



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).

With the theme of Jesus Quest ringing in our ears this Lenten season (Search, Explore, Discover), I am reminded of a book which has been of particular value in helping me in my own Jesus Quest. The book is entitled Living Jesus, Learning the Heart of the Gospel, by Luke Johnson. Johnson is a Professor of New Testament at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga.

Johnson begins his book by declaring his unambiguous belief that Jesus is alive. Everything rests on this basic conviction, that Jesus is still alive. Jesus is the risen Christ, and the goal is to confess with the Easter exclamation of Mary Magdalene, “I have seen the Lord.”

Johnson says that everything we do in the church or in our own personal lives is determined by this one irreducible reality, Jesus Christ is alive. And because Christ is alive, he also becomes the life-giver for each of us. Because he has risen from the dead, his promise that we shall also rise is given credibility.

Such a confession goes to the very heart and soul of our faith, Jesus Christ is alive, and we are gathering together in the name of the risen Christ. Everything in the Word and Sacraments points to a living Jesus.

Pausing for a moment, many of us may echo the popular phrase of a generation ago, “where’s the beef?” Doesn’t every Christian believe that Jesus is alive? This seems like such a no-brainer.

Johnson goes on to document how so many theologians and historians and even pastors seem to be doing research on a dead Jesus. In fact, many scholars today begin the search for the historical Jesus with the belief that Jesus is dead. But if Jesus is dead, this changes everything about faith and life,

it creates a radically different kind of theology and ministry.

In the February 20, 2004 Pastors Update I quoted a wonderful piece from William Willimon, formerly chaplain and professor at Duke University, now a United Methodist Bishop. Since his opening story is very relevant to this discussion of Jesus, let me quote it again:

“In a lecture on ‘The Renewal of the Inner City Church,’ Jim Wallis (Editor of Sojourners Magazine) told a group of pastors true stories of declining inner city churches that had, by the grace of God, re-discovered their mission and begun to thrive. I was inspired, but in the conversation afterwards one pastor after another criticized Wallis’s speech. They accused him of looking at the church through rose-colored glasses. One even implied that he had lied.”

“That evening I told Wallis that I was appalled by the groups’ reaction. ‘I wasn’t,’ he said. That’s what I always get from mainline, liberal pastors. (Here comes the punch line) They are amazed when God wins! Scared to death that Easter, after all, might be true.”

Wallis, who has been all over television since the election, is talking about a living Christ. “they are amazed when God wins! Scared to death that Easter, after all, might be true.”

Luke Johnson passionately states that Jesus is alive, that Easter is true. Because Jesus is alive, this means we see his life and presence among us in a very different way. People who are alive are still capable of doing new things and saying new things. People who are alive can change their minds, they can show up in different places from where we might expect.

People who are alive can surprise us. They can appear on our doorstep or contact us in the middle of a worship service or at a family celebration or in the midst of a prayer time or when we are sick.

Because Jesus is alive, we can be in relationship with him, because Jesus is alive this intimacy can continue to grow and mature. If Jesus were dead, we would need to become historians, but because he is alive we can become friends and sisters and brothers and partners in ministry.

The question which Johnson asks his readers is this, "Do you believe Jesus is alive or dead?" That is the crucial issue. Johnson declares unequivocally that Jesus is alive, he is risen, he is risen indeed. He quotes a fellow advocate for a living Jesus, someone named the Apostle Paul, who writes, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching and our faith is in vain."

If Jesus is dead, then the story is already complete. Game, set, match. If Jesus is alive, then the story continues. At Lutheran Church of Hope during Jesus Quest the message will be unapologetically clear, Jesus Christ is alive and his living spirit lives in us and in this community of faith. Because he is alive we can continue to experience new beginnings and new possibilities.

A second major theme of Johnson's book follows upon the first. If we believe that Jesus Christ is alive, then our lifelong challenge is to learn as much as we can about him, indeed to learn to know him and be in relationship with him. Johnson uses a very interesting and promising choice of words, he says we need to "learn Jesus." I like that wording, "learn Jesus." Not just learn about Jesus, but learn Jesus.

In the Gospels the closest followers of Jesus are called disciples, which is another word for "learners." We are called to be learners, disciples, "learning Jesus." Hope is committed to being a learning community, and at the center of this quest is learning Jesus. Nine worship services each week, hundreds of small groups, growing numbers of classes, a myriad of support groups, an expanding prayer ministry all are focused on "learning Jesus."

We learn Jesus by immersing ourselves in the Scriptures, we learn Jesus in the power and flow of the worship experience, we learn Jesus in the preaching of the Word, we learn Jesus in the message and inspiration of the music, we learn Jesus in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. We learn Jesus in the lives of saints all around us.

We learn Jesus as we carry out our mission statement, "reaching out to the world around us and sharing the everlasting love of Jesus Christ." We learn Jesus when we reach out to the poor and needy, for in the face of these sisters and brothers of Christ we see the living Christ.

Learning Jesus is never finished, never complete. Johnson says that such learning is always a process, always a sojourn, for Jesus and each learner are always in the process of change, of growth, of new beginnings. We are never allowed the luxury of staying the way we are, but are always in the process of learning Jesus. It is learning Jesus that gives life its meaning and purpose and power.

So welcome to Jesus Quest. In Johnson's words, we hope this will be a time when you can learn the living Christ. It is a quest well worth taking.