An Actual Encounter with the Resurrected Savior:
A Round Table Conversation on Witness

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Mark Ramsey: Hi, this is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, and, unfortunately, our colleagues Beth Daniel, Jennifer Watley Maxell, and Amy Valdez Barker, are out working in the vineyard. So you're stuck today with the other people on our staff. So, I'm here with Ryan Bonfiglio, Adam Mixon, and Adam Borneman. Hey there, everybody.

Adam Mixon: Hey, Mark. How's it going?

Ryan Bonfiglio: Hey, Mark.

Mark: We're in Post-Easter, and I'm sure, as you all have, and I think a lot of people who are listening to this, have been immersing themselves in post-resurrection texts. And, I am drawn to the idea of witness being a primary theme in the post-resurrection accounts. And I'd like to talk about that today, but I'd particularly like to talk about the tension between bearing witness to what is wrong with the world – injustice, things like that – and bearing witness to the joy and hope that Easter gives us.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. My mind went to the place of how we often tell the Gospel story. We talk about all of this bad stuff and then we say, "But." "The world is horrible, but God is good. Things are rotten, but the worst is not the last," and all of that kind of stuff. And I wonder what would happen if we started with the good stuff instead, of overemphasizing how terrible things are, because there's enough of that going around. But, we start with the idea that we serve a good, a loving, gracious, and a compassionate God, who allows us to remain resilient when things in the world are off kilter. What if we started there, and what if we anchored that in an actual encounter with the resurrected Savior, instead of some intellectual exercise or some reasoning toward better? I feel like we've made the Gospel, in some circles, so academic that we've stripped it of any human experience.

And when I read Scripture, whether pre-resurrection and post-resurrection, the people who were talking about Jesus were people who knew him and met him and had an encounter. They were healed. They were embraced. They were acknowledged. They were affirmed in some kind of way, and that encounter changed the trajectory of their lives. And somewhere along the line, I feel like we just set that aside. Like, somehow, that is not the main thing, when I think it's precisely the main thing.

Ryan Bonfiglio: Adam, it's almost as if we've come to think that, in order for the Gospel to be good, the world has to be bad. And I wonder if that's the case. And I think if it is for us, if in order for the Gospel to really be good news, the world has to be bad, we're probably dealing with a pretty malnourished sense of what "good news" is. We've made the good news of the Gospel so small that it can only be a slight corrective to what we find is broken in the world. But, what if we discovered and talked about a good news that is great and spectacular and transformative even in a world that wasn't broken, that wasn't ripped apart by grief and trauma and so many other things? What if our sense of what's good about the Gospel is just too limited to contain what Jesus talks about?

Adam Mixon: Yeah. And I think there are theological implications there, right? We've reduced the Gospel to being something of God's reaction to, which is problematic. If we think about a God that we

claim to be omnipotent and omniscient and all of these things, the Gospel is not God's reaction to a broken world, but it was God's idea from before there was ever a beginning, this goodness. Yeah.

Adam Borneman: It seems like, by default, we treat the good news as the exception to the rule, rather than the rule. And I think that's what you all are generally saying. And as you're talking, I'm reminded of, there's a wonderful little paragraph from Flannery O'Connor that I read a long time ago that basically makes that case and says, "We shouldn't be reading incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension as the suspension of the natural world or the natural laws, but the other way around. We should be, as followers of Jesus, be seeing death, decay, brokenness, sin as the suspension of how things are supposed to work." And I've always found that to be, um, a really beautiful and very challenging way to think about these things, because our default is to look at those things as the exception, not the rule.

Mark: I also think there's a tension among people who are really, sincerely trying to be sensitive to the world and all its broken places. I saw a post this week from a friend, somebody who was in a former congregation of mine, who, they just had a new baby. The post was along the lines of, "Well, this is wonderful, but we feel bad feeling so joyful at this new life, given how broken the world is." I don't think we have to pay every time we feel joyful. We should be able to feel joy all the time, and acknowledge all the broken places. That's a hard tension, I think, particularly for Christians.

Adam Mixon: Yeah, Mark, I think in my tradition, that's given more toward a prophetic and calling out of injustice, I think there's a danger: to prophesy without being oriented toward hope, or being sustained by a real type of joy, just makes us cynics. And the reality of it is, is cynicism is poison to a preacher. When we speak prophetically, it's anchored in a living hope that we have, again, in the resurrection. And that has to be personal. In times of frustration or despair or stress, my refrain is my encounter with Jesus. That might sound unintellectual or primitive or childish or whatever, but you know what? I had an encounter with Jesus. I wasn't raised in a Christian household. I had an encounter with Jesus, and it changed everything about my life. And when things get fraught, I remember that to be true, and it anchors me again. Or sometimes, I need somebody outside of me to remind me of that. But I think we overlook that. And I don't know if we, again, are just too heady, but we need to return to that.

And we need to remind our folks: survey the landscape of your own life. A lot of what you're facing or what's frustrating now, look back and see where you've come from, and what you've endured, and how you've overcome. Those are sources of hope that are sustaining when the world becomes fraught.

Adam Borneman: Adam, as you're talking, it makes me think, too, that not only do we not have to pay for our joy, as Mark put it, or name these things as exceptions, or either you're joyful or you're acknowledging the pain of the world, but there's another way to phrase it, too, that occurs to me. And that is: it's because of Christian hope and joy that I engage with the world around me. It is the reason I'm able to be in solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. Those things are not opposed to each other. It's not just having strength so that I might be able to endure it. It is the reason I endure it. The reason we go to serve the marginalized, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, those in pain and suffering, is because of the joy that's in us, the same joy for which Jesus endures the cross.

Adam Mixon: Yeah, that's Hebrews, right? "Who for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame, is even set down at the right hand of the Father." Yeah, the joy is lost. And this is from within a tradition where this is heavy. And it's going to sound like a critique, which I'm probably going to get in trouble for; but, when our prophetic speech loses his orientation toward that joy that's rooted in the living hope of the resurrection, then, again, we just become like the pundits.

We're just calling out what's wrong, pointing to the…what's broken instead of orienting from a place of wholeness that actually is saying something different.

Mark: Well, as I think of the biblical texts – Hebrews, the Emmaus story, Jesus encountering the disciples after they've gone back to fishing in John 21, the women at the tomb – joy is relentless. Biblical joy is relentless. "Were not our hearts burning?" They hadn't figured it out, but they realized their hearts were burning. There is a sense in which God is going to show up and continue giving us joy upon joy upon joy, all rooted in the resurrection, all rooted in the risen Christ. And we've got to be able to give testimony to that.

If the witness we bear is simply, to use a term Marthame used in one of our last podcasts, "complaint", who's going to be drawn to that? Look: I could go through my whole day with a list of complaints. I don't need help, and I don't need it from the Bible, and I don't need it from God. I will complain really well, and on appropriate things, on my own. Christian faith is calling us to something deeper, and more resilient, I think.

Ryan: And Mark, with that, I think we've come to a misunderstanding of the Biblical prophets. We've almost now used the word "prophetic" as a synonym for "critique": calling out what's evil, calling out what's wicked. I even see this in awards for prophetic preaching, or for preachers who are really good at critiquing things. And we need that. One of the prophetic tasks is to puncture the pretense that everything is as it should be. But equally important to the role of the prophet is energizing hope, is shedding a light on where goodness and joy and compassion and love and justice are breaking through. And the prophets do a lot of that. Arguably, the prophets do more in the avenue and in the direction of energizing hope in the world, than they do in pointing out problems.

If you read the last part of the book of Isaiah, it's all about prophetic joy and hope. And it's…gone as the critique (or mostly gone is the critique). So, I think part of it is we need to rethink what we think a prophet is and does, and what does prophetic preaching or teaching look like in this more fulsome model, where the prophetic task is both to critique and bring joy, both point out evil and pronounce good news.

Adam Borneman: You know, Ryan, that is such a good point. It's almost as if our litmus test for what prophetic proclamation or preaching should look like is whether or not it includes a thread of hope or joy, because, otherwise, we very quickly can fall into the trap of justifying our cynicism, and calling it prophetic or just critique. With you, I think there is a place for critique. I love the phrase you used: "to puncture the pretense of the world we inhabit." But, as you say that, I wonder, maybe that's part of the litmus test is: am I hearing some thread of hope and forward-looking and joy in this critique? Or am I just hearing, look how awful it is and calling it prophetic? And we have to be very careful with how we label those things, and how we unwittingly baptize them into something that sounds deep and rich, but is actually just our own cynicism showing up.

Adam Mixon: Well, practically speaking, Adam, I think there's a question that we can ask ourselves that can help us discern where we're landing, right? There are things that are good in this world that ought to be celebrated: the birth of a child, the completion of a project. There are things that God blesses us with, that ought to be celebrated and enjoyed. Point blank period. Across the board. If I feel the need to apologize for that, or somehow suspend any joy that I would gather from those moments, then there might be something wrong.

Again, in my tradition, I am so tired of people always disrupting the celebration and I'm just going to say it the way I feel it, y'all. If Black folks are laughing or singing or dancing or having a good time or celebrating something, there's always some wet blanket who has to jump in and say, "Well, I didn't see y'all dancing like that at the polls last Fall." Or "How can you be singing and dancing when the world is going to hell in a hand…?"

I'm like, "Will you shut up?" Our ancestors survived because they knew how to sing; because they laughed instead of crying all the time. We're here because of that joyful resistance.

Mark: Adam, you make a good point. We seem to have gotten so far from a genuineness of the gifts that God gives us out of our, at least I think some of the times, it's white liberal guilt. I think every tradition and every location can probably have its own motivations for this.

I was in a group recently where I used – and there are various versions of this – the ten things at Quaker meetings that are used to ask yourself before you speak: "Is this a message from God or my own ego? Is it necessary for me to say this? Is it true? Is it kind? Is it for the whole meeting, or just for me and a few others?"

But when I did it, a pastor looked down at this and said, "You know, I like all these, but I'm very uncomfortable with asking, 'Is it kind?' Sometimes we can't be kind."

That was deeply disappointing. Kindness, to me, does not mean you ignore everything else. But, if we're going to reset our default settings to the same as everybody else in the world, so kindness is seen as suspect, we are deeply troubled. And I think it goes to, among other things, we need to recover the Biblical tradition of testimony, where we will bear witness to what we have seen and heard, what God has done within us. By the way, twelve- step groups do this great, and without reservation or cynicism and there are other places, too.

Ryan: This conversation is reminding me of a story in the Gospel of Mark. It's right in the middle. It's chapter eight, and the disciples are out in a boat with Jesus, and, all of a sudden, they discover they forgot lunch. They forgot bread. And they're losing it. And, of course, the Sea of Galilee is quite small. They could have easily rode back to the shore in about 15 minutes, and had all the bread they needed, but they're worried about scarcity. They're worried about their lack. All of their energy and attention is on the lack of bread. And Jesus simply asked them, "Why are you talking about not having bread?" And I think we hear those words two things: one, right before this story, Jesus had multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed 4,000. The disciples had completely lost sense that they are in a boat with this person who can make abundance out of scarcity.

But I think even more than that, Jesus isn't denying that there's scarcity in that moment. But he's saying, "Why are you talking just about the scarcity? Here, with you, is abundance. What I'm promising, what I'm talking about, is an abundance that goes beyond bread." So, it's not a denial that there is scarcity or problems in the world, but where is our energy? Where is our focus? What do we perceive? What are we talking about? It's a powerful story for this moment, I think.

Mark: It is. And I will say, it is, I think, very hard as pastors listening to this to be the pastor who's constantly getting messages from their congregation about scarcity: scarcity of justice, scarcity of hope, scarcity of resources. Again, like all our podcasts, I want this to be received with a huge dose of

empathy, which we understand with what's going on. But we are called to the abundance that you are talking about.

Ryan: And in that dynamic, Mark, if you are the pastor who doesn't talk about scarcity, then perhaps your fidelity to justice is questioned. Your seriousness is questioned. Maybe even your intellect. It's become prominent now to think of critique and deconstruction as the smarter thing, and the pointing to joy and hope as something that's naïve, or less well polished. And we have to get away from this fracturing of these two ideas.

Adam Borneman: Yeah. Isn't it interesting that maybe the most prophetic thing you can do as a pastor or preacher right now is exhibit the Fruit of the Spirit without flinching in the face of the world's horrors, while also naming them? That can cause a lot of cognitive dissonance, but I think in a lot of cases it probably is the task ahead.