



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace and Peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus Christ has risen. He is risen indeed. So marks the powerful Easter declaration, the same refrain which has been repeated for almost 2000 years. Jesus is alive, Jesus has risen, he has risen indeed.

Amplifying this theme of resurrection is a wonderful book by Luke Johnson, Professor of the New Testament at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta, called Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel. The major assertion of the book is that Jesus Christ is very much alive, the stone has been rolled away and Jesus has overcome the power of sin, death and the power of evil. And the goal of each believer is to be able to say with Mary Magdalene, "I have seen the Lord."

Johnson says that everything we do, say and believe in the Christian church and in our own spiritual walk is fundamentally determined by this one reality, that Jesus Christ is alive. Because he is alive, the whole world has changed, history has changed, our future has changed, we can celebrate life. Because he has risen from the dead, we can be assured the same thing will happen to us, our bodies of low estate will be transformed to be like his glorious body. All of the Word and Sacraments point to this one truth, that Jesus has risen from the dead. He is alive, he has risen indeed.

For most of us this truth may seem obvious, incontrovertible, accepted by all Christians. We may disagree on all sorts of issues, but this is one where it seems as if there should be unanimity. However, this is not the case. Johnson goes on to note that many theologians and academicians and even some pastors spend their time trying to come to grips with a dead Jesus. In fact, many scholars who study the historical Jesus begin with the assumption that he is dead. But if Jesus is dead, that changes everything, it creates a very different kind of theology, history and ministry.

I love to read history. In recent years I have read fascinating accounts of Martin Luther King, John and Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Lewis and Clark, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Benjamin Franklin and Winston Churchill. Every one of these biographies

begins with the knowledge that these pivotal figures in our history are dead. And because they are dead, the record of their accomplishments is complete. The only thing which can change is our interpretation.

(I don't appreciate Woody Allen, but I loved his pithy comment about ancient documents. He said that some doubts have been raised about the authenticity of the Dead Sea Scrolls after they found the word "Oldsmobile" six times in its contents.)

But if Jesus is alive, then we will look at him and his message in a very different way. People who are alive are still capable of doing new things, the record is by no means complete. Someone who is alive can say new things, can show up in different places from the ones we might expect. People who are alive can continue to surprise us, can appear on our doorstep or come to us in the midst of a worship service, a family celebration or a prayer time.

And because Jesus is alive, we can be in relationship with him, which is not possible with someone who is dead. Because Jesus is alive, we can have deeper intimacy. (See Pastors Update, April 7, 2006 to revisit the power of this relationship). If Jesus were dead and buried, then all we could be would be historians, digging around the artifacts of ancient history. But because he is alive we can talk about being friends, brothers, sisters and partners in ministry.

If Jesus is alive, then the question which Jesus posed to Martha in John 11 is especially pertinent: "Martha, do you believe this? Do you believe this? Martha passed the test when she said, "Yes, Lord I believe that you are the Christ, the one who has come into the world." So the same question comes to us, "Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus Christ did what he said he would do, rise from the dead?"

Our confession then becomes, "Yes, Lord, I believe." And if that is too difficult to do all at once, then we can say with the Apostle Paul, "I believe, help my unbelief." Paul will later say, "If Christ has not been raised, then

our preaching and our faith is in vain.”

Professor Johnson suggests there is really no middle ground at this point. If Jesus is dead, then the story is completed. If Jesus is alive, then the story continues. I believe the story of Jesus continues, and because Jesus is alive, then we can live also. And as Jesus rose from the depths of the grave, so also will we. “Do you believe this?” Jesus asks. “Yes Lord, I believe.”

Johnson’s second theme in the book follows upon the first. If we believe Jesus Christ is alive, then our life-long challenge is, as he puts it, to “learn Jesus.” Our task is to learn Jesus. This is more than just learning *about* Jesus, it is learning Jesus, it is being in relationship with him. All of this is consistent with the Gospels where the followers of Jesus are called “disciples,” which is another word for “learners.” They, and we, are to develop as disciples by learning Jesus.

Of course this is the primary reason why we worship each weekend, so that we can maximize every opportunity to learn Jesus. It is almost inconceivable to me that people who wish to learn Jesus would stay away from the one place where this learning is priority number one, which is in worship. We learn Jesus whenever we enter into the community of believers, whenever we experience the music, whenever we hear the Word of God, whenever we pray and confess and respond to God’s Spirit together.

We learn Jesus as those around us share what Christ is doing in them and through them. We learn Jesus as we study the Bible together, as we participate in Alpha with one another, as we search out support groups to deal with our diseases. We learn Jesus as we reach out to the poor and needy and those on the margins, for Jesus has promised that whatever we do for our sisters and brothers, we do it for him. We learn Jesus through the confessions, the creeds, the sermons, the faith and joy of others, especially children.

On Ash Wednesday I told the story of our granddaughter, Linnea, age nine, who mentioned to me a couple of weeks before Lent began that her class at school was going to go on a field trip, staying two nights at a nearby camp on the St. Croix River. She was very excited about this outing. But then a couple of days before the event she told me she was quite disappointed to learn this campout was going to be over Ash Wednesday. She didn’t know that when she signed up and she always looked forward so much to

that worship service, the beginning of Lent, having the ashes put on her forehead, hearing the words about returning to dust. I told her I was sorry she had to miss the event.

But, she said, in her typically can-do attitude: “I have been collecting ashes from our fireplace and putting them in a small jar. I am going to take the jar with me and then on Ash Wednesday evening I am going to take out the ashes, put them on my forehead, make the sign of the cross and then repeat the words, “From dust you have come and to dust you will return.” Once again I was amazed at the faith of a nine-year-old (a little child will lead them). She follows a risen Christ. (At age nine I would probably only have thought about bringing my baseball glove.)

As Luke Johnson asserts, our learning Jesus never stops, never takes a vacation, never is complete this side of heaven. In fact, he says, we can never fully know Jesus, because both Jesus and the learner are always in the process of change, of growth, of new beginnings. When Jesus is alive we are never allowed the luxury of staying just the way we are, but are always in the process of learning Jesus. And it is this learning Jesus which gives life its meaning and power.

So gather for Easter at Vets and celebrate this incredible news, “Jesus Christ is alive, he is risen, he is risen indeed.” And because he is alive, everything in this world has changed. You are a new and different person, the old has passed away, the new has come. May the risen Christ empower and embolden you to confess all year round and all life long, “He is risen. He is risen indeed.”