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Rick Myatt

DIGGING IN THE RIGHT HOLE John 11:21-26

In their book *Repacking Your Bags* Richard Leider and David Shapiro wrote, “on the whole, we are a society of notoriously numb people. Lonely, bored, dependent people who are happy only when we have killed the time we are trying to save. We worry constantly about making a living but rarely about making a life.”

Being numb can be a good thing. My difficulties with dentists began with a sadistic nut job who filled some of my teeth without using Novocain when I was young. I found out the hard way that having your mouth be numb while a dentist plies his trade on you is one of the great boons of modern medicine. However, do you know what it’s like when you leave the dentist and your mouth is still numb? Would you like to live your entire life that way? Of course not, nor do we want to be numb in our souls either. None of us wants to go through life numb, not really feeling anything. Yes, many want to be numb to the pain they have in life, but when you’re numb you also don’t experience the reality of life, you can’t feel the joy and the excitement that life can and should have. Our society is full of pastimes. We have entertainment 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Maybe you can remember when your television had three channels. Early in the morning there was something on the TV screen called a test pattern because the station wasn’t broadcasting yet. At the end of the day the station signed off. They quit broadcasting, usually around midnight. If you’ve ever been awake at 3 in the morning and seen the infomercials for ridiculous products and exercise programs you might think they’d be better off not broadcasting at all. We have hundreds of television channels broadcasting 24 hours a day all intended to help us “pass the time.”

The point is not that television is evil, but that we have so much of it. Researchers tell us that when they study brain activity they see less brain activity when you’re watching television than when you sleep. Doesn’t that suggest that we are indeed a numb, bored people who are killing the time we’re trying to save? Don’t we want a life that is better than just passing the time until we die? We want to be truly alive. But how do we make that happen? Surprisingly what we commemorate on Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is pivotal for having a true full life.

Today I am not going to argue for the validity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I am going to assume it. There is great evidence that Jesus Christ did in fact rise

from the dead, but I'm not going to go into that today. That's not my point. I want us to consider what that resurrection has to do with living a full life?

PREMISE: JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION BRING LIFE

Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were some of Jesus' best friends and supporters. But at one point Lazarus fell seriously ill. His condition grew steadily worse. His sisters sent urgent word to Jesus, who was in another area several days' travel time away, appealing to him for help. Unfortunately by the time Jesus got there Lazarus had been dead 4 days.

In verse 21 Martha said to Jesus when he arrived, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." There was faith in that statement, but also some disappointment. Couldn't Jesus have done something about Lazarus? Couldn't he have healed him from a distance or stopped him from getting sick in the first place? Martha didn't want Jesus to think she didn't believe in him, so she next affirmed that she still had faith. In verse 22 she said, "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." She's telling Jesus that she thinks he can bring Lazarus back! Perhaps that was the desperation of one devastated by the loss of her brother.

Have you been through what Martha was experiencing? I know what it is like to be so distraught over the death of someone you love that you find it hard to even think straight. There is an anguish inside that is intense and it is coupled with a sense of helplessness and frustration. It can be disorienting in addition to horribly painful. In her anguish and desperation Martha is hoping against hope, though her rational mind is telling her there is nothing that can be done now.

Jesus' response was "your brother will live again." He meant that literally, but he phrased it in a way that in the historical context was a little ambiguous. His statement was the ancient Jewish equivalent of "He's in a better place." It was what you said when someone died. It was the appropriate cliché. Martha understood it as that expected cliché.

Jesus then said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." That almost sounds like nonsense. Believe in Jesus and you'll live even though you die. By definition if you die then you are no longer alive, so how does this make sense? Jesus was actually making a couple of claims. First, he is the resurrection. Jesus is the one who makes the future resurrection happen. He is the one who has the power of resurrection. He was about to demonstrate that power that day, but the ultimate proof of it would be

when he himself rose from the dead, never to die again. He claimed that anyone who believed in him would not stay dead, but would be raised from the dead because of him!

He also said he was the life. One who believes in him will have a life that is what life ought to be, full life, and this life will continue eternally. It will not end when a person's body ceases to function. He will keep living that full life even after his body dies. One of John's repeated themes is that Jesus came to bring life. By that he meant not just existence, but life as it was intended when God created humans. John claimed that Jesus is the source of real life and that to experience it we must believe in him. He claimed if we do we won't just exist, we will be truly, completely alive.

In John 1:4 speaking of Jesus John wrote, "In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind." This life is what all people long for. It is life we sense we were made for, but it has always been out of reach. In John 14:6 Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In John 6:35 Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus claimed that by believing in him we can experience life so full that we will never be hungry or thirsty for anything more.

In his commentary on John, Chester Quimby wrote (p. 157) that John is "concerned with a larger, more terrible death, wherein a man may walk the earth and yet be dead—dead in spirit." He goes on to say (p. 161), "The risen life is not (merely) a wistful desire for which men hope. It is a present experience. It is given to the Christian now, in the very days of his flesh. When receiving eternal life, a man does not go at once to heaven. Heaven comes at once into him."

When have you felt alive? Have there been times when you have felt totally alive, felt that you are experiencing everything that life has to offer, that you are totally engaged in every aspect of your being? In the movie, *The Fast and the Furious*, in one scene the central character, Dominic, whose passion is drag racing, tells a friend that for those 10 seconds on the track he feels free, alive. He says he lives his life a quarter mile at a time.

Last month on one gorgeous February day I was reminded of a recent day like that for me. The particular day last month was a beautiful day with the temperature in the mid 70's, a blue sky with some wispy clouds. That reminded me of the day that Carissa and Michael got married. They got married on the beach at Coronado on February 1. Exactly one week before we had a big winter storm. It was cold and

pouring rain. Carissa and Michael gambled that the weather would be good on their wedding day and it paid off. It was a spectacular day. It was warm and sunny. But more to the point it was a day of such joy for Laurie and me. We had prayed for years for the right guy for Carissa, and finally he had arrived. That day was filled with preparation, excitement, laughter and joy. Newly married Anna and Toby were there and for us it could not have been better. The day was so wonderful I wished I could freeze time and live in it forever. We felt totally alive. Life felt like life should be. Some of us have never experienced that. Others of us would say there have been precious few moments when that is true. Jesus intended to bring us life, to make us alive. That doesn't mean to have every day be joyful like that one, but it does mean increasingly being as alive as we were that day.

Having the life of heaven come into us sounds terrific, doesn't it? That is what Jesus died and then conquered death to accomplish in us. He came to give a life that will start now and last eternally. That life will never die. What we experience right now will keep on, Jesus said. We want that life, because we all want to be fully alive. If we don't have that life, whatever we have, it is not what Jesus came here to give us.

WHAT MAKES THIS LIFE DIFFERENT?

I am going to point out 3 aspects of this life Jesus has made possible for us through his death and resurrection. To be fully alive you must have these elements. If you lack any of them you will not experience the life you were born to experience.

It is connected to God

Have you ever felt or known something was missing? How does that affect you? In such situations I can function but I feel divided and distracted, bothered by the missing item. Years ago I misplaced my checkbook. I looked everywhere I could think of. I looked in my desk, my night stand, in the little cabinet in the kitchen, under the bed, in the pockets of the clothes I'd been wearing, every place in the car it could possibly have dropped. All to no avail. The checkbook was nowhere to be found. Did I take it out in the bank or in a store and leave it there? I could identify no situation where I could have misplaced it. I began to imagine worst case scenarios. Some crook had it and was writing checks in my name. I continued on with my life but there was this constant nagging sense, "where could it be?" It would not leave me alone. Knowing something is missing is really disturbing. I did eventually find the checkbook. Days later I found it in my slipper in my closet. I had left it in a pocket and it slipped out when I was hanging up my clothes and fell inside my slipper.

Knowing that you are missing something is unpleasant. It can range from just a nagging background sense to something that totally distracts and dominates your mind. All of us have a sense that something is missing. This is because we were created by God with a built in need to know him and be closely connected to him. Colossians 1:16 says of our Lord, “all things have been created through him and for him.” Romans 11:36 says, “From him and through him and for him are all things.”

These verses assert that we were created for God. That means that to be truly, fully human we must be connected to God. God created our lungs to take in oxygen and infuse our blood with it. That’s what they are for. What happens if they can’t do that, if they are cut off from oxygen? They can’t do what they were made to do and eventually they die. God created our souls for him. What happens if they are cut off from him? They cannot be what they were made to be and ultimately they die. The need for being connected to God is inherent. If we do not have that connection to God we will have a nagging sense that something important is missing.

Some people deny that they were created for God. But denying it doesn’t mean it isn’t true. Reality can be stubborn in not bending to our personal theories. Throughout the human race there is a sense of a need for God, and where it is denied people live with the feeling that they are missing something and life ought to be more than it is.

John Jeremiah Sullivan is an award winning writer. He said he had what he calls an adolescent bout with Christianity in his early teens. He says about once a year he’ll have a conversation with someone in which they both have a laugh about their common youthful “Jesus phase.” But in his book of essays titled *Pulphhead* he wrote that his problem is a phase is supposed to end, not expand into a long preoccupation. He says his problem is, “I (still) love Jesus Christ... Why should he vex me? Why is his ghost not friendlier?” Jesus bothers him to this day and won’t let him go. He knows something is missing. He says even after years of unbelief, “one has doubts about one’s doubts.”

Back in 1977 NASA launched Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 to explore the galaxy. They put on each spacecraft a recording called the sounds of earth. The idea was that anyone out there in the universe who might be listening might hear these recordings. They contain music and even the sound of a human heartbeat. Ann Druyan was the creative director for the project. A few years ago she reflected on the music that they included. She said one of them was one of her favorites, a piece by Beethoven from Opus 130. It is a beautiful piece of music that is haunting. In

the margin on the piece of music that Beethoven wrote he inscribed the German word *sehnsucht*, which means longing. Druyan said that part of what they wanted to capture in the Voyager message was this great longing we all feel. What is it we're longing for? We're longing to be connected to God.

In John 17:3 Jesus said, "this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God." This life, this being really, fully alive, requires knowing God and being connected to him in relationship, living with him as a reality each and every moment. Without that relationship there will always be a hollowness, a despair even because life just isn't what it is supposed to be and you know it.

It is not that hard to figure out that there is a creator. This incredible universe, this spectacular world, our own nearly miraculous bodies, shout to us that this is no accident, that someone put us here. It is not rocket science to figure out that if there is a being who is responsible for our existence he has a reason for it. Until we know the point we will always feel lost to some extent. But who is this creator, what is his reason for us, how can we get in touch with him and know him?

If we are left to our own devices we have no solid answers to those questions. We are left to blunder in the dark and to feel both alone and lost, knowing we are missing something huge and central to our existence. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the proof that God is there and can be known. Through Jesus he has made himself known. He shows us that we can know him by believing in Jesus.

It is full of hope

Imagine that you have listened to your doctor and decided that you need to lose some weight. You commit to follow a dietary regimen and exercise program that is sustainable. For a week you eat what you're supposed to and stick with your exercise routine. At the end of the week you weigh yourself and find you've lost one pound. That's not spectacular, but you know a pound a week is good, sustainable weight loss. So far, so good. Thus encouraged, your second week you are even more disciplined. At the end of the second week you weigh yourself and discover that you have somehow gained back the pound you lost and added one! What is likely to happen? You lose hope that this is doing any good, head down to VG's and lose your sorrows in a doughnut orgy.

Hope is essential for life. Without hope there simply is no life, there is only despair and bitterness. A couple of weeks ago Laurie was watching a Josh Groban concert on television. At one point he sang the classic song *You'll Never Walk Alone*. What

stirring words. “When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high and don’t be afraid of the dark. At the end of the storm is a golden sky and the sweet silver song of the lark. Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain, though your dreams be tossed and blown. Walk on, with hope in your heart and you’ll never walk alone.”

Great sentiment. Maybe you’re battered and your dreams are dashed, you are being buffeted by powerful wind and drenched by cold rain on a dark night, but hold your head up and walk on and you’ll never walk alone. It’ll all turn out great with a golden sky and a lark singing. Yes, that’s lovely. And not true. What will happen when the storm is over is you’re likely to get slammed by an even bigger storm, and then eventually you’ll die. On television a woman commented that after hearing that song she feels like she can take on the world. The problem is that feeling will crumble like dry feta cheese when it gets hit with a powerful enough blast of wind.

Laurie and I have been through the horror of having a child born with a life threatening heart defect. We’ve been through having a baby in the ICU for weeks, undergoing surgeries when he weighed 4 pounds and his life was hanging in the balance. We had friends tell us they knew it was all going to work out and he was going to be all right. There was a golden sky and the sweet song of the lark on the other side of these trials. We walked on through the storm. And then our baby died, and that crushed all those brave sentiments to dust.

When that happened we heard some platitudes from well-meaning friends and none of them helped even a little. In fact, some of them chafed an already raw and festering wound. Ultimately **only one thing helped**. Jesus Christ, in real, human history, literally died and literally came back to life. He didn’t revive after a near death experience. He physically defeated death. He proved that he had the power over our most fearsome and previously undefeated enemy and he promised that those who believe in him will physically be raised from the dead. He promised that our little baby will live again, that in fact he is alive right this minute, and that because I believe in Jesus someday I will see him again.

- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 says, “We do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” That is hope. That’s not some mamby pamby sentiment that if I hold my head up high I’ll never walk alone that’s nothing more than wishful thinking.

Jesus' resurrection gives us a proven guarantee. It is the most important hope one could ever have, and until we have it, life will inevitably be dangerous, dark, and tragic.

I watched my dad as he approached that fearsome enemy, death. Jesus was with him every step of the way. To the very end he had courage and peace. He had life, because he had the hope of the resurrection. I saw a part of an interview with Laura Hillenbrand, who wrote the book *Unbroken*, the powerful story of Louis Zamperini, who survive a crash at sea and a brutal Japanese POW camp. Shortly after he died at the age of 97 Hillenbrand said she could hardly believe he had died because he seemed immortal. She said that his spirit to the very end was immortal and strong. Angelina Jolie said in large part it was because he knew he was going to live again with his Lord. He had hope.

Because Jesus defeated death, we know he is who he claimed to be, God revealing himself in human form. We know that he keeps his promise when he says he will never abandon us. We know that he works out everything for our good. We know that when our lives finally end, as they surely will, there is still hope for we will live again with Jesus in his kingdom. In other words, in every single moment of our lives we have hope. And this hope gives strength, joy and confidence to our hearts, the very things we absolutely must have if we are to truly be alive in an often difficult world.

It has peace

I have a friend who told me about a flight in which he noticed a delay after they arrived in the vicinity of their destination airport. They seemed to be flying in circles. Eventually the pilot came on the PA and informed them that they had an indication in the cockpit of a problem with the landing gear. They had been trying to determine whether there really was a problem or if it was a false indicator. They'd done all they could to resolve the problem, but the only thing left for them was to land and hope for the best. They had been waiting for the emergency vehicles to prepare. The pilot told them that when the flight attendants gave them the word they should assume the crash position. They did land without problem, but after that he had no interest in getting on another airplane any time in the near future.

My friend illustrates a fact that we all know is true. When we don't have peace we are as far from full of life as we could possibly be. Life is full of fearful things. There is fear of physical harm, of course, but just as powerful are fear of rejection,

fear of failure, fear we will be found worthless, fear that our guilt will be discovered, fear that we can never be loved, fear that we can never be forgiven.

The death and resurrection of Jesus tell us that God cares so much about us he would go to that extreme to rescue us. It tells us that the terrible penalty we deserve has been fully paid, so we never need to fear that God might reject us or cannot forgive us, or that he is unable to love us.

Do you remember what it was like when you were dating? For you guys there was that sick and paralyzing fear of actually asking a girl out. I don't remember any specific occasion where a girl said flat "no." But there were those, "Uh, I'm sorry, but I can't because I already have plans that night." "Well, how about the next night." "Oh, actually I'm busy that night too." "Okay, could you do a week later?" "As it turns out I'm busy every night for the rest of my life."

Then there were the times when the young woman did accept your invitation. Now the pressure was really on. What if you went to dinner and spilled food on yourself? Or what if you got food stuck between your teeth and didn't know it? Or what if you were at dinner and couldn't think of anything to say and the two of you sat there in an awkward silence? Or what if you accidentally burped or did something even more embarrassingly inappropriate?

We all survived the horrors of those dates. They didn't do too much damage to us. But what if you, in effect, had to live your entire life that way? What if you felt like you were under a microscope with every decision, every action being closely watched and severely judged when it was less than ideal? Would you enjoy that? No one would. The great news about Jesus' resurrection from the dead is that it means we don't have to. We can live in peace because we are forgiven by God and loved unconditionally. Jesus' death has taken away the condemnation that we deserve so now we are loved.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection we can have peace that we are forgiven. One of the greatest needs of humans is to have some answer for the guilt we all feel. We have peace with God because we are forgiven through Jesus. I have peace because I can know that God loves me with all of my flaws. I can have peace that my life means something, I am valued by God, so much that Jesus died to save me.

The resurrection of Jesus means that though bad things are going to happen in our lives the worst could happen and God can still make it come out glorious. No matter what happens God is alive and is with us, and that makes for peace.

Our little granddaughter, Leilani, is so cute and precious. But I tell you I'm getting a little impatient with her. She never says a thing to me when I see her. Her grasp of the English language is abominable. She doesn't seem to understand much of anything. And talk about a slow starter, not only can she not walk, she hasn't even tried to take a step yet. Do you believe that? I hope not. She's only a little over 3 months old. It doesn't matter she can't do those things. It doesn't matter when she spits up on me or blows out her diaper while I'm holding her. She's our beautiful granddaughter, and though she does some disgusting things, they are what babies do. We all love her and are delighted with her.

We all do some disgusting things and seem incapable of doing a lot of things we should do. But because of what Jesus did for us we are his little children. He accepts us and loves us for who we are. It doesn't surprise him when we spit up on him or when we fail to do things that it seems we should do. He just loves us, and that love is what gives us peace. It assures us that he cares about us and always seeks our good, so we can be at peace.

In John 14:27 Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

CONCLUSION

If you aren't experiencing life in Jesus Christ, I know you are aware that something is missing, life could and should be more. You can start experiencing that life that Jesus promised by putting your faith in him. He offers you hope, a connection with God and peace. It starts with you giving up your way, putting your faith in him since he has proven himself by rising from the grave, and then letting him direct your life. If you haven't do that today.

If you believe in Jesus, but you aren't experiencing the life that he gives, it is probably due to one of two causes: It may be that you are not believing. Maybe you are forgetting about God's love. That's usually the biggest problem. You are trying to earn something or prove yourself, forgetting your great value in his eyes and his unconditional love.

You may be forgetting about the hope that he has given you and are not living in the reality of it. You may not be believing that what he has given you is better than anything else in this world. You may not be aren't believing he is in you to give you life. Put your faith in our Lord and his hope.

The other possibility is you are seeking life in the wrong places. This may be the most common problem. We start to believe that real life is found in being famous, or successful, or rich, or having some achievement that we desire, or in being accepted, or in some person's approval. Those are all what the prophet Jeremiah calls empty wells.

Did you see that Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford have recently announced they have agreed to make a new Indiana Jones movie? It is due out in 2019. But think back to the first one, *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. At one point the Nazis are looking for the Well of Souls in the Egyptian city of Tanis where they believe the ark of the covenant is buried. The key information for their dig is from the replica of an Egyptian medallion. But the replica only has markings on one side. Indiana realizes at one point that the real medallion has markings on both sides that totally change the location they should look for the Well of Souls. He realizes the Nazis are digging in the wrong place, hundreds of yards from the true location.

The Nazis could have dug for hundreds of years in that location and it would have done them no good, because the ark wasn't there. When we look to success, power, money, acceptance, fame, approval or anything else for life, we are digging in the wrong place. You can dig there all your life, and in the end all you will have is an empty hole. Ask yourself, can the thing you are seeking so desperately connect you to the living God? Can it give you the hope of eternal life? Can it bring forgiveness, love and peace? If it can't then it cannot ever give you real, full life. It cannot make you alive! So keep looking to Jesus as the source of life, because he, and only he, can give you the things you need to be truly and fully alive.