



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Apr 1, 2005

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

I continue to ruminate over the extraordinary events of Sunday past, when we experienced the awe and wonder of the celebration of Christ's resurrection. According to the Des Moines Register, close to 10,000 people (our numbers were 8260 plus 600 at Sunrise) flocked to the Veterans Memorial Auditorium to (in my words) sing, praise, clap, shout, laugh, do the wave, eat, drink, hug, learn, listen, pray and rejoice. From 8:00 am until almost noon, we had a nonstop marathon of people deeply engaged in the Easter message of death and resurrection.

In the past decade Lutheran Church of Hope has experienced amazing transformations. Early Easter services were held outside in a tent, fighting off gale-force winds; in a much smaller barn, and in the shell of a new building with no heat. But only a few years later the congregation almost fills the largest venue in town. God must be doing something here. What do you think is causing all of this growth?

During Pastor Mike's sermon I climbed to the highest point in the building to try and gain some perspective on what was happening down below. I was assuming that the worship service might lose some of its vitality or connectedness in the "nose-bleed" sections, but I found quite the contrary to be true. Being that far above the floor tamped down some of the natural noise and commotion of people walking around on the floor, and so up high it was remarkably quiet and reverent.

The huge screen above the stage made it possible to see Pastor Mike almost clearer than we can see him even in the worship center on weekends, if we are sitting near the back. Of course Music Mike looked like a small speck from where I sat, thank goodness the bright spotlights shone brilliantly off the top of his head, acting almost like a mirror sending out signals.

What is it about Easter that brings such an incredible response? Ben Witherington, writing on Beliefnet, says that "Easter is all about the fact that God's "yes" to life is louder than death's "no," and the ultimate proof of this is that God raised His Son from the dead. Easter is not just about an isolated miracle 2,000 years ago that chiefly affected one person. Easter is all about the fact that miracles do still happen." During the service we saw

several poignant illustrations of these amazing miracles.

John Updike, the famous American novelist, has waxed eloquently about this miraculous event in his poem, Seven Stanzas of Easter.

"Make no mistake, if he rose it all, it was all his body; if the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle, the church will fall.

The same hinged thumbs and toes, the same valved heart, that-pierced-died-withered-paused, and then re-gathered out of enduring Might new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence; making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages; let us walk through the door."

Amen. As Updike suggests, let us not make the resurrection into a metaphor, an analogy, a parable, rather than an historical event. The stone was rolled away, the grave was empty, the power of God was unleashed, Jesus Christ is alive. And as Pastor Mike described on Sunday, we worship a living Christ, which changes everything; the world and us.

The other day at the bookstore I was paging through one of Marcus Borg's theological tomes, Borg being one of the hottest of the Jesus' Seminar gurus. (I can't bring myself to buy it.) Having been a college classmate of his, I am interested in his conclusions, and wonder especially why he is a part of a group which seems to deny most of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. For them Jesus is a metaphor; a parable of dying and rising, of suffering love, of peace and justice.

One of the chapters in the book was arguing for a "noninterventionist God," which is akin to Updike's description of "sidestepping transcendence." God is only immanent, not transcendent, not supernatural, for as any good Enlightenment rationalist can tell you, because this would defy the laws inherent in creation. Borg seems to suggest (although I only skimmed) that God would never intervene in the world, in nature, in human life. Of course this would also cover the resurrection, because there is no more radical intervention than this, God

becoming human, dying and rising.

A later chapter in the book, however, extolled the benefits of intercessory prayer, which is by its very nature asking God to intervene. He seems to suggest that one reason for this is that it is much more helpful for the one praying than the one prayed for, but he seems to be open to the idea that prayer has some effect on the one prayed for. So much muddle, so little clarity.

All this is very much unlike what happened at Vets. Pastor Mike announced unambiguously that we believe in an interventionist God, one who has come into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us and now transforms us. He made it clear that this is not a metaphor, but an event which happened long ago and continues to happen in the hearts and lives of all who believe. In fact, Lutheran Church of Hope could only have done what it has done this past decade with the power of an interventionist God.

Staff writer Abby Simons writing in the Monday Register headlined her article, [Glimpse of Heaven: Two Easter services draw 13,000 to downtown Des Moines](#). She writes,

"Jesus has outdrawn basketball. That was Pastor Mark Housholder's (must be a previously unknown fourth brother, on the lines of PDQ Bach) news Sunday. The Lutheran Church of Hope's Easter service had beaten the average single-session attendance at the state boy's basketball tournament this month. Upon hearing it, a celebratory cheer rose up from the congregation."

The article continued, "Of course, it wasn't just any Sunday and these weren't ordinary church services. Packed into Veterans Memorial Auditorium for the second year in a row, the West Des Moines church brought a new feel to Easter—and a jump in Sunday downtown traffic as two metro-area (Lutheran) churches simultaneously celebrated the holiday. At nearby Hy-Vee hall, nearly 3,000 members of Altoona's Lutheran Church of the Cross gathered for their first "Gather at the River" Sunday service.

On Tuesday of this week Pastor Mike reflected upon the Easter happening at a staff meeting. He said that if we have an average of 4,000 people on a normal weekend, the fact that we more than doubled on Easter means that large numbers of our regulars were inviting others to come. Of course this has always been a part of Hope's vision, to be invitational, evangelistic, welcoming. Unfortunately the average mainline Christian supposedly invites someone to church only once every 27 years, so it appears that Hope is breaking the norm.

Moving a step further, if we incorporate the research that says that it takes seven invitations before the average person will finally accept, that means that the 4,000 regular worshippers may have invited up to 28,000 people to come this Easter. Think about that, all of the phone calls, personal invites, postcards sent out, and another five or six thousand people showed up.

The great Indian evangelist D.T. Niles once described evangelism as "one beggar telling another beggar where to find food." Evangelism for Hope is one seeker inviting another seeker to the place of transformation. Praise God for such an incredible day. Thanks to the hundreds of volunteers who spent much of Saturday and Sunday preparing. And keep the message going, "He is risen. He is risen indeed."

(Footnote). This upcoming weekend more than 500 people have signed up to participate in the AIDS walk/run. AIDS is devastating much of Africa, and the message of the Gospel is very clear, *"Whatever you do, whatever you do, for the least of my sisters and brothers, you do it to me,"* Jesus says in Matthew 25. Or as I talked about on Maundy Thursday in the parable of the Great Banquet, "When those who had been invited to the banquet (Christians, westerners, affluent,) began to make excuses, the master became upset and told his followers to go out and invite the poor, the infirmed, the dying, the marginalized. "There is still room. There is still room." This AIDS walk/run is taking such directives seriously.