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Rick Myatt

A HOLE FOR THAT MOUSE
Luke 24:52

In her book, *Cold Tangerines*, Shauna Niequist wrote, “I want my everyday life to make God...glad that he gave life to someone who loves the gift.” Don’t we all kind of want that? Don’t we all desire to be fully alive every day, to be marked by joy and gratitude in all that we do?

Blaise Pascal was a brilliant mathematician, physicist, philosopher and theologian who made significant contributions to the fields of fluid mechanics and probability theory. He wrote, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever means they employ, they all tend to this end...This is the motive of every action of every man.” He said people may do exactly opposite things but their goal is the same. It is to gain happiness. Every single thing you and I do is driven by the desire to be happy. This is why our nation’s forefathers wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all people have the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To be denied the right to pursue happiness is tantamount to denying the very essence of freedom and personhood.

But where does happiness come from? It turns out that the pursuit of happiness is a tricky business. Where during the 1980’s and 1990’s several hundred psychological and sociological studies on happiness would typically be published each year by 2014 10,000 studies on happiness are published each year. Sadly, it is not working out that well. In her book, *The Power of Meaning*, Emily Esfahani Smith reports that social scientists have discovered that pursuing happiness actually makes people unhappy. When we set out to make ourselves happy, we end up unhappy. We have a friend that once told Laurie her rationale behind the choices she was making, “I just want to be happy in life.” That was a number of years ago. The result of her pursuit has not been happiness. In fact, it has produced a great deal of unhappiness.

I submit to you today that what people really want is joy. Joy and happiness are not exactly the same, though they are closely related. Semantics comes into play here, for people sometimes use them to mean the same thing. Joy is a result. It is the result of some good thing occurring. Don’t you want to be filled with joy? We all do. That was Pascal’s point. But how can we have it? It turns out the events of Easter have a lot to do with joy.

JESUS' FOLLOWERS HAD GREAT JOY

Jesus hand picked a group of 12 men to be his disciples. That group was reduced by 1 after the traitor committed suicide. Those men gave up their previous lives and dedicated themselves to following Jesus and learning from him. They were totally committed to him and believed that he was the divine Messiah. They were certain that he was going to do something dramatic to take his rightful place as the King of Israel and conquer all enemies of their nation. He did something dramatic all right, he died on a Roman cross, executed by the method reserved for the most heinous of criminals. His followers were devastated. In the crucial moments when he was arrested they panicked and ran, terrified that the Romans were going to arrest and execute them alongside their leader.

But a couple of days later they heard rumors that the tomb where they put Jesus' dead body was now mysteriously empty. Some of the women who followed Jesus had been to the tomb and came back claiming they had seen an angel who told them Jesus was alive. Luke 24:11 says, "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense."

Those guys lived in a really sexist culture. Women were not even allowed to testify in court because, after all, who could believe anything a woman would say? I want to emphasize here that I am not endorsing that view, I'm just telling you that's what they thought. The implication of verse 11 is that the disciples thought these were the ranting words of hysterical women who could not be trusted. After all, their story was absurd. They'd seen Jesus die. They knew he was buried. You don't come back to life after you are dead. Luke tells us there were other encounters reported in which people claimed to actually see Jesus alive again. So in verse 36 we find that the disciples were together and were discussing these strange reports when, "Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" Verse 37 says, "They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost."

What would you think? If you saw a dead person suddenly show up apparently alive again into which category would you put that event? Seeing a ghost is about the most logical I could come up with too. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is discounted by many people as a legend or a tale swallowed by unsophisticated, superstitious first century people. The idea that it was a legend that grew up in the centuries following Jesus' life is simply untenable. I am astounded to occasionally encounter supposedly intelligent, educated people who espouse that idea. To maintain it one must either be completely ignorant of history or intellectually dishonest. We know for a fact that the claim that Jesus came alive again after being dead for a couple of days, was clearly and widely spread in Jerusalem in the weeks

immediately following his execution. Legends and myths require considerable time to grow. There was no time for a legend to arise.

The idea that gullible superstitious first century people hysterically leaped to the conclusion that Jesus had risen from the dead the moment they heard some rumor about his tomb being empty just does not fit with the facts. When his followers first saw Jesus it scared them and they thought they were seeing a ghost. That was the only conclusion they could reach because they knew as bedrock truth that people don't come back to life after dying. Their culture thought the idea of someone rising from the dead was ludicrous, just as ours does. But their eyes were telling them that's exactly what Jesus had done. They just had a hard time believing it. Jesus tried to help them see it was really him by showing them his hands and feet with the nail scars in them. But verse 41 says "they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement." They couldn't imagine such a thing happening. Jesus finally convinced them by eating some fish to prove he was quite real. Everybody knows ghosts can't eat.

Weeks later Jesus did leave them, but not by dying. Verse 51 says he was "taken up into heaven." Observe the reaction of Jesus' followers to the fact that Jesus is alive, never to die again. Verse 52 says, "they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy." Remember, joy comes from something good happening. In this instance, something unimaginably good had happened. Jesus, whom they loved and revered, had died, but then had conquered death. Now that's cause for joy. Only in this case it was "great joy." The Greek word for great is *mega*. So those early Christians had mega joy. I suspect had that happened today Luke would have said they had giga joy or tera joy, some amount even more massive than mega joy. It was a joy that filled their whole being and altered the whole nature and direction of their lives from that time forward. Could it be that the truth of the resurrection of Jesus and its implications is in fact, the source of the joy, the megajoy, we all long for? The New Testament says it is. Let's think about why they were so joyful.

THEY HAD JOY BECAUSE THE WORST THING BECAME THE BEST THING

Those men had invested themselves totally in Jesus. They followed him with all their hearts. They were absolutely certain that their greatest dream was about to come true because Jesus was going to make it happen. They were on the verge of a whole new world, and that whole new world included a new life for them in which they would suddenly be some of the most important and famous people in the entire world.

Then the whole thing blew up. The Jesus they were certain had divine power suddenly was totally powerless. He ran into the authoritarian powers of this world and was squished like a bug on a windshield. With him the dream died. There would be no new world. And rather than being world famous rulers they found themselves possibly considered to be outlaws worthy of the same treatment their leader had been given.

How could they have been so badly mistaken? They were absolutely sure Jesus was sent by God, but now it looked like he was cursed by God and they had been on the wrong side all along. They were thinking about the best strategies for dropping completely off the grid. They wanted to get completely out of sight and stay off the radar of anyone in authority.

On that incredible night when they first saw Jesus risen from the dead they experienced the greatest reversal, the most astounding comeback the world ever has or ever will know. In that astounding moment they knew that the dream was alive, that Jesus was actually even more than they thought he was, not less, and that there was nothing for them to fear.

An upset, impossible, come from behind victory brings more joy than an ordinary win. Jesus' followers experienced something infinitely greater, for they weren't merely losing a meaningless game, they were at the lowest point of their lives. Suddenly, the Jesus they so revered and now mourned stood among them, and their heads exploded. They were stunned and astounded, but also they were deluged with mega joy. To go from that low to that high in that short amount of time was a wild ride, made all the more joyful by its unexpectedness and its spectacular outcome.

That's nice, but how does that help us experience joy? In Philippians 3:10 Paul wrote about knowing "the power of the resurrection." The unimaginable power that enabled Jesus to defeat humanity's greatest enemy, death, is still at work today in the lives of followers of Jesus. The power of the resurrection is all about impossible come from behind victories. It's about vanquishing the seemingly unbeatable foe. No matter how deep the pit we are in, we can remember that the power of the resurrection means that it is not final. We are not alone. The risen Lord Jesus, alive today, is with us. He knows all about whatever difficulty we might face and he is not daunted by it. How does that difficulty compare with death? Not as strong, not as ominous. If he defeated death then he can defeat whatever it is we might face. This means even in the darkest times we can have

optimism, we can have joy, for the resurrected Jesus, the Lord before whom all will bow, is with us. He can turn any loss into a victory.

The past couple of months have been stressful for our family. Anna's pregnancy has been hanging in the balance with the very real possibility of things going very badly looming over her and Toby and Anna's next daughter, little Cara. But what is the worst that could happen? I don't even like to think about it, but we know that the worst has already been faced by Jesus and defeated. It makes all the difference in the world to face this situation knowing the power of the resurrection.

I've mentioned before my best friend my freshman year in college basically flunked out of school at the end of that year. He joined the Marines, and a year later he was the radioman for a rifle platoon in Vietnam. He survived that year, was honorably discharged, and my senior year he came back to school. He was a different guy when he returned. He was quite a bit more serious and much more confident. He didn't sweat much. He just didn't let things bother him. Whenever we talked about some way he might get in trouble he would say, "What are they going to do? Shave my head and send me to Nam?" He kind of had the power of his own resurrection in a way, and that gave him a lot more peace in life. When we know Jesus, we can know the power of his resurrection, the greatest come from behind upset victory in history, and we can face our troubles with peace, because he is at work in our lives.

THEY HAD JOY BECAUSE THEY WERE WITH GOD

Jesus' followers knew he was no ordinary man. They knew that he had some connection to divine power, for they had seen him exercise that power even over the forces of nature. They had watched him miraculously heal hundreds of people with all manner of conditions. They knew he was the Christ, the Messiah. He was God's chosen one to rescue his people.

However, they did not perceive the true nature of this special person. They did not comprehend that this was not merely some special man God was using in a previously unheard of way. After the resurrection they realized this person whom they were best friends with, was, in fact, God himself in the form of a man. They had walked with, talked with, eaten with the Creator of all. Thomas, one of the 11, missed it the first time Jesus met with his guys after his resurrection. When he heard the story he thought his buddies had lost their minds. He thought this was absurd. Then Jesus confronted him. According to John 20:28 when Thomas saw him risen from the dead he said, "My Lord and my God." He now understood this man he was with was Almighty God. He and the others had been palling around

for the last couple of years with God! And they had been specially chosen by God Himself!

These were good Jewish men who were deeply sincere in their faith. But they were also common people who simply could not keep all the ancient laws as scrupulously as the religious leaders. They wanted God to accept them in his kingdom, and they thought he might, but the jury was still out on that one. They knew that because they knew most of the religious leaders regarded them with considerable disdain. Now they realized they were wanted, accepted, loved, chosen personally by Almighty God!

The followers of Jesus had believed he was the long promised Messiah and thought he was going to be their king. He was going to make Israel great again. He would defeat the Romans, Israel would become the preeminent superpower in the world, it would become incredibly wealthy and they would be part of the ruling administration! They thought that was the best thing that could ever happen. And they were wrong. What if Jesus had done that? Their life on this planet would have gotten better, to be sure. But they still wouldn't know if God really accepted them. They wouldn't know him in a personal way. They wouldn't have certain proof that he even existed. He would still be kind of distant. And they would still face death some day not too far down the road with no answer for it. In other words, the deepest problems of humanity would still be with them.

Jesus shocked them by doing something far greater than they had ever even considered. He had solved their deepest problems. He connected them to himself, to God, he brought them forgiveness and acceptance, he assured them he would always be with them.

We get joy from something good happening. Joy comes in different sized packages. Not all joys are the same. Some things are bigger and more important than others and as a result they cause us more joy. Michael and Carissa moved here after a 3 plus year long exile in Mississippi. What joy it is to have them actually live here again. Laurie and I have had so much joy from being near Anna, Toby and Ella, and now that joy is being multiplied by the presence of Michael and Carissa. And I will continue to get joy from getting to be with them much more frequently. Something really good has happened to me. We got joy when we learned this week that Michael will be based out of LA rather than have to travel to Atlanta or New York every time he flies for Delta.

There is another joy I have experienced and continue to experience that is even bigger than having Michael and Carissa move back home. And that is being loved by my wife, Laurie. Maybe that is so joyful for me because our relationship was kind of improbable from the very start. And it hung in the balance, could have gone either way, right up to the moment Laurie agreed to marry me. I get to go through my days loved by her, and that blessing is so incredible that it is greater than the disappointments life brings. Being loved by her these past 13,750 days has brought joy that cannot be extinguished by the obstacles and hardships of life.

There is an even greater bump of joy that we can have. That is the joy that the followers of Jesus got when they realized they were friends with the God who created all things. David understood that when he wrote to God in Psalm 16:11 “you will fill me with joy in your presence.”

The reason that people are desperately seeking happiness, yet still unhappy, is that the heart of joy is being connected to God. In his book, *Everybody's Normal 'Til You Get To Know Them*, John Ortberg related something that happened when he and his wife moved their family from California to Chicago. One of his daughters, who had seemed okay about moving, after the fact began to be less cheerful, more sullen and began getting in trouble more than she had. One night as he was talking to her she opened up. In her new school she just didn't connect. She said, "I don't belong. I don't have anybody I can talk to. I don't have people who want to have lunch with me. She said, "I feel like a little mouse that doesn't have a hole." She experienced a sadness that nothing could touch because she was lonely. She knew she was made to be connected to people and there was no substitute for that. There will never be lasting joy in a life until a person knows who God is, knows that God loves and forgives him or her, and that God is a reality in his or her every day life. Without being connected to God every human will be like a little mouse that doesn't have a hole. You and I were created to live loved by and connected to God. Until we are connected to him we will feel that down at our core something is wrong. We will spin our wheels, sometimes furiously, trying to fix that thing that is wrong. But nothing we try will ever work.

I just went through several years of battle with what I thought was tennis elbow. I read all kinds of articles on it and tried everything suggested to try to get over the problem. Rest, ice, heat, anti-inflammatories, stretching, strengthening, cortisone shots, I tried all of it, and nothing fixed the problem. The shots would give temporary relief, but soon the pain would be back. There was one thing left I could try, but I wanted no part of it. That was surgery. Finally I had the surgery. I found out that none of the things I tried was ever going to fix the problem because they

were based on wrong diagnoses. I didn't have stubborn inflammation in the elbow. The surgeon told me I had a torn tendon in my arm. He said the tendon was a mess, it was shredded. None of the remedies I tried were ever going to fix the pain because none of them actually addressed the real problem. And that's what happens to us when we are not connected to God. People so often try everything to fix that ache in their soul, and end up frustrated and confused about why nothing works. It's because they are treating the wrong problem. But with God loving us unconditionally, with him present in every aspect of our lives, we can have enormous joy if we will just count on him and look to him. That is a joy that is eternal. Nothing can ever take it away from us.

THEY HAD JOY BECAUSE THEY HAD HOPE

Remember that had Jesus merely been a conquering king he would have given his followers no answer for death. But he gave them an answer for death. This was not some speculative idea or some pie in the sky wishful thinking. He gave them tangible proof that they could see and touch, that he had defeated death and would do the same for his followers. We can know that we will have life after death, eternal life, real, physical and spiritual life forever that is immeasurably better than what we now have, because Jesus has proven it and guaranteed it.

Peter wrote a letter to some followers of Jesus that we call 1 Peter, and in that letter he wrote about the effect of having an answer for death to some followers of Christ that had not physically known Jesus, kind of like us. In 1:8-9 he said, "Though you have not seen him (Jesus), you love him; and even though you do not see him now you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." Peter knew they had boundless joy because of this hope, because he experienced it. This hope in the face of death means a joy that is "inexpressible." It is so big and so powerful it cannot be explained by human language.

Recently I reflected on the fact that my dad, who was a terrific dad, died 20 years ago. I wish he could have known his great grandchildren, Addison, J. J. and Ella, and soon Cara. He would have been so happy to see his grandchildren, Michelle, Carissa and Toby, graduate from high school and college, and get married. He would have loved Anna and her sense of humor and he would have so admired and been proud of Michael. But death took those wonderful things from him. It saddens me that he didn't get to see any of that. But I realize that I am not going to see any of that in the lives of my grandchildren, unless I live to be ridiculously old, as in getting close to triple digits. It's possible I guess, but that's not where the smart money is betting. Death will likely rob me too of that joy. Death really sucks.

If death is really the end then our lives are all scary and tragic. They all end sadly. And without Jesus, that is the reality. But Jesus makes all the difference. He did rise from the dead, and so we have hope. Hope changes everything. Without hope there is no joy. But when we have hope we can be filled with joy in all things.

CONCLUSION

If you are not a believer in Jesus:

PUT YOUR FAITH IN JESUS

If you haven't decided to trust Jesus and to ask him to be Lord of you, then I guarantee you that you are looking for happiness, but you are not there yet. You may like a lot of things in your life, but you sense there is something more that you need to be truly joyful. You sense that there is something missing, something wrong somewhere, that in quiet moments unsettles your soul. Somehow, though you have happy moments, nothing is ever quite what you hoped it would be, and it never lasts. The only way to begin experiencing true joy is to believe in Jesus as the Lord of all, to trust that in him you can be forgiven and loved by God, and to count on him to fulfill his promise to give you eternal life through his resurrection.

But how can I believe this? A man rising from the dead? God actually living here in the form of a man? Yes, those are indeed some head exploding ideas. But here's the thing: If you investigate the evidence you will learn that the resurrection of Jesus is one of the best attested facts of history. It is ` ~better attested than the fact that Aristotle or Plato ever existed. Put your faith in the facts of history, the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.

If you are a believer in Jesus:

PUT YOUR FAITH IN JESUS

Know that you can be joyful in him. Know that whatever may happen to you, Jesus, the one who accomplished the greatest comeback in history, is with you. Count on that fact that no matter how dark it may feel, it's not bigger than death, and he beat that.

Most of you know that earlier this year Laurie and I went through a frustrating experience of trying to buy a clothes dryer. The store we tried to buy it from kept telling us they would deliver it to us then repeatedly failed to do so. In the end they never did get us a dryer. We just got our money back from them and gave up. Recently the refrigerator joined the appliance rebellion at our house and quit working. We had to get a new one. With some trepidation we once again ventured forth to fight the appliance wars. We bought a refrigerator at a different store, and

they informed us it would be delivered 2 days later. The night before the delivery they called to confirm the delivery time. And the next day, they never showed up! I learned that the stores that sell appliances have united in an effort to persecute us. They've determined that those Myatts will never get another appliance. Their goal, apparently, is to send us back to the 19th century. I just hope SDG&E doesn't find out about it or soon we won't have electricity either. So if we sidle up to you one day and surreptitiously whisper, "Hey, how about if I pay you to go buy me a stove," you'll understand that we are trying to skirt around the blockade. I called the store and after several abortive attempts to get some answers I finally reached a woman who seemed willing to listen to my woes. I explained the situation to her and she looked up our transaction. Then she floored me when she said, "Huh. This is odd. We don't even have that refrigerator." They tried to sell us a fridge they don't have. I was too stunned to even respond. Before I could say anything she said, "I am going to find you one of those at another store. It will take a little time so I'll have to call you back," and she hung up. I was not happy. But I quietly prayed and told God I know he is with us and that he is way bigger than an appliance boycott. So I asked him to help us get a fridge, because we were tired of buying ice for an ice chest. More important I asked him to enable me to be kind and patient with that woman if she ever called back and with whoever I had to deal with at the store if she didn't. I fully expected I would never hear from her again. But I could relax, and hopefully keep my cool in dealing with those people because God is with me. God answered my prayer. I did maintain my calm, she called back, and she actually broke the blockade and got us a refrigerator.

Rejoice in living in God's presence. He loves you. Knowing him is the greatest thing that could ever happen to you. You are his child. Never lose the wonder of that. Experience the joy of being in his presence every day and every moment of your life.

Remember that you have hope that nothing can take away from you. You will live forever with him in a kingdom that is immensely better than anything you have ever imagined. This is not a superstitious wish, it is a solid fact established by Jesus walking out of his tomb after being dead.