

“Living the Good Life”

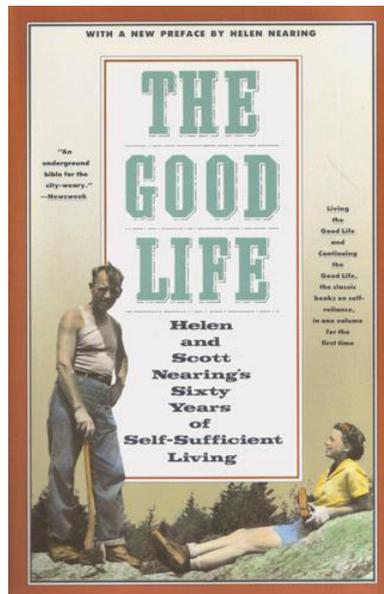
Jeremiah 31:10-14 & Matthew 28:1-10
Easter, April 20, 2014 ~ Rev. James Ramsey

Hear the word of the LORD, says the prophet, and declare it in the coastlands far away!
The word of the LORD for this day: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Throughout these weeks leading up to Easter we have been thinking about the Good Life. We have a different idea than most of our culture about what it means to be living the Good Life.

Many people imagine the good life as unattainable unless you are a Hollywood starlet or professional athlete. They think the good life involves outward trappings like new cars and palatial mansions and bulging bank accounts. These definitions are all illusions.

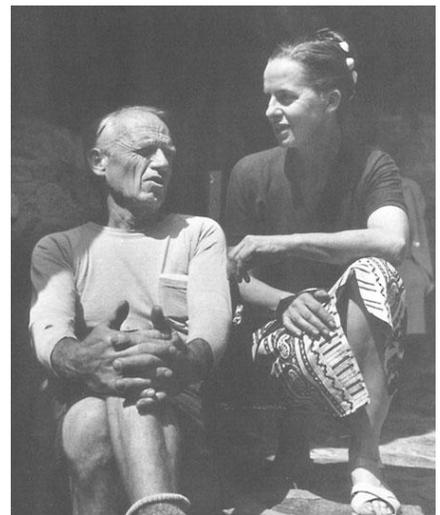
I was inspired years ago by a very different definition of the Good Life. Helen and Scott Nearing authored a book titled “The Good Life,” describing their intention and adventure to live a simple, satisfying life on the land. They



devoted themselves to what they called “mutual aid and harmlessness,” along with an ample margin of leisure in which to do personally constructive and creative work. They abandoned their urban lifestyle as teachers in New York City during the height of the Great Depression, 1932. They moved to Vermont, adopting a rural and manual way of life.

The Nearings inspired me with their earthy philosophy. Their good life was based on self-reliance, good health, genuine relationships and a commitment to better the earth and humanity. Plus, they were pioneers of the slipform stone masonry

movement, a method of building stone walls and structures in which any person of limited skills and experience could build a permanent and beautiful house of stone.





Rather than doing freehand stonework with a trowel and level, stones were placed with a good face against boxed formwork, and the space behind them was filled with concrete, making a beautiful hybrid wall of stone and concrete. Buildings constructed with this method are structurally sound and long-lasting, while requiring little maintenance.

I am captivated with this kind of stone work, and dream of dabbling in it. Working with your hands, being close to the earth, mutual aid and harmlessness, as the Nearings put it – that is surely part of living the Good Life for me, yet even this lifestyle would be empty without Christ.



We know you cannot approach the Good Life unless you have Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as your foundation. Only when you live out of a relationship with Jesus – always seeking that spiritual connection and bond, continually fed and nurtured by the loving/healing presence of Christ will you find life good, whether in the country...or in an urban setting.

Living the Good Life begins with Easter confidence: Christ is risen. He is not dead and neither are we. Yet good does not mean easy.



We walk with Christ...and he with us...through all the joys and accomplishments, as well as the difficulties and conundrums of life.

Just in these last few months of Lent, everything has not gone so well...not with us and not with the world. A teenager stabbed his fellow students, not 30 minutes from here. There was a terrible bus crash in California. A ferry sunk in the Far East, killing hundreds. Closer to home, friends have lost parents. Neighbors have had surgery. Tests have come back with discouraging results. If we're living the good life...it doesn't seem so. How will we find God again? That question is part of our story.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary must have felt scattered, like sheep bereft of their shepherd. They came with despair, no song in their hearts. The pall that hung over them must have had them questioning the goodness of the Lord. Their spirits were dry, even though their faces showed streaks from the wetness of many tears. They languished in their grief as they ventured to Jesus' tomb, early in the morning, just as the sun was coming up.

What do you expect when you go to a cemetery...when you approach a mausoleum? You expect it to be quiet, even peaceful. If you see someone, you don't expect to talk to them. You expect to be left alone to reflect, with no interruptions.



So much for that notion! As soon as the women arrive, they experience a violent earthquake. The second earthquake in three days, for as the Mary's had watched Jesus' life ebbing away on the cross...they had felt the ground rumble, too. Just as they had heard his final gasp, saw him draw his final breath – At precisely that same moment the earth had been shaken and the rocks splintered.



It was happening all over again – the shaking and the quaking – but this time, in the midst of the rumble, they saw an angel of the Lord, coming down out of heaven. He landed by the great stone covering the entrance to the tomb, and before their very eyes rolled it away and sat on it. Imagine the sight, the angel effortlessly moving the stone aside. Did he have to heave with all his might? I suspect not. I see him pushing it with one hand, maybe just his pinky finger...and then sitting upon it, as if ridiculing

the futile efforts of Jesus' enemies. They had strived so strenuously to keep Jesus' body locked up and squared away!

The stunning appearance of the angel sounds like some wild description from the Prophet Daniel – there was lightning that reflected off his brilliantly white apparel.

Yet the women were not alone with the angel. In the background were guards, armed soldiers – placed by the religious authorities. Already shaken by the earthquake – the security detail shook more at the sight of God's holy messenger, shook so much that they passed out!





Before the women also fainted – the angel quickly assured them – “No need to be afraid. You came to see Jesus, whom you saw crucified. You won’t find him here – for just as he said would happen – he has been raised. Look for yourself – then hurry to share the good news with his disciples, telling them that they will see him in Galilee.”

They ran from that place, their feelings a jumble of joy and fear. So intent on sharing the news, They nearly bowled over the risen Christ who met them on the path. At his greeting they fell to their knees, embracing his feet in worship. Jesus reiterated the angel’s message. No need to be afraid. Go share with my brothers that we will see each other in Galilee.

Living the Good Life has everything to do with how we share the good news of Christ’s resurrection. Think of a person who inspires you this Easter...a person who is living the Good Life – who knows the risen Christ and walks in his presence -- someone who wears their faith comfortably and humbly. I’m thinking of an old, dear friend, Henley Bernard.

I saw Henley five years ago when we met on Study Leave at Montreat Conference Center in the mountains of North Carolina. It was a surprise rendezvous. Neither of us knew the other would be there. I live in Pittsburgh. Henley is a pastor in Jamaica. We became close friends in seminary in the late 1980s. I was studying to be a minister. Henley was already ordained in Jamaica and pastoring a church – but had taken a year off and away from his family for further study. One thing that got us through our studies was frequent intense games of ping pong. We found a table at Montreat and played a game for old time’s sake.



I got the chance to visit Henley years ago, not long before I finished seminary. I was on a mission/study trip and stayed overnight with Henley and his family. It was just before Easter that year. I dined with the Bernard family and then got to worship at Henley’s church.

A funny thing happened that day in church. In the middle of the service, Henley asked me to come up and lead the Children’s Chat. I was caught off guard. I had nothing planned. What would I say?

I headed up and sat down. But when I invited the children to come forward, none came. Not one. Again, I encouraged them to join me. Again, no response. Finally, I invited the children to gather around me, to make themselves comfortable, to sit on the big wooden chancel chairs. Suddenly, the kids came out of the woodwork! They draped themselves all over me, the chancel and the chairs. They were animated and excited. I remember giving an inspiring Children's Chat about frogs.

The children never forgot my Children's Chat, but it wasn't because of my message. It was those chairs, the precious, ancient heirlooms of the church. No one in a hundred years had sat in them. They were strictly off-limits to the children. They were not to be touched. In fact, Henley's still hearing about his American friend who let the kids climb all over the chairs! I guess I got Henley back for his spur-of-the-moment Children's Chat request!

Henley and I have laughed about that day many times. Actually, we have a good laugh about a lot of things. Henley lives with joy. When I spend time with him I know I'm in the presence of one of Christ's disciples.

I hope you have people like Henley in your life, people who are living the Good Life.

If you are living the Good Life, you surely do have people who exude the love of God – you can see it in their actions and hear it in their words. They have a way about them. They have seen the risen Christ.

Jesus says in the 10th chapter of John: I am the gate for the sheep...

Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.



That's the Good Life...

The Abundant life that Christ talks about...

It's life with others who have seen and know and believe that Christ is risen...

He is risen indeed!