never forget the moment she saw us and rushed into our arms with the tears from a deeply broken heart flowing down her face. Her first words were, "Ron, what is God doing?" Well, we don't always know what God is doing, but we can be assured that he will be glorified and that we should be drawing closer to him. The five of us were moved once again to turn to Jesus, the only Resurrection and Life and our only Comfort. And we were moved to trust him fully that he and his Father would be glorified and that our faith in him would be matured regardless of the immediate tragic circumstances, which appeared to be the untimely death of her beloved son and our beloved friend. We were led to focus not on the death of this boy, but on Jesus: the only one who could give to him and all of us eternal life. And her son and her husband were alive in eternity with Jesus. And Jesus continues to be, for all who will believe, not only the only Resurrection and Life but also their Comfort in the midst of the most deadly situations.

All glory to the Father and the Son

John 11:38-46

Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hearest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me." And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things which Jesus had done.

Jesus, still deeply moved within his spirit, came to the tomb, a cave cut into the hillside just like the one he himself would be placed in some two miles away and a few weeks later. When he requested that those around the cave remove the stone, Martha stepped up and reminded the Resurrection and the Life that really her

brother had been dead for some four days, and if they removed the stone the smell of death would be overwhelming. They all stood there in pure hopelessness. Jesus needed to remind Martha once again to stop thinking about the corpse and place her faith in him. The death of her brother had happened so that the Father and the Son would be glorified, so that the disciples would mature in their faith, and so that many would come into the kingdom.

Jesus reminded Martha that if she really believed that he was the resurrection and the life, if she really believed as she said she did that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, and if she really believed that "...whatever You ask of God, God will give you," then she would see the glory of God within a few moments. So, expressing a true and childlike faith, she had the stone covering Lazarus' grave removed. The stench of death filled the air.

Then Jesus raised his eyes and prayed to his wonderful heavenly Father, "Father I thank you that you hear me [miracle accomplished]. And I know that you always hear me, but because of the people standing around I am saying this, so that they may believe that you did send me." Jesus continued to demonstrate to his disciples "our heavenly Father," the One who was always available to hear the cry of his beloved Son and all who had placed their faith in him. He was saying, "I am praying out loud in the presence of my disciples as well as Mary and Martha and this mixed crowd of Jews, so that by this miracle your name will be glorified; they will see that you really are my Father and I am your Son, and that you are the one who sent me to this earth as their Messiah. (For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him [John 3:17].) So please, by your power through me, raise my friend Lazarus from the grave."

Jesus then cried out, "Lazarus, come forth." In Greek this is literally, "Lazarus: Out! Out!" And Lazarus, who had died, came out, bound hand and foot with wrappings and with a cloth wrapped around his face. The dead responded to his call! Jesus told them, "Unbind him and let him go." "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live." (John 5:25.) It is wonderful to notice the way Jesus required the family and friends of Lazarus to become involved in experiencing the miracle by helping him to get back to living again.

Paul would later write to the Corinthians, "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." (2 Corinthians 2:15-16.) Many of the Jews who saw what he had done believed in him. But some of them went and told the Pharisees, and so plans were made that very day to kill Jesus. Many among us are still looking for life in all the wrong places.

Let me share this recent story out of *Christianity Today* entitled "For Women, Against Abortion" (March 7, 1994). It is a wonderful story of God's mercy and grace toward one woman who spent years looking for life in all the wrong places.

"I would have been proud of having an abortion. I didn't happen to get pregnant, but if I had, I would have had an abortion in a minute. I would have seen it as a revolutionary act in which I declared my independence."

With those words, Frederica Mathewes-Green sums up her views on abortion during her days as a campus flower child in the early 1970s...After sampling a salad bar of Eastern religions, she settled on Hinduism. She affirmed gay rights, women's rights, abortion rights...

Then something odd happened. Frederica's boyfriend, Gary, had to read one of the Gospels for a philosophy of religion class. He chose Mark---it was the shortest. An atheist, Gary was nonetheless intrigued by Mark's portrait of Christ. "There's something about Jesus," Gary would tell Frederica..."He speaks with authority."

In May 1974, Frederica and Gary married, offering a Hindu prayer to bless their union, and then donned backpacks for a trip through Europe. In Dublin, as they toured yet another looming cathedral, Frederica stood before a statue of Jesus. "Behold the heart that so loved mankind," read the emblem beneath it.

Suddenly she was on her knees on the cold, stone floor, weeping before the Christ. "I am your life," she

sensed Jesus saying to her. "You think your life is in your personality, your intellect, in your breath itself. But these are not your life. I am your life."

"I stood up," says Frederica, "and I was a Christian..."

To make a long story short, Frederica is now the director of *Real Choices*, a research project of the National Women's Coalition for Life, a coalition of 15 organizations whose combined membership includes more than 1.8 million women.

Frederica's search for life is over. She found it in the person of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God; and she will live forever, beginning now---that is what Jesus said! Are you still looking for life in all the wrong places? Take a closer look at Jesus, for he said:

"I am the resurrection and the life;
he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies...."

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