

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

Seizing the Promise of Easter | Lazarus Life Series (Pt 8)

Text: Luke 24:36-49

A Seat on the Immortality Bus

Among the many contenders for President in the election of 2016, was a dark horse candidate by the name of Zoltan Istyan. Sort of sounds like a Marvel comics character, doesn't he? You can almost picture him with a lightning bolt insignia across his chest. Zoltan was the nominee of the Transhumanist Party -- a movement whose main purpose is to help human beings, and I quote, "*to become god-like and overcome death.*" To draw attention to his cause, Zoltan spent months driving around the country in a giant coffin-shaped RV dubbed, "The Immortality Bus." I kid you not. The Transhumanists believe that by leveraging the power of science and technology, we can overcome death in our lifetime.¹

Before we too quickly write off a guy like Zoltan as a crack-pot, let's remember that no less a respected powerhouse than GOOGLE is after the same outcome. For the past five years, Google has been investing significant sums in the *California Life Company (CALICO* for short). CALICO's goal is to stop the aging process and grant human beings indefinite longevity.² Just picture the possibilities. You'd have centuries to get your golf game right, to catch up on all those episodes you've been missing, and to save up for that very romantic 650th wedding anniversary trip!

It needs to be said, however, that not everyone believes that just sustaining these bodies of ours ought to be our goal. Max Tegmark, an MIT professor, contends that we ought to be pursuing what he calls "Life 3.0." In his recent book of the same name, Tegmark defines Life 1.0 as the stage where biological life originates and develops. Life 2.0 is that period where human beings develop culture and modern technology. But everything has been moving toward the arrival of Life 3.0 -- the merging of the human body with artificial intelligence, creating the potential for almost unimaginable power. Tegmark writes: "By merging man and machine, humanity can become "*master of its own destiny, finally fully free from its evolutionary shackles.*" (Dr. Max Tegmark)³

It's fascinating, isn't it, how – after all these years – human beings are still on the same quest – to be masters of the universe and freed from the shackles of death. The oldest story in the world, in fact, is about a SNAKE who tells a pair of naked people, just do this... just invest with me... and **"You shall be as God... You shall not die."** (**Gen 3:4-5**) Wealthy Egyptians had themselves mummified in pursuit of this goal. Spanish kings spent fortunes trying to find the fountain of youth. Rich young rulers in every generation have asked the question: **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** (**Luke 18:18**) In other words, how can I buy a seat on the Immortality Bus?

A Better Hope

When I was seventeen, I attended a fundraiser at the estate of Charles Revson, chief of the Revlon Cosmetics empire. Revson is famous for saying, "*In our factory, we make lipstick. In our advertising, we sell hope.*"⁴ As I strolled around his magnificent estate, it was clear that while this strategy was working for Mr. Revson, it was falling short for others. One of the guests at the garden party was a striking redhead by the name of Tina Louise. Some of you will remember her as Ginger, from the long-running sitcom, *Gilligan's Island*. Ms. Louise was only in her early forties at the time, but it was clear already that time was doing its cruel work on her. No amount of makeup or plastic surgery could reverse the inevitable changes going on. Ms. Louise struck me as a nice, but somewhat sad person. She needed a better HOPE. We all do – a hope better than Zoltran and Google and Tegmark and Revlon are all selling.

On Easter morning, a group of grieving women went to a garden tomb to pay their respects to their spiritual teacher. They'd put a lot of hope in him -- that he might even be the long-awaited Messiah. But then they watched him suffer cruelly at the hands of sin and death, and go the way of all flesh. To their astonishment, however, when they arrived at the tomb, the guards who'd been posted there were gone. The stone that had sealed the grave had been rolled away. The grave clothes in which their dead Master had been buried were lying there like a chrysalis abandoned by a butterfly. And, then, the darkness of that early morning was pierced by an even greater light. Mary Magdalene heard a voice speaking. She turned and found Jesus standing there, very much alive. And, at his instruction, Mary ran to tell the other disciples.

Luke's Gospel tells us that later that day: **While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." The disciples were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."** When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet... Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, **"This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:36-48)**

The light of that Easter encounter – and the many more they experienced during the six weeks Jesus remained with them afterward – transformed those men and women. Before Easter, the disciples thought Jesus might have the authority to forgive their sins; after Easter, they were absolutely sure of it -- and the light of that grace not only filled them with newfound peace and freedom; it made them the most gracious and generous community the ancient world had yet seen. Before Easter, the disciples were somewhat inclined to put some of the teachings of Jesus into practice; after Easter,

they dedicated themselves to living in light of all that he had commanded, convinced that Jesus had the power to bring flourishing to the human race. Before Easter, that original band of disciples dreamt that there may possibly be a life beyond the grave; after Easter, they became so certain of their eternal future that they were willing to be tortured to death, rather than deny that Jesus was Lord.

Within three centuries, the light of hope that filled the hearts of those first followers would spread out and transform the darkness of the Roman Empire like the sun coming up, like a blessed revolution. The number of people dedicated to living in Christ's light would grow from 3000 in AD 60 to 33 million by AD 350. Never perfect, the expanding Christian movement would, nonetheless, establish a vision for the dignity of all persons, extend works of unprecedented compassion, make legal and political systems more just, advance the welfare of women and children, encourage the growth of scientific and medical inquiry, lay the groundwork for democracy and free markets, and offer an eternal assurance even to the dying.⁵ This is the movement of which some of us are already and all of us are invited to play a part. This is the light in which you and I are welcomed to live – even if, sometimes, we struggle to receive it.

Enter the Kingdom of Light

Author Skye Jethani describes a trip he took with his father to the streets of New Delhi, India. A largely naked, skinny little boy with disfigured legs, approached them, waddling on calloused knees. *"One rupee, please!"* he cried. *"One rupee!"* He said this while motioning his hand to his mouth and bowing his head. *"How about I give you five rupees?"* my father said. The boy's submissive countenance suddenly turned to defiance, as he retracted his hand and sneered at us. He assumed my father was having a laugh at his expense. No one would offer a beggar such a sum. Mumbling curses under his breath, the boy began to shuffle away, and my father reached into his pocket, as coins began to jingle. The boy turned to see my dad holding out a five-rupee coin. He approached the stunned child and placed the gift into his hand. The boy didn't move or speak. He just stared at the coin in his hand. "We passed him and proceeded to cross the street. A moment later the shouting resumed, except this time the boy was yelling, *'Thank you! Thank you, sir! Bless you!'* He raced after us once again—but not for more money but [simply] to touch my father's feet."⁶

I wonder sometimes, if this isn't how God sees us. He knows that we're all in need of help. We all long for a seat on the Immortality Bus. We'd all like an upgrade to Life 3.0, if there really is one. Every one of us is looking for some kind of cosmetic to cover our blemishes. But we often settle for solutions that are simply too little. After all, what good would it be to live 650 years, if we're stuck with this character and the character of the people around us? What real hope is it to have our lives merged with all the technological and scientific capacity in the world, when what we long most for is not knowledge or control but authentic love? Why settle for cosmetics that make us look better for a little while, when Jesus offers us GRACE – a power for forgiveness,

flourishing, and forever living – that changes our fundamental condition? “**I am going to send you what my Father has promised,**” said Jesus to his disciples that Easter day. “[You will receive] power from on high.” (**Luke 24:49**)

You know the funny thing about gifts? For them to take effect, you have to receive them. Dallas Willard illustrates this by telling the story of growing up in a part of rural Missouri where the only POWER available came in the form of lightning. *In my senior year of high school the Rural Electrification Administration extended its lines into the area where we lived... When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life – daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and serving it–could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements... The power that could make their lives far better was right there near them where, by making relatively simple arrangements, they could utilize it. Strangely, a few did not accept it. They did not 'enter the kingdom of electricity.' Some just didn't want to change. Others could not afford it, or so they thought.”⁷*

It’s like that with the Kingdom of Light that Jesus invites us into. Jesus wants to give us the forgiveness, flourishing, and forever kind of life we seek. To enter into it, we simply need to turn away from (repent of) the false securities and thin solutions we’ve been relying on. We need to arrange our lives in such a way that we are connecting daily to God’s power. One of God’s powerlines runs right through this place and a lot of other great churches out there. So, arrange your life to receive the power Christ was born, died, and resurrected to show us he has. If ever there was a time since the first century when the world needed people who live in his Light, now is that time.

We get a glimpse of this truth in the eight episode of the Star Wars saga, and with this I’ll close. Kylo Ren, son of Han Solo & Princess Leia, has gradually had his life taken over by the Dark Side of the Force. Returning from a mission, Ren believes he has crushed, once and for all, the rebellion that opposes the work of his master, the dark Sith Lord, Snoke -- spelled much like “Snake.” Donned in a black robe and helmet like his grandfather, Darth Vader, Ren exults in his victory over the rebels. But Snoke knows better and chastises him: *“You're just a child in a mask.”* Kylo Ren explodes: *“I gave everything I had to you; to the Darkside.”* And Snoke reveals the decisive fact: *“Skywalker lives. The seed of the Jedi lives. As long as HE does, hope exists.”*

That’s true in a much larger sense. The one Luke points us to – the one who rose from the grave and walks the skies -- He lives. And because Jesus lives, real hope for you and me and this planet, also lives – to challenge the darkness and bring forth the Kingdom of Light. I don’t know about you, but that makes me want to get off every other kind of bus I’ve been on and join HIS revolution. And the thought that Christ’s revolution is going to win out in the end, makes me want to sing, *Hallelujah.*

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/09/magazine/600-miles-in-a-coffin-shaped-bus-campaigning-against-death-itself.html>

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/31/google-co-founders-and-silicon-valley-billionaires-try-to-live-forever.html>

³ Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017)

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/blogs/schumpeter/2012/06/z-business-quotations>

⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (HarperCollins, 1997) and *The Victory of Reason* (Random House, 2005)

⁶ Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Zondervan, 2009), pp. 113-114

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998)