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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www.newlifethica.org. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

A reading from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 51 through 57. Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

01:14

When the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the word of the Lord.

01:43

The gospel this morning comes from the gospel of Luke chapter 24 verses 1 through 12. Please stand if you are able.

02:03

But on the first day of the week at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared, and they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, Why do you seek the living among the dead?

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He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise. And they remembered his words. And returning from the tomb, they told these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James.

03:01

and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb, stooping and looking in, saw the linen cloths by themselves, and he went home marveling at what had happened. The Gospel of the Lord.

03:27

Religion is back.

03:31

I've talked to you about this a lot recently, some of the studies that have been done, sociological studies, scientifically rigorous studies that have shown that the decline in an American religion is over. Just last week there was a study released from the UK also, and it found that people were returning to church in the UK, that church attendance has had a spike in recent years in the United Kingdom.

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But here at home, we've seen recently, as I reported to you, that the decline in church attendance that has occurred over the past 20, 30 years has stopped. And over the past five years, really since the pandemic, church attendance has been holding steady. And there's even been a slight uptick, about 40 % of people that attending church. It's not falling any further. A recent study, Pew does a lot of studies about American religion. You can look those up. They're very interesting to look at.

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The recent study by Pew has found that 92 % of Americans would say they believe in God or a higher power. That's a high percentage. Here's another telling statistic. 82 % of Americans would say they believe in an afterlife. One demographer, a pastor named Ryan, former pastor named Ryan Burge, who's also a professor of sociology, said, if you want to look for any statistic that shows that America is a religious nation, that's the one. 82 % believe in an afterlife.

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Now I've reported some of these statistics and studies to you, but I read an article yesterday that was not a scientific study, but actually an analysis of these numbers and an anecdotal report, an opinion piece. The person that wrote this was formerly a Mormon. Mormonism is a sectarian offshoot of Christianity, but has a lot of the same values, cultural values of Christianity, lot of similarities. This person was talking about how she had left religion and

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Many others of her cohort have left religion. the article, but the title of her article was Americans Haven't Found a Satisfying Alternative to Religion. Americans Haven't Found a Satisfying Alternative to Religion. And what she talked about is there's a large group of people, and I've talked about them before, maybe you've heard of them, called the nones, those who would check no religion or none on a survey if they're asked what their faith is.

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Over the past 20 or 30 years, a large amount of Christians had left Christianity and would classify themselves in this way. these folks, although they had left Christianity and organized religion, they still had a need for religious experience. And they tried a lot of stuff. And this article, this woman, she talks about the things that she tried. She says she paid for workout classes on Sunday mornings, practiced mindfulness, went to therapy.

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visited saunas, subscribed to meditation apps, tried book clubs and running clubs.

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So the nuns tried lots of things to satisfy their craving for community and craving for the other. One study found that attempts to satisfy this hole in their life were attending yoga, CrossFit. CrossFit, if you know about CrossFit, it's pretty religious, know. Soul cycle, supper clubs, meditation. It Oprah tried sound baths.

06:56

Gwyneth Paltrow advertised energy healing. than a third of women under 30 have downloaded personal astrology app CoStar, according to the company. There's been a lot of attempts to find something esoteric in our lives. 18th century French philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal once said that we all have a God-shaped vacuum in our hearts. A God-shaped vacuum in our hearts.

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It's appropriate that Pascal will talk about vacuums because there's a unit of pressure named after him, the Pascal, for those of you who know. But what does that posit? That posits that all of us have a need. And what was interesting about this article is it talked about how folks are looking for an answer, but they haven't found it. That same religious demographer, Ryan Byrd, said that he recently reported on a study. And by the way, if you're interested in these kind of things,

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Ryan Burge has a sub stack that's B-U-R-G-E and it's called graphs of religion. It is fascinating. If you're interested in that, I recommend it to you. But there was recently a study done on those who had left Christianity in the past 20, 30 years and two thirds of them found that their time without Christianity had not been satisfying. It has not gone well.

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Now, it is not surprising to me that people would find religion beneficial. It's actually scientifically demonstrable that religion is beneficial for people. Studies have shown that

people that attend religious services are healthier, unaggregate, they have better relationships. One study found that

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Religiously affiliated Americans are more likely to feel gratitude, spiritual peace, a deep sense of connection with humanity. One long-term study done by Harvard doctors found that women who attended religious services at least once a week were 33 % less likely to have a premature death than women who never attended church. We know that there are benefits to singing. are singing in a crowd that is psychologically helpful. There's all sorts of demonstrable benefits of being a part of religion.

09:18

One of the things that this author pointed out was that they're they're what she sociologists called the three B's belief Belonging and behaviors people need to believe in something beyond themselves and they haven't need to belong to something That's what the supper clubs in the crossfit are all about and they have a need for moral formation We need someone to help us something to help us tell us what to do so we can avoid our basis instincts And why do people need this? because in the face of

09:47

atheism, you know, strict atheism, there's nothing left but cold hard biology. You know, we always have the workings of chemistry and physics and biology and there's no sense of why we're here. We can talk about the what, but we can't talk about the why.

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And indeed, um.

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We need also moral formation, as I said, behaviors. One of the things that is not without a moral compass, without some sort of moral grounding, there is no reason to protect the vulnerable, at that I can see. And philosophers have discussed this. Protecting the

vulnerable does not make biological sense. In fact, many animal species slaughter their vulnerable.

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So I would argue that yeah, there's a lot of benefits for religion. One famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, recently called himself a cultural Christian and said he loves to go to church, he loves to in the beautiful cathedrals, he loves to sing the songs, participate in the liturgy, and participate in the fellowship. But what about all this struck me? It's yeah, there's lots of benefits for participating in church and coming back to church. Some of the more famous recent converts from atheism to Christianity cited

11:06

that it was a very helpful thing to be a part of and that Christianity was the best thing to form a society, to form a culture. But what those, all those accounts that I've read and we've seen over the past few months that sound like this, that look like this, what I haven't really seen is anybody talk about how the reason why they came to Christianity was because of faith in Christ and love for God. Yes, there are benefits, but there's also something deeper. There's something far deeper.

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There's something far deeper. And the essence of this approach is that not only do we need the benefits of spirituality, we also have this deep, deep need, this need that Pascal alluded to. This article that I've been referring to has a stirring, at least I thought it was a stirring ending, almost in the second to last paragraph. You can almost make this her conclusion. But she has this very short sentence, and she said, I want a God.

12:06

She wrote the morning newsletter this morning in the New York Times as a newsletter every morning. And she wrote the newsletter this morning and her title was Americans Need God. This profession, I take it as a cry, I want God is almost like, yes, I need there to be a God. I need there to be such a thing. I need there to be an entity that is powerful and is in

control and gives me a source of meaning and purpose in this world and gives me moral formation. And I think a lot of people feel that way.

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There's not just the benefits of being a part of religion, there's also something very deep that we need. And I would argue as we read in the text today and as we see in this Easter Sunday, one of the biggest problems that isn't solved by religious practice, it isn't solved by singing necessarily, it isn't solved by having potlucks like we're going to do after church, is the problem of death. And I think the problem of death is really the big

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existential crisis that we all have to deal with.

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French existential philosopher Albert Camus wrote in the myth of Sisyphus, he argued that the finality of death made life absurd. And to deny this fact by either losing yourself in pleasure or achievement is wrong. There's no way to escape it. We're all going to die. And for Camus and other existential philosophers, this is a big problem. And it looms largely over our psyche.

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Now many of us do try to cheat death or escape death. would say escape death through pleasure and cheat death by achievement. And maybe in today, in this town, where we live in Ithaca, maybe that is what we're pursuing. We can achieve, we can cheat death. A lot of folks, including my own, we seek to achieve, we seek to earn our way past the effects of death. But Camus says this is pointless because we can't cheat death.

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We might be able to put off its effects. We might be able to engage in pleasure that helps us to forget about it for a time. But we'll never be able to move past it. Tim Keller in his book on death, Pastor Tim Keller, in his book on death gives this illustration. He says, imagine if

someone has broken into your house, tied you up, and announced that he is going to kill you.

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Now imagine that you have absolutely no hope for rescue. Basically, this is going to be your fate. You're going to die very soon. But then what if the intruder said, I'm not heartless. Tell me something you enjoy doing that gives you a lot of happiness. And your reply is, I love to play chess. So he says, well, let's play a game of chess before I kill you. Won't that make your final moments pleasant? Keller writes, the only truthful answer would be that your impending death would drain all that satisfaction out of the game, because death

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takes away the significance of joy and things.

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The text today gets at this very acutely. There are lot of benefits to religion, there are lot of benefits to relationships, but as the angels say, you cannot seek the living among the dead.

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You cannot seek the living among the dead. My preaching professor in seminary used to drill into us day after day in our preaching class. What does this text say? This was the refrain. What does this text say? And what he was trying to get us to do was not to just preach whatever we want, but preach what's in the text. And as I was wrestling about what to preach today, another Easter sermon, another sermon about Jesus' resurrection, and I'm searching for some hook, some interesting thing to say. And as I was

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Rolling over that in my head and getting nowhere by the way that thought came back into my head. What does this text say? What does this text say? The main part of this text and this is printed in your bulletin if you want to look there Luke 24 is what I'm looking at

16:12

The main point of this text is that can't find the living among the dead. That's really the only thing that's asserted here. We have the women, they come to the tomb, they find it empty. They're going to honor the body of the Lord Jesus by preparing it with spices. And this is a part of their custom. This is the way they love their fallen friend and their fallen son and relative. But when they come, they find the tomb empty and they're perplexed. And they have these two men appearing in dazzling apparel. These are angels dressed in white that are appearing as men.

16:43

And they say the thing that they want us to know. The main point of this passage is this. The body of Jesus is not there. That's what it says in verse 3. They did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And the second thing is you cannot find the living among the dead. You cannot find the living among the dead. If you want life, don't seek it among dead things, in other words. You must find life where life is found.

17:09

As I was thinking about today and thinking about what I would say, I try to put myself in the shoes of someone who maybe was attending church for the first time or for the first time in a long time and I thought, what would I want to hear? And then I thought as a preacher, what would I want to say to such a person? And the thing I want to say is this, Jesus Christ has defeated death and if you follow him and believe in him, you can too. That's the thing that you need to know. And that's the thing that this text says.

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Don't seek the living among the dead. Dead things will never bring you life. Achievement, pleasure will never bring us life. They can be good. They're good things, created things. You know, I enjoy good food, good drink. These are things that are wonderful. But they won't give you life. They're dead things. Achievement will not give you life. You can achieve. You can do a lot of good in your life. You can contribute to society. You can provide for your family. Those are all good things. But it will not give you life. You cannot seek the living among the dead. The same is true for religious functions.

18:07

All these things that people find value in. They're beautiful, they're wonderful. If you haven't seen, we do religious ritual here at church. It's not necessarily bad, but you can't find life among it. There's no life to be had in religious rituals and religious practices without the Lord of life. You can't find the living among the dead. He is not here. You can't find him there. Where do you find the living one?

18:32

Where do you find the one who has not cheated death but defeated it? The one who has rose again. Where can you find life? You have to find it in him. Where the body of the Lord Jesus is. He is not here. The angels say. Where is he? That's the point of the text. Where is he? Where did he go? Where is he? The text doesn't say. All we know is we can't find the living among the dead. We must find the Lord Jesus. We must seek him where he is because he has defeated death. Luke doesn't go into it here. He'll go into it

19:02

in the next part of the second half of the chapter which I will cover in two weeks when I preach so stay tuned we'll find out where the Lord's body can be found HIT HIT

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This is Luke's conclusion at the road to Emmaus. But Paul lays this out in a more explicit way. The text that we read today was from 1 Corinthians 15. And it says, death wears your sting, hell wears your victory. There's no better exposition of this passage of 1 Corinthians 15 and no better answer to the issue, the problem of where we find the living amongst dead things than the sermon of St. John Chrysostom.

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that he preached almost 1700 years ago in Constantinople. And I like to recite this every year. This is the ending of the sermon. John Chrysostom's exposition of the passage we read from Corinthians. He says, let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free.

He that was taken by death has annihilated it. He descended into Hades and took Hades captive. He embittered it when it tasted his flesh and anticipated.

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This Isaiah exclaimed, Hades was embittered when it encountered thee in the lower regions. It was embittered because it was abolished. It was embittered because it was mocked. It was embittered because it was purged. It was embittered because it was despoiled. It was embittered because it was bound in chains. It took upon a body and came upon God. It took on earth and encountered heaven. It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen.

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Death where is thy sting? Oh Hades? Where is thy victory? Christ is risen and you were overthrown Christ is risen and the demons are fallen Christ is risen and angels rejoice Christ is risen and life reigns Christ is risen and not one dead remains in a tomb for Christ being raised from the dead has become the first fruits of them that have slept to him be glory and might to the ages of ages

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Christ is risen and life reigns. You cannot seek the living among dead things. You find the living where Christ is because Christ has defeated death. When death swallowed Christ, it was bummed, very bummed because it came upon God, Chrysostom said. And Jesus put death in chains forever. He has defeated it. And in that man, that man, Jesus Christ, we have life.

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And so that is where we find life. We find life not in religious rituals, not in meditation, not in supper clubs. They can be great and life-given, but we ultimately find life in a person, in a person who died and rose again and defeated death. That is where we find life, and that is where we find light. You know, over Lent, we had this part of the prayers with the Lord's Supper.

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that talked about a tree being overcome and by a tree overcame. I don't know if some of you were here remember that. And it's a little bit of a awkward wording. What was that prayer saying? The prayer was referring back to the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, God created everything good and all things were good and he created men and women in his own image and they were good. But of course Adam and Eve fell and by their fall

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All of humanity fell into sin and to misery. That's where our pain comes from. But how did that fall happen? How did we, how did death enter the world? It entered the world through a tree. The tree of life. The tree of, sorry, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they were told not to eat. So by a tree, the serpent, Satan overcame us.

23:01

But the poetic part of the gospel of Christ is that by a tree he overcame. By a tree we were overcome, but by a tree he overcame. In Christ's death, his sacrifice for us, and his resurrection from the grave, he overcame death. And he reverses the curse, and he gives us life.

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NT Wright in his book, *The Resurrection and the Son of God* said this, the point of the resurrection is not simply that the Creator has done something remarkable for one solitary individual, that is Jesus, and raising him from the dead, but that in through the resurrection, the present evil age has been invaded by the age to come. The time of restoration, return, covenant renewal and forgiveness.

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An event has occurred as a result of which the world is a different place and human beings have the new possibility to become a different kind of people. So where can we find the living one? Well, ironically, I'm gonna say you find him here. Amongst those who profess belief and are filled with the spirit of the living one. The reason why Christians are happier, the reason why they're healthier is because they have

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lives and hearts that have been changed. It's not just religious practice. It is life change. It is new life that comes through belief and adherence and following the one who was raised from the dead. Where can you find the living one? You find him here amongst his people because this church is his body and every church across the world is his body as well. Where can you find the living one? You find it

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with the body of Christ and His people where they meet to read His word and hear it preached and participate in the sacrament as we're about to do.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, Christ did not come into the world that we might understand him, but that we might cling to him and we might simply let ourselves be swept away by him into the immense event of the resurrection. Can we even comprehend how profound that is? I don't think we can. But my prayer today is if you come away with anything from today is that Jesus Christ defeated death. And if you follow him, you can too. Let's pray.

25:36

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