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# *Resurrection*

SHAPED LIFE

DYING AND RISING ON PLANET EARTH

JAKE OWENSBY

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CHAPTER ONE  
GROWING BEYOND OUR PAST

*I didn't intend to start thinking about God,  
it just happened.*

— Mary Oliver, “Drifting”



**D**espite the heat and humidity of late-July Florida, I strapped on my shoes for an afternoon run. The relief of getting out of the house and capturing a few quiet minutes on my own outweighed the threat of heat stroke.

Andrew, our firstborn, was just a few weeks old. My wife, Joy, had taken maternity leave from her public-radio job, and since I was on a college faculty, my summer months were my own to structure. So we both spent the first days of Andrew's life sharing his every gassy smile, dirty diaper, and middle-of-the-night feeding. A combination of sleep deprivation and cabin fever was tipping each of us toward new-baby psychosis. So when Joy said, "Jake, I think you need to get out the house. For all our sakes," I jumped at it.

At about the half-mile mark, I'm sure I looked a fright. My heart rate and breathing had evened out, but my face was flushed and sweat had saturated my t-shirt and shorts. One of my older neighbors was shuffling toward his mailbox. As I ran by, he said, "What on earth are you doing?"

I responded, "I'm running from my past."

Pretty clever, right? It seemed funny at the moment. But the phrase kept turning around in my mind. I'm running from my past. Am I running from my past? What am I running from?

At the time, I was just at the beginning of my professional career, straining to establish myself as an expert in an academic field. New parenthood was stretching not only my sense of self but also who Joy and I were to each other as friends and lovers. Challenges of the heart and professional growth were exactly what I had signed up for. My days were rewarding and the future looked promising. Well, mostly. As I was coming to the



end of my run, another truth emerged with wrenching clarity. Some of the defining memories of my life were breaking my heart, disrupting my relationships, and dragging me into bouts of shame and sorrow. I couldn't just leave those experiences behind; I was going to have to grow beyond them.

Up to this point I had spent my life pushing ahead, as if a new life as husband, father, and philosophy professor would in time diminish the power of these painful memories. Maybe I could just start over and escape all those old wounds. But now I was beginning to admit that simply moving on was out of the question. After all, unless injury or disease destroyed my memory, my past was going to follow me wherever I went.

Actually, the past doesn't just follow us around. It's a crucial part of our identity. Just ask some people to tell you who they are. I mean, who they *really* are. Once they get beyond telling you that they're a doctor or a lawyer or a machinist, stories about kids or grandkids often follow. Dig a little deeper and they'll start telling you personal stories. They will share their memories with you. They will piece together their past in a way that makes sense to them and that they hope will be acceptable to somebody else.

On a résumé, we can cherry-pick the flattering bits of our experience. We're out to make an impression, to land a job. Nobody lists their biggest flops or most embarrassing missteps. We omit the messy parts of our lives. Coming to terms with our past does not resemble résumé building. We have to be honest with ourselves about everything. Especially the stuff that can still shatter us, enrage us, flatten us, and make us wince. Like those of many faith traditions, Christians have realized this for eons. And we know that processing our memories is most effective when we do it with another. For us, coming to terms with our past is done best with Christ.

Jesus-followers usually call this repentance. And I'm going to use that word too. But before I do, I want to help us recover a depth and breadth of the spiritual practice that Jesus had in mind. Like many of my fellow Christians, I once assumed that repentance focused narrowly on sins. The process went something like this: Admit that you've gone the wrong way, stop where you are, turn around, and get back on the right road. God blots



out what you've done in the past and grants you a sort of do-over. God won't hold your past against you.

I've confessed some real doozies. Before taking the run that day, I had received absolution for things done and things left undone more times than I can count. As advertised, confession brought relief from my feelings of guilt. But remorse about my past wasn't the defining problem; I was wounded by my past. I was wounded by abuse, neglect, and exploitation. I needed to find a way to die to the person whose life was shaped by this pain and sorrow in order for a new self to emerge from them.

### **The Night My Father Killed Me**

Like most of us, my soul was bruised by countless things. But one childhood experience crystallizes the woundedness that was finally overtaking me. When I was ten years old, my father, my mother, and I lived in a newly constructed house on the outskirts of a tiny south Georgia town. My maternal grandparents had provided the money to purchase land and to make a down payment for construction. My parents had alternated between periods of living together in low-level combat and taking up separate addresses. When my mother asked my grandparents to loan them the money, I wasn't surprised to hear them quietly ask in their native German, "Are you sure this is going to work out?"

We had moved into the 900-square-foot house a few weeks earlier. Like my mother, I believed that this new setting could give us a new start as a family. My unpredictably angry, violent father would become reliably kind. We could be what I took to be a normal family. Sitting in my room, I heard my father's angry voice echo down the hallway from the den. I hustled down the hall toward a clearly escalating conflict. When I walked through the door, I found my father aiming a pistol at my mother's head. Without thinking I stepped between my parents, putting myself between the gun and my mother. The barrel was now leveled at me.

I said with a calm I still can't account for, "Don't shoot my mother. If you kill her, you'll go to prison. You'll leave me an orphan."



With a sneer, my father glared at me and said, “You’d be better off an orphan.”

I stood my ground.

Exactly what happened to break the tension escapes me now. I remember only that my father ended up in my parents’ bedroom. My mother and I holed up in my room with the door locked. After what seemed like hours, my mother slipped into the hall and peeked briefly into their room. She ran back and locked the door again. My father was lying on the bed with a shotgun resting on his chest, the barrel tucked under his chin.

In retrospect, I realize that this was a clumsily choreographed production. My father’s intent, I now suppose, was to divert our fear and outrage into pity for him; in reality, the whole horror show was a display of manipulation and control. But neither my mother nor my ten-year-old self realized this at the time. We just panicked. The calm I had managed to show earlier in the night was steadily dissolving. When my father crashed through the locked door, whatever composure I had left abandoned me. I hid behind my curtain quaking and sobbing.

This time, my mother ran to protect and comfort me. This wasn’t what my father had had in mind. It threw him off his game. So, unbelievably, he switched in an instant from menacing assailant to his version of comforting parent. He assured me that everything was fine. I was overreacting.

My father did not pull the trigger that night. Soon after this episode, my mother left him and—along with me—escaped that little town once and for all. Only we didn’t escape entirely; something inside me shattered that night. My father killed a version of me, the version that still hoped that I could be lovable by simply being me. And that murdered ten-year-old me was still running along with me as an adult. Waiting for resurrection. Yearning for new life.

## **Repentance and Resurrection**

What I’ve come to believe is that repentance is precisely what I needed and what I still need. I needed to learn, however, that repentance is



more than a sin-canceling transaction. When we repent, we admit that the sorrows, the losses, the wounds, the betrayals, and the regrets of our past have made us into someone we don't want to be anymore. We die to that self and entrust ourselves to Jesus. From those shattered places in our lives, Christ brings new life; to put it another way: repentance is the beginning of our resurrection. Right here on planet Earth.

Look at the story about Jesus's call of the first disciples. Jesus was strolling along the shore. He saw two sets of fishermen: Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus invited them to follow him with the odd promise to transform them from fishermen into fishers of people (Mark 1:16-20). The ordinary life they already knew would provide the root from which eternal life would grow. Repentance does not mean for us—nor did it for them—that we cut ourselves off from our past. All that we've ever done, all that's been done to us, no longer merely defines us and limits us. Our past will become that beyond which we have grown. Even the most harrowing, humbling, and cringe-worthy moments of our lives provide the soil from which Jesus nurtures us into eternal life. If we hand the life shaped by our past over to Jesus, eternal life will emerge from the depths of our day-to-day lives.

Jesus's first sermon pointed us in this direction. The Gospels record the heart of it: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). Some Jesus-followers hear something like this: Repent or else. God's harsh judgment is just around the bend. Time is short. Jesus comes into the picture to get us off the hook for sin. The bad stuff we've done won't count against us as long as we believe that he took the punishment we deserve. In other words, Jesus's message is only about sin and the forgiveness of sin. As long as we conceive of salvation as a rescue operation from the consequences of sin, we will continue to hear "repent" as a requirement for escaping eternal punishment.

But a different message emerges when we reconsider what Jesus means when he says, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." In Jesus himself, the divine has come near. Heaven has reached into our ordinary, everyday lives. The holy is braiding itself into the mundane before we lift





a finger. God has initiated a relationship with us prior to even the feeblest moral reflection on our part. Repentance is our response to God's intimate presence in our lives. Flipping Jesus's word order and amplifying the translation will help convey what I mean: "God is breathtakingly close. Open your eyes. Open your heart. Letting God in will really change things for you. Starting with you." The Greek word we frequently translate as "repentance" means a change of heart. Paradoxically, we become ourselves by being changed. Changed by an increasing nearness to God in Christ.

Repentance is the admission that we need to learn how to live; a change of heart, however, happens gradually. We have to grow into it. God's transforming love seeps into our lives sometimes gently, sometimes startlingly, but never all at once. As Ezekiel puts it, God is replacing our heart of stone with a throbbing heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). God replaces the life we made—with our past experiences and our own willpower—with a life grown from divine love. Mortal life with eternal life. The resurrection is shaping our lives even now, but this is not an instantaneous switch.

### **Learning How to Live**

First-century Jewish disciples learned by imitating their rabbis. Following a rabbi did not resemble sitting at a desk, taking notes, and passing exams about the Torah or the Hebrew Bible; disciples devoted themselves to learning how to live a God-shaped life. One learned how to live a life like this by staying close to wise and holy rabbis and by copying their patterns of acting and talking in surprisingly minute detail.

How does the rabbi wash hands? Which sandal does the rabbi put on first? Does the rabbi travel on the Sabbath? If so, how far and by what means? I once heard that some disciples hid in the rabbi's bedroom to learn the proper expression of marital intimacy. Others peeked into the rabbi's bathroom to learn . . . well, these stories may not be true, but they make the point.

Studying Torah is learning how to live a God-shaped life, and disciples got the hang of how to live such a life by emulating their rabbi. Rabbis



certainly taught Torah by discussing it, but most important, they imparted Torah to the next generation by embodying it through their everyday actions, common words, and habitual demeanor.

When Peter, James, John, and the rest of the Twelve accepted Jesus's invitation to follow him, they were committing themselves to patterning their lives on Jesus. Like beginning violin students, the disciples hit some sour notes early on. Initially, they may have thought that Jesus was passing on to them his superior grasp of the moral law and the proper spiritual practices. Gradually, they came to realize that they were letting go of the lives they had known in order to receive a new kind of life that Jesus was passing on to them: his very life. Eternal life. Following Jesus is an ongoing pattern of repentance and resurrection, letting go of our own lives so that Jesus can remake them.

Struggling to follow Jesus's example doesn't make the disciples—or any of us—failures or underachievers. On the contrary, mistakes and missteps are part of what it means to follow Jesus to a resurrection-shaped life. I think that may be why Matthew (14:22-33) tells the familiar story of Peter's attempt to walk on water. In the accounts of Matthew, Mark (6:45-52), and John (6:16-21), the disciples have gone ahead of Jesus in a boat. The weather gets rough. In the predawn hours, the disciples spot Jesus strolling across the lake. If we stop with the accounts of Mark and John, the passages tell us only that Jesus is divine. That's an important message, and Matthew conveys it as well. But Matthew adds the bit about Peter getting out of the boat. And it's important to ask why he included it. Scholars have concluded that Matthew had a source that Mark lacked. But that still doesn't explain why Matthew thought it important to include the Peter episode in the larger story he was telling. My hunch is that he wanted to show us what discipleship meant in light of what we had just learned about Jesus's identity.

Jesus is God incarnate. So, imitating Jesus is an impossibly high goal for ordinary slobs like us. It's like asking somebody to defy the laws of gravity. And, of course, that's just what Jesus does. He urges us to walk on water.



Crucially, he also knows what that will mean for us. Let's look more closely at the passage.

Peter essentially says to Jesus, "If that's you, tell me to come out there with you." Peter climbs over the gunwale, takes a few steps, and then sinks. Jesus grabs him and hauls him into the boat. He says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31).

You've probably heard lots of sermons about Peter's faith deficit. Me too. If he had only believed strenuously enough, preachers have said, he would never have sunk. Frequently, we're harangued about our own puny faith and told to buck up. Believe harder!

Well, baloney!

For starters, remember that Peter was a disciple. He took the risk of imitating Jesus doing impossible things. It's what he had signed up for. Besides, Peter had already come to expect Jesus to do and say unthinkable things:

- Turn the other cheek. Don't imagine that violence will solve anything.
- Forgive the unrepentant. Repeatedly. How you feel about it isn't the point.
- Love your enemy. Even the dangerous one who hates your guts.
- Give your stuff away because someone else needs it. Don't even ask about who deserves it.
- See everybody—simply everybody—as infinitely valuable. Nobody is here to serve your agenda, gratify your desires, or live up to your expectations.
- Eat with sinners. Befriend outcasts. Get over yourself.

This is what a resurrection-shaped life looks like on this planet. We can't get there on our own. Jesus imparts a life like that to us, but we also have spiritual work to do. We have to relinquish our habits of coercion and violence to turn the other cheek. Forgiving doesn't happen while we insist



on payback. When we repent, we die to our old self so that Jesus can raise us to a new kind of life.

Jesus is showing us what it means to live, to have eternal life. Eternal life is loving in a way that resembles God. And, yes, while our street address is on planet Earth, this will be like walking on water. Impossible! We will sink. And sinking is where the growth happens. Once we've been brought back to the safety of the boat, will we step back out on the waves again?

I imagine that when Jesus welcomed Peter out on the waves, he knew that Peter would sink. Who wouldn't? Jesus wasn't testing Peter, waiting to see how tenaciously he would cling to his beliefs. In fact, getting out of the boat was Peter's idea. Jesus merely encouraged him. It's as if Jesus said, "Go for it! Live a little!" When Jesus pulled Peter back into the boat, he said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I for one do not hear a scolding tone. Instead, I hear something like compassion and encouragement. Jesus recognized that Peter had room to grow; nobody gets the hang of living like Jesus all at once. Jesus teaches us to do things that most ordinary people call naive or just plain crazy. Anybody is going to be at least a little hesitant at first. In a word, the resurrection shapes us gradually. We grow into eternal life one step at a time. In a way, it's like immigrating to a whole new world.

## **Immigrating to the New World**

For my birthday, Joy surprised me with a framed photograph of my twenty-year-old mother, Trudy. Someone had taken the photo aboard the ship that brought her to America. Doing some genealogical work while we were visiting Salt Lake City, Joy came across that photograph and the passenger manifest of *Vulcania*.

Traveling completely alone, my mother took the seventeen-hour train trip from Linz, Austria, to the port in Genoa, Italy. There she boarded *Vulcania* for a roughly three-week ocean crossing. Trudy's possessions fit into a single flimsy suitcase. She arrived at Ellis Island on October 29, 1949.

The word *cruise* suggests luxury. This trip was anything but that. The



ship's manifest lists my mother among those in alien tourist class. Read that as "steerage." The photo captures her dining among dozens of other passengers in an unadorned, cramped compartment more suitable to storing cargo than hosting people. The simple tables and the small chairs reminded me of lunchrooms from my middle school days. Plainly dressed diners sit elbow to elbow with their backs nearly touching the people at the table behind them. My mother sits in the background. Even though people in the foreground may have been the photographer's intended subject, Trudy's determined profile and wavy brunette hair are unmistakable.

When I was twenty, going away to college seemed like a big move. Spring-break trips with friends and study-abroad programs felt like adventures. Traveling all alone to a distant country with no job, no facility with the language, and no local support system would have been out of the question for me. Then again, I had not survived daily Allied bombing and internment in a Nazi concentration camp. These experiences had forged my mother into sterner stuff than I was at the same age.

War's indiscriminate slaughter and the Nazi state's systematic violence against what it viewed as undesirable elements had bruised and battered Trudy's soul and body. And yet she emerged from those experiences with a childlike humor, a tender acceptance of others' quirks and idiosyncrasies, and an ability to make even simple moments into a party. We would watch cartoons together and laugh out loud at episodes of *The Little Rascals*. During my teen and young adult years, her insistence that other people were doing the best they could simply drove me crazy. By contrast, I did appreciate her ability to find reason to celebrate with sweets at the least provocation.

You might think that my mother was escaping the rubble of bombed-out Austria and fleeing the Soviet threat poised just across the Danube in her then-occupied hometown of Linz. And such thoughts must surely have played some part in her decision to make such a risky journey. But I believe that it would be more accurate to say that my mother was inspired. Inspired by a dream of greater life. When Trudy talked about immigrating



to America, she never talked about getting rich or famous. She talked about being free.

As I look back on it, I realize that my mother wasn't talking about civil rights as such. She was getting at something deeper and more abiding. In America, she perceived a New World, a world redolent with the promise that she—and everyone in it—could become a fully human person. I believe that my mother was swept along by a dream and a longing analogous to what the disciples experienced when the newly risen Jesus appeared to them.

Here's how the Gospel writer John described that experience (John 20:19-29). The disciples were huddled in a locked room, hiding for fear of violence. Jesus appeared, and commissioned them to go into the world. Then, he breathed on them. The breathing thing seems a little weird, but it's crucial. Jesus, you see, inspired them. They were moved not by the force of a command but by the excitement of inspiration. Consider the word *inspire*. Its roots mean to breathe in, to fill with breath. Remember that God brought a heap of dust to life by breathing into it. The Book of Genesis calls that dust-person Adam.

Jesus breathed new life into his disciples. His resurrection animated them with the dream of a New World, a world where love dissolves hatred. Where compassion displaces fear of strangers. Where generosity eliminates deprivation and respect guards the dignity of all. This is, of course, not the world we inhabit—at least not yet. And that is why Jesus sent them. He didn't tell them to wait around until he waved a magic wand. He inspired them to take the risky journey from the Old World they still inhabited toward the New World they longed for.

That journey involves immense risk. Jesus puts it this way. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23). In other words, the peace and reconciliation we dream of starts with us. It's God's dream, all right. We can't get there without God. But God will only make this New World a reality through us. We will get to a mended world only by stepping out toward



it ourselves, even in the midst of the pain and sorrow and violence that makes headlines every day. If we don't forgive, forgiveness won't happen. If we don't seek reconciliation, reconciliation will never exist. If we wait for others to be ready for forgiveness or until it's safe to offer reconciliation, they will never come to pass. In the crucifixion, Jesus himself showed us that getting to the New World is not for sissies. And yet, the promise of his resurrection is that our risks—though costly—will not be in vain.

My mother was not a theologian; she was an immigrant. An immigrant inspired to set sail for a new world. Strictly speaking, that's what Jesus is inspiring us to do when he invites us to repent: to leave an old world, an old life, behind and to set sail for a resurrection-shaped world. The first leg of that journey is our own resurrection-shaped life.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What idea, image, story, or passage from this chapter grabbed your attention or captured your imagination? How did it affirm, challenge, conflict with, or expand how you've been thinking about repentance?
2. The author broadens the definition of repentance, saying that in repentance we grow beyond not only past sins but also regrets, wounds, and losses. Explore this amplified idea of repentance.
3. The author explains that to repent means to change your heart or mind. What does he mean by this? Have you experienced a change of heart or mind in this way? Or are you struggling with a change of heart or mind now?
4. Have you ever struggled with things in your past? How have you grown beyond wounds or feelings of remorse or losses?
5. Are any old memories, regrets, or resentments affecting how you see yourself, relate to other people, or feel about God? What might help lead you to a change of heart and a new life?



# EXPERIENCING RESURRECTION IN OUR ORDINARY LIFE ON EARTH

“It made me remember what kind of human I long to be—and why I can’t quit Jesus. Read *A Resurrection-Shaped Life* and fall in love again with God—and with hope.”

—**Diana Butler Bass**, author of *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*

“Christ is risen! And yet sorrow, anger, shame, and failure, writes Jake Owensby in this generous book, are also part of every resurrection. He tenderly shows us how to enter, just as we are, into Jesus’ promise of new life.”

—**Sara Miles**, author of *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*;  
*Jesus Freak: Feeding Healing Raising the Dead*, and *City of God: Faith in the Streets*

“Too often, as we attempt to live out the Christian narrative, we use the resurrection to slap a smiling face onto our bitter mourning. Bishop Jacob Owensby allows the grief to break and form us, which brings startling insight to our resurrected beliefs.”

—**Rev. Carol Howard Merritt**, pastor and author of *Healing Spiritual Wounds*

“If you’re looking for a beautiful book that infuses the lovingkindness of Jesus with the realness of our humanity, this is the book for you!”

—**Kaitlin Curtice**, author of *Glory Happening: Finding the Divine in Everyday Places*

“Spirituality does not rescue us from the world but sends us smack-dab into its midst to serve those with greatest need. Faith has political consequences. Owensby dares to love the world, all of it, as God loves it.”

—**Louie Crew Clay**, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University

“Hope is more than optimism. Hope is knowing that God is making out of the mess of life something honest, beautiful, and transforming. Life is shaped like Resurrection. What a thrilling wonder! Thanks Jake for the reminder.”

—**The Right Rev. Robert C. Wright**, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta

**Jake Owensby** (PhD, DD) is the author of four books including *A Resurrection-Shaped Life*. He is the fourth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana. Before his election as Bishop in 2012, he served as Dean of St. Mark’s Cathedral in Shreveport and rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in metropolitan St. Louis, Missouri. Owensby is a graduate of the School of Theology at Sewanee. He has three adult children and lives in Alexandria, Louisiana, with his wife, Joy, and rescue pup, Gracie. He blogs about looking for God in messy places at [JakeOwensby.com](http://JakeOwensby.com).

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