



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 Cor. 13:14.

He is risen! He is risen indeed! The Apostle Paul articulates the Easter message, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead." Phil 3:10-11.

A reporter might have described Easter Sunday this way, "It was a glorious day. Blue skies everywhere, flowers absolutely exquisite, brilliant butterflies reminding us of spring. Even though it was not in a church sanctuary, people expressed reverence and awe, referring to the setting as "cathedral-like." Many gathered as of old in the "amen corner" to herald the coming of the victor.

The leader stood apart from the crowd, tall and stately, leaping into the air in response to the good news, announcing that from this day forward nothing would ever be the same again. Behind the leader were pictured legions of followers, arms raised to the heavens, embracing the moment of victory. The family of the leader was front and center, dressed in Easter finery, inhaling the joy and wonder of the day. Voices shouted and celebrated everywhere."

Such was the Masters Golf Tournament, won by Phil Mickelson on Easter Sunday.

But a much more important and eternally significant event happened this past weekend at the Des Moines Veterans Memorial Auditorium. While most of the descriptions of Mickelson's win relied on metaphors (i.e his rising from the depths) what was celebrated at the Vets was absolutely real. Easter is not a metaphor, it is absolutely reality. The great Easter hymn says it best, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today. Alleluia! Our triumphant holy day. Alleluia!*

In a staff review early this week, the prevailing sentiment was that Easter could only be described as a "God-thing." Lutheran Church of Hope threw a party at Vets and thankfully and miraculously, God showed up. We all agreed that no-one in the staff or congregational leadership was smart enough or visionary enough to plan and implement such a life-transforming event. Only God can create life, and only God could create the kind of life that was found in a worship event like this. To God be the glory.

However, contrary to Pastor Mike's disdain for the word "logistics," I think that it might be helpful for us to try and understand how God pulled this off, and of course God chose to work through people like us. Many factors paved

the way for Easter 2004.

Perhaps we need to start with the initial Easter Worship at Living History Farms in 1993, with around 100 people in attendance. But a dream was given to the pioneers, a vision that someday such a church, such an Easter event, might reach a much wider audience. Fast forward to Easter 2003 when some 6000 people attended two services at Valley High School, miraculous growth in just ten years. But with the past as prologue, God had something even greater in store for the congregation and community.

Lent 2004 was pivotal in the preparation for the Easter event. More than 2000 people were actively engaged in Purpose-Driven Life, helping them understand more clearly their own purpose and mission of evangelism and worship and discipleship. This led so many to become invitational, reaching out to friends and neighbors and co-workers with a friendly invite to join them at Vets.

It is worth noting that Lutheran Church of Hope spent only a minimal amount of resources on advertising this event. There were no full-page ads in the paper, no expensive commercials on radio or television, no city-wide mailings or telephone campaigns. For the most part, the invitations were person-to-person, people doing the work of an evangelist.

People of Hope showed up early and often during Holy Week to help prepare for worship at the "barn", well over 300 were counted. Prayer teams came and prayed over every seat in the building, invoking God's blessings on each worshipper and asking that God capture the heart of each seeker. Our technology gurus traveled all the way to Nebraska to pick up a motor which could raise the speakers high into the stratosphere for maximum coverage.

More than 8,000 bulletins were published and stuffed chuck full of inserts. A group of stay-at-home moms created more than 200 flower and butterfly displays to be arranged around the auditorium. Food and beverage planning was huge: 100 dozen Krispy Kremes, 1000 Hy Vee donuts, 1500 assorted muffins and pastry, 3000 cups of coffee, 1000 cartons of juice and 500 cartons of milk. Hardly any of the food remained at the end of the day.

Precise numbers on how many worshipped on Easter Sunday 2004 are somewhat vague. Television Channel 13

estimated 8,000. Channel 8 upped the ante to 10,000. One local radio station blew the lid off of the place by estimating 15,000. Our own number crunchers ended up somewhere in the 8,000 range, someone on the church council thought it was between 8,000 and 9,000. Of course, who could count all of these people? (As the old joke goes, just count all of the legs and divide by two.) At any rate, it appears as if the attendance was up by at least 33% from a year earlier.

How do we compare the experience at the high school with that at Vets? Having only one service this year instead of two had obvious benefits, everyone could be together at the same time. Also a year ago, the extremely crowded conditions at the high school became almost claustrophobic, and the whole experience of fellowship and hanging out together suffered. In addition the seats at Vets were much more comfortable, every seat had a back. A point in fact, fewer people put their children in the nursery this year in spite of the much larger attendance, apparently Vets was more conducive to parents bringing children with them to the service.

I have heard the music for Easter described this week by our musicians as "the finest musical effort in the history of Lutheran Church of Hope." Throughout the morning we had stirring renderings from the hand bells, the brass choir, the 100 voice Praise! Adult Choir, and from a composite band led by Pastor Richard, Music Mike, Mark Brandt and Heather Noble.

Technology can add so much to worship when it is done right. An outside sound technician who was at the service said that "these were the best sound efforts he had ever heard at Vets." Keep in mind that most of our sound people are volunteers. By way of comparison, Pastor Richard remembers a comparable event that took place when he worked for the ELCA. An outside sound company was hired and the fee was \$60,000. He said that our sound on Sunday was superior to that of the professionals.

Arriving at Vets on Sunday morning was an experience in itself. Interstate 235 was jammed with cars, highly unusual on a Sunday morning. Most of them exited at the 3rd Street turnoff. Police officers were on duty to help with traffic flow, some of these officers were wishing new arrivals "happy Easter." A lobby band greeted those who entered the building. A huge hospitality area extended a welcome to people, and enthusiastic ushers were ready and waiting to help people find seating.

The flow of the morning was truly inspired. For at least an hour, musicians involved the arriving crowds in praise and singing. Some "not-ready-for-prime-time players" tried to perform a skit from the movie "Hoosiers." More than 300 children came bounding on stage or on pogo sticks as they shouted a musical number about Jesus. Football player Troy Dickey, "the preacher man," came looking for arena

football, but instead announced, "this is the most important event ever to happen in this arena."

A huge wave meandered around the balcony area, then touched down onto the main floor and then bounced back into the balconies, while everyone was proclaiming "He is risen! He is risen indeed!" Powerful testimonies were shared on the screen by people for whom the gospel of Jesus Christ has brought about transformation and resurrection. Pastor Mike proclaimed the eternal message of Easter, that Jesus Christ has won the victory of sin, death and the power of the devil, and that we can also experience the miracle of new birth.

At the close of the worship service, many people just stayed around, inhaling the moment, some praying, some hugging one another, some expressing amazement and awe. Again a huge cadre of volunteers showed up to dissemble the arrangements. Once again the freeway was jammed. Not surprisingly, the first thing the manager of Vets said after the service were the words, "We are already planning for you to come back next year."

Will this Easter have any lasting effect? I believe we will be hearing stories about its impact for years to come. Already there are short term responses. On Tuesday night of this week some 400 people showed up for Alpha, the largest group ever. Can you believe that? It's the middle of the week, it is spring with nice weather, this session will go into June, 400 people turned out. It must be a God-thing.

In addition, all indications are that a similar sized group will attend the new member class this coming Sunday, the registrations are pouring in. That is about double the size of any previous class. Lyle Schaller calls a church of 400 people a large congregation, this means we have another large church joining Hope this weekend. Some people have asked the question, "where will we put all of these people?" We had ample room on Easter, but how about the weeks to come? I have always had a stock answer to this question, "I'm in sales, not in management." This church belongs to God and God will provide.

I hope you were at Vets on Easter Sunday. It was much more exciting than the finish of the Master's Tournament. This was the beginning of something new, something profound, something transforming which will continue to surprise and amaze us in the future. To God be the glory.