

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
King of Glory Lutheran Church - Greenfield
Supply (Gerald Hibbard, Vice Pastor)
April 28, 1974

"I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO . . ."

"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.' . . . (Gamaliel says) So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" Acts 5:29, 38-39

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all."

We've all stated this many times during our lifetime. Most of us know it "by heart." It's a statement that most Americans cherish - many have even lost their lives because of their strong belief in this assertion.

There is another statement from the Bible that is somewhat in contrast to the one we've just heard. Some of us learned this statement in catechism. Few Americans have lost their lives due to their strong commitment to this statement. Yet many Americans claim that they place this belief above all others in their lives. The statement is found in the 20th chapter of Exodus - it goes like this:

"And God spoke these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before me.'

'You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall

NOT bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

From childhood to the present day, these two statements have always made me feel uneasy. Throughout my lifetime, I've always affirmed both of these statements. And yet, I remember as a teenager how they caused me some confusion.

They were both asking me for TOTAL ALLEGIANCE. And we all know "allegiance" means "faithfulness," "loyalty," and "devotion." And I always asked myself, how can I be totally faithful to God and totally faithful to a creation of God, namely, a country, its people, and its symbol? Even as a teenager I realized that NO COUNTRY or ITS PEOPLE were perfect; so I asked: How can I place my complete trust in any individual or government?

My Christian friends, I still struggle with that question to this very day. And as long as I'm alive, I don't know whether the question will ever be totally resolved. But I have solved the dilemma to a partial extent.

And that solution is that I give MY FIRST ALLEGIANCE TO GOD and HIS WILL -- and I give allegiance to my country, its government, and its people AS LONG AS THESE CREATIONS OF GOD CONFORM TO HIS WILL. And that's why I say I've only reached a partial solution - because knowing exactly what God's will is in every situation IS RARELY an either / or. Since human beings are most often involved in all life situations, His will is usually REFLECTED on both sides of any issue.

But one thing is FOR SURE - whenever Christians are LIVING their resurrection faith, they will experience a struggle -- a tension with the forces

of life around them. No better evidence of this is given than in today's First Lesson.

The apostles were seeking to LIVE and PREACH the resurrection faith. They were seeking to live by the love of God in Christ - and they were seeking to teach this as the way for others. But the forces of life around them - namely, in this case, the supreme judicial ruling body of the Jewish state, FORBID them from doing any of this.

According to the Sanhedrin, there was NO ROOM for any religious tolerance. Any doctrine contrary to the Torah was to be stamped out! Isn't it interesting that this orientation to monolithic, single-minded religious establishments continues to be heard even today. And yes, even today, it continues to gag the voice of our resurrection faith. In words, it affirms God, but in spirit it denies Yahweh as Lord and instead demands allegiance to a synodical-political religious organization.

And so we see even the religious establishment can create a tension for the Christian. Allegiance to resurrection faith is challenged by allegiance to an organized vehicle for that faith. Thus the Christian - in this case many Lutherans -- are forced into a struggle to determine where the resurrection faith IS BEING ALLOWED TO LIVE.

And so we see, whether life's forces are the Sanhedrin, a political dictatorship, or even an organized structure of the church -- all these can have the desire to pervert our allegiance to God AND to our resurrection faith.

These forces too often seek to rob us of our allegiance to the love of God. The force can be the power of success -- or the power of wealth-- or the power of the state -- or the power of things -- or the power of pleasure -- ANY ONE OF THESE CAN ANNOUNCE TO US: We strictly charge you

NOT to teach or live by His name." Yes, any created order of things in life can become like the Sanhedrin - a powerful source of suffocation of the spirit of our resurrection faith.

But our presence here this morning proclaims that we have NOT succumbed to these stiffling forces. They may have tempted us - but we haven't sold out to them. Our presence here, as a community of faith, speaks of our desire to obey God rather than men - we are seeking to be renewed in our resurrection faith.

We are here because we desire that our faith MAY live outside these holy walls, for we believe our trust in God is more than a private, exclusive thing. We live by a resurrection faith - by a trust in a Living Lord - a Lord whose love DOES bring new life to all conditions of human relationships.

Our Christian faith is not a blind faith - we are not fatalists who say to one another: "Just have faith, and everything will turn out all right." That's putting trust in an empty vacuum - that's leaving things to chance. Our trust is centered in a living Lord. And we put our trust IN LIVING HIS WAY - because in so living, WE KNOW we can be confident that everything will turn out o.k.

Christian faith is ACTING OUT CHRIST'S LIFE - putting his life into action. That's giving allegiance to a resurrected Lord - that's living and preaching a resurrection faith.

Resurrection faith is a love-in-action faith-- it is a way of life that often puts us into tension with other forces of life. Because it is a way of life which assesses things as they are - then takes risks to bring all things into harmony with God. It is this resurrection faith which then endures all other forces or movements in life.

Let me repeat those emphases of our faith:
Resurrection faith ASSESSES - RISKS - and
always ENDURES. *Yes...*

Our faith causes us to ASSESS. That is, we are called upon to determine the value of our actions and the actions of those around us. Our resurrection faith causes us TO LIFT UP those actions which serve the welfare of human life - and TO PUT DOWN those actions which degrade human existence.

In short, this means WE DO NOT give blind obedience to the ways of men, whether those men are national leaders or pulpit prophets. Both students and teachers often blindly follow the pressure of peer groups. Medical doctors are often led like sheep by their professional associations. Labor union members often resign their intelligence to their labor leaders. Many an executive is forced to apply a company policy when it goes against every Christian principle of love and justice that he has been taught.

To live *by this obedience to men* (accordingly) is to conform to whatever forces of life happen to be blowing at the moment. This is to live without a resurrection faith - to live as though Christ's way were dead - to live without assessing the value of every action in life.

Secondly - our faith causes us to TAKE RISKS - not necessarily life risks like the apostles took, BUT AT LEAST the risk of application. That is - resurrection faith enables us to apply our faith in our given life-situations.

God calls us to live our faith in the common places of our lives - whether factory, office, or living room. The apostles were not called into obedience while at a worship service - their call came during a fishing excursion -- during a routine and very familiar vocation of life.

Can there possibly be a more meaningful place TO LIVE OUT the resurrected love of God?!?

Finally - resurrection faith ENDURES. Radical movements and ideologies - whether left wing or right wing - will never stand the test of time. Arrogant nationalism failed under the régime of an Adolf Hitler. The new, Nazi racist movement in our society today will crumble accordingly.

Gamaliel - a Pharisee and member of the Jewish establishment says in today's lesson: "let these men alone. For if this plan or undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." Isn't it sad that we still fail to apply the wisdom of this great leader of the establishment. Here was a member of the judicial power structure faced by a group of men who were clearly involved in a case of CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. And he says - let's not over-react; if these guys are not of God they'll destroy themselves.

Rather than jumping to the gun and murdering these men, Gamaliel calls for patience and cool-headedness. Needless to say, not all crises can be handled this way. Some call for immediate action. But I know of many divorces - domestic murders - family separations - and even some wars which could have been avoided HAD THE PARTIES BEEN OBEDIENT TO GOD RATHER THAN TO THE HOT-HEADEDNESS OF MEN. ~~OR DECEPTIVE TACTICS~~
OR DECEPTIVE TACTICS

We come here again today to re-affirm our resurrection faith - to again proclaim our obedience to God. We do this throughout life with the complete confidence of God's forgiveness for our former moments of disobedience. Yes, we again pledge our allegiance to God and His will - because through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have come to know that God's WAY, TRUTH, AND LIFE will endure forever.

Amen.

3RD AFTER EASTER
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
May 2, 1976

"ARE THERE ANY WITNESSES?"

"Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are my witnesses of these things.'" Luke 24:45-48

It was the summer of 1966. I had just gone into debt way over my head by purchasing a Mustang convertible.

I'm certain I was puffed up with pride as I proceeded eastbound along S. Park Ave toward the main library at the Univ. of Wisconsin. And then came the surprise -- with a tremendous jolt and the crackling of steel and chiming of tinkling of glass - the entire rearend of my Mustang had been restyled in less than two seconds

The moments following were agonizing. Had anyone seen what had happened? I just didn't know. I had had the right of way, but could I prove it? I desperately needed someone to speak for me. But would anyone do it?? If anyone had seen the accident, would he tell what he saw?? would he be accurate?? or would he be afraid "to get involved?"

So it was - and so it is with all important things in life -- "Are there any witnesses?"

How often the fate of life hovers upon the testimony of a witness. They can make the difference between innocence and guilt -- between joy and jail. How important it is to have someone say - we have heard it - we have seen it with our own eyes - we have looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands -- it is of this we tell.

Whether it be a football game, a landing on the moon, the performance of a rock group, the

death of a loved one, or the resurrection of Jesus Christ -- how good we feel when we can say -- I actually saw it -- I was a witness to that event.

Yes, witnesses make the difference -- they confirm the reality of things. It is for this reason that history remains such an important reality for us all.

During the 1st three centuries of the Xan era, vast numbers of Christians made their headquarters underground in caverns near Rome. Here they found refuge from their persecutors in almost 600 miles of mole-like tunnels. Archeologists estimate that between two and four million were buried there. Inscriptions carved by Christians can still be seen on those walls -- one which clearly reads - "The Word of God is not imprisoned."

A witness to the truth. So it is with our faith. It is known and re-known, experienced and re-experienced, by the principle of RELAY. It's the practice of "pass it on" -- person to person, generation to generation.

Just imagine -- imagine that one generation would be TOTALLY SILENT concerning Christ and our faith in God's promise through Him. Suppose nothing would be said, nothing written, nothing preserved. What is a sobering thought in a generation which sees the witnesses of materialism far outnumbering the witnesses of ultimate truth.

So it is that to whatever extent any generation is SILENT or HESITANT or UNCERTAIN -- the next generation is impoverished to that degree. So it is that I have a great concern for Angela and her contemporaries - because studies clearly show that the generation before her (those now in their teens thru the late 20's and early 30's) has chosen to be IMPOVERISHED regarding a witness to faith in God.

For you and I - who have been blessed with parents who were SERIOUS about their witness of faith - we can truly be thankful. And especially I - during this past week and the

present moment, reflect upon the WITNESS of Blanche Martyn in my life. How grateful I can be that she did not leave me impoverished! Granted, I am far from perfect -- but thank God for mother Blanche, I am far from impoverished

Yes - thank God that she was not afraid to witness to her faith. Thank God she was not afraid to get involved with her sons regarding talking about faith. Thank God every time her sons asked a question she didn't tell them to go and ask the pastor about it.

For through her witness, came greater strength for her sons. Oh yes, I realize I run the risk of glorifying my mother by saying these things. But hopefully you will understand that I am glorifying God for using my mother as one of his witnesses.

Yes - she was not afraid to tell her sons that Jesus Christ was the way, the truth, and the life. She was not afraid to tell her sons that SHE wanted them to be DEVOUT Christians. Yes, regardless of the crisis we faced, it was never ~~so~~ an excuse to stay away from God or his people.

scared that it became
Yes - how many times I remember that she forced me to go to church -- esp. after being out late on Saturday night. How well I remember her words - "If you can stay out late on Saturday, just remember, you'll be getting up early on Sunday."

Yes - there was a loving force in her witness, not because she liked to see her sons grumble -- but because SHE KNEW her sons needed to be nurtured -- she knew they needed to be cradled in Christ's arms from the crib to the grave. And that meant that the witness of God's house had as much priority as the witness of the Martyn household.

So it was that Blanche Martyn did not let us make up our own minds about faith or worship. She didn't let us make up our own minds because she knew we'd take the easy way -- she knew we'd cop out -- she knew if given a choice, we'd stay

home. Yes, she didn't have to have a college education in order to understand the mindset of an adolescent -- she knew that like all other people, her sons were just as selfish. Yes, she knew that if given a choice, her sons would choose their own selfish interests over God's interest for them.

And so it was that her witness to her family was no different from her witness outside of her family. And I can only believe that her witness TO A LARGE degree is a major reason for my standing at this pulpit today.

So it is that I thank God today, and every day, for using mom Martyn as a witness of His love in life and resurrection after death. Yes, I truly thank God - because when it came to her death, ~~I would not~~ be defeated or despairing.
As witness would not let me

For through her, right up to her last week, I had been given the foundation of the Good News -- that nothing in all creation would be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Yes, through her, God had given me the resurrection faith -- I had heard it, seen it, and during that last week at Mercy Hospital, I looked upon it and touched it with my own hands.

The foundation of reassurance even in the midst of her death. Yes, Blanche Martyn was for me the kind of witness God wants me to be for Angela -- and you to be for your children., and for us to be to one another.

And so
~~blanche~~, For those of you who have not been afraid to witness to me since her death -- I thank you for your witness. Your words of sympathy and comfort have been God's resurrected vehicles of love and faith.

It takes words and witnesses if God's love is to be communicated -- it just doesn't happen by itself. And without witnesses at a time of crisis TRULY leaves the bereaved person feeling that the one who is afraid to speak REALLY DOESN'T CARE.

God help us to all get involved - to be witnesses -- NOT ONLY TO THE BEREAVED -- but to those suffering from poverty and other forms of human depreciation and imprisonment.

Yes, God help us to be courageous witnesses -- at least to our own families -- even if we have to wait like Jesus' disciples did to become witnesses to all peoples.

Above, may God's power, namely the Holy Spirit, again come into our lives as we gather around His table and share his forgiving love. Yes, may this power be ours, so that we can leave here and be his witnesses of repentance and forgiveness in our Monday world.

AMEN

EASTER III
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
April 24, 1977

"ON A COLLISION COURSE!"

"Peter and the other apostles answered back, 'We must obey God, not men.' ... And (Gamaliel said), I tell you, do not take action against these men. Leave them alone, because if this plan of theirs is a man-made thing, it will disappear; but if it comes from God you cannot possibly defeat them." Acts 5:29,38-39

Our Easter festival celebration has come and gone. For many, it's now time to settle back into familiar routines. Easter was a lovely flourish. But for them, only a flourish that has no lasting value.

But let us not kid ourselves into thinking that people today are the only ones who have made Easter a momentary flourish. Seven disciples in today's gospel had gone the same route.

They had returned to Galilee - to the familiar place they had left behind. With nothing better to do, they decided to return to their former trade of harvesting fish. Better to do that than sit around waiting for something to happen.

They were soon to find out that Jesus was not through with them. The long night with no results; the stranger on shore telling them where to cast their nets; the catch of fish so great they could not haul it in; and finally -- the realization of eating breakfast with the resurrected Lord. Wow - what a moment!

And from that moment on - life could never be the same again. And it's from that vantage point that we meet Peter and the apostles in the lesson from Acts. At this point, discipleship could never be routine religion for them anymore; the resurrection of Christ now made faith a deeply radical commitment to God. Only his way

was of importance on earth -- even if that meant civil disobedience in the face of the authorities.

So it was -- facing a collision of powers -- God's power against the power of the governing authorities - and Peter and the apostles could only answer: "We must obey God, not men." Obviously what's meant here is that true disciples cannot obey human power when they violate the will of God. And what was the usual cost of such disobedience -- death. And even though Gamaliel prevented that -- the future path of the disciples was already determined -- following the risen Lord would surely yield a collision course with great suffering.

Friends in Christ, the scene has not changed today. To the degree that you and I proclaim the power of the Christ, we shall remain on a Collision Course -- forever locking horns with established powers and principalities that live by principles that contradict Jesus Christ.

So - why did Peter and the apostles do it? And why do we continue to do it? Why do we continue to proclaim Him as our Lord and God? Why do we continue to seek to bring others to Him? Why do we make such a big tadoo of Christ WHEN WE KNOW WE WILL SUFFER FOR IT?? Isn't that akin to masochism??

By no means! Never masochism! We do it because there is no greater power to live for than the power of forgiveness and promise of resurrection. Yes - we can even delight in our suffering like Peter. Because suffering for Christ is always short lived. Surely never more than a lifetime. And how can that be eternally hurtful WHEN WE KNOW THE FUTURE WILL BE RESURRECTION, Not suffering.

Sounds incredible? yes! Is difficult to live at times? Definitely, yes! Is the truth? God says - without a doubt!

And that's why Peter and the apostles could proclaim, "We obey God, not men." That's why they could even face suffering because of it -- because their lives were moving from suffering to resurrection -- from deterioration to wholeness. That's what the power of resurrection meant to them.

And it should mean the same for you and me. For whether we're proclaiming Christ right now or not, we're all suffering and we're all deteriorating. Because that's the cycle of this life -- from existence to death.

But with Christ -- as we proclaim Him -- the cycle is from suffering to resurrection. And what a difference that is from death -- both the deadness of sin and guilt, and the deadness of body.

Being on the collision course with Christ can make suffering NOW and in the FUTURE into nothing -- because resurrection negates all the negatives of life. So why worry about a little suffering caused by our own faithfulness-- caused by our proclamations-- or caused by anything else. That little suffering will mean nothing in the end.

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So - how does that stack up? Do we believe it? Do we really live with the power of the resurrection as our hope against all hell and suffering? Do we really obey God rather than these powers and principalities that forever contradict Him?

You know the answer for yourself, and I for myself. But one thing's for certain -- as long as we really proclaim faithfulness to Christ, we'll never escape the collision course. Nor did Peter and the others.

And dare we get the wrong impression - please

note where God confronts Peter with the call of obedience. Not in some act of worship -- not while he's praying -- not even in some heroic or crisis moment. Peter was fishing. That's right - God calls for Peter's obedience in his regular everyday tasks. Peter and the others were doing their thing.

Much as it might happen to us at the office, factory, or with the neighbor next door -- Peter's call to obey came while he was involved in his regular, everyday livelihood. It was there that he was called to proclaim and live by the power of the resurrection. He either responded to that power -- or chose to live by the power of men.

God calls for obedience in our everyday business. And there's a lot more to his business than an hour on Sunday morning.

So my friends - we'd best get used to things as they really are -- in fact, we might as well delight in them -- that is, get used to and delight in the fact that we'll forever be on this collision course. Forever having to choose between obeying God and men -- and forever suffering man's abuse for choosing God.

Because we're moving from suffering now -- (sometimes our fault; sometimes the fault of others; sometimes just the power of deterioration) from that suffering to the wholesome resurrection of tomorrow - and an eternal future. And that's a plan no man will ever defeat.

AMEN

3RD OF EASTER
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
April 9, 1978

"MISSING THE MAIN POINT"

"How dull you are!" Jesus answered. "How slow to believe all that the prophets said! Was the Messiah not bound to suffer thus Before entering upon his glory?" *Luke 24:25,26*

What were those two followers doing heading for Emmaus? That was seven miles away from the empty tomb. They had already shared in the excitement that the grave was empty -- and now here they were walking away from all the action.

If ever there was a time for the followers of Jesus to stay together - this was the time. They needed to talk things over - to compare notes - to find some slender thread to tie things together. But here they were -- walking to Emmaus - seven miles away from the real confrontation of life.

We have no idea what compelled them to take this journey. But when you think about it -- there situation comes pretty close to home. When problems get too tough to handle -- when life and events bewilder and confuse us -- when our little worlds begin to crumble and come apart -- we often run away from God and everything he stands for.

Adam and Eve confronted their sin -- and their first reaction was to run away from God. Israel received the covenant only to turn their backs to God forcing the prophets to beckone for their return. The prodigal son had it made - yet he couldn't scramble fast enough to get away from his father's house. And this dramatic script repeats itself time and again right up to the present moment in history.

Is it any wonder that Jesus said to these followers: How dull you are! How slow to believe all that the prophets said! How sad that you

have missed the whole point of my coming @- that I came to suffer in order that I could be glorified afterward!

How sad that these followers had MISSED THE MAIN POINT. But their story is repeated over and over again -- hundreds of people continue to MISS THE MAIN POINT of Jesus' life.

This past weekend -- I had a mixed marriage --- I married a Christian girl to a Jewish young man. On Thursday night, both families were here for the rehearsal. But before this could begin -- the Jewish mother requested a conference with me.

Obviously - she felt a bit strange in this Christian environment. I could completely empathize with her. She was deeply upset that none of the rabbis in Oak Park would consent to come here to assist in the marriage. Likewise, I felt the rabbis had been very narrow minded. But the real blow came when she asked if I might remove the large cross in the sanctuary just for the wedding. Obviously, I couldn't quite agree with her feelings.

But the real issue here is that both she and the rabbis had MISSED THE WHOLE POINT of the marriage. Instead of thinking about what marriage really stands for -- instead of concentrating on God's will -- they had become totally hung up in man's religious boxes. This woman and her rabbi friends WERE RUNNING AWAY from God's ordained will of marriage.

God ordains that man and woman should be married. And moreover, God desires that his love be present in that marriage. That's the main point. The religious trappings surrounding the marriage ARE VERY SECONDARY.

Yes - how dull we often are. How slow to believe all that the prophets have said.

Obviously - it's not totally fair to take a pop shot at this Jewish circumstance WITHOUT also pointing out that Christians continue to miss the main point IN MORE WAYS than we can probably count.

In this congregation at the present time I know of several family situations which are presently IN A STATE of confusion or maybe even coming apart at the seams. You would think that under these circumstances THESE PEOPLE would be clammering for the forgiving love of God.

But surprise! Like Adam and Eve, like Israel, like the prodigal son, like the two followers heading for Emmaus -- these people have turned their backs on God. Somehow or other, they think they can pull their lives together WITHOUT HIS FORGIVING POWER -- WITHOUT HIS HEALING LOVE. And too often, the saddest reality is that they'll sometimes finally come back to God TOO LATE -- they finally face up to forgiveness after their hearts have become too hard.

Obviously - God forgives them at that time -- but they can't forgive one another. So they continue for years to ~~live~~ live with a chip on their shoulders -- never really completely free from their feelings of guilt, *hurt, bitterness,*

Yes -- we've all known and we've all seen people like the two followers on the road to Emmaus. They are too often people who seem to be totally over-powered by gloom & doom. They are the ones who never let lose of their grief -- every time you encounter them they remind you of how bad things really are.

Or they are the ones who walk around with plastic smiles at cocktail parties -- trying to ~~make~~ make you and me believe that everything is peachy-Q -- when we know that their lives are

rotting from the inside out. They are living skeletons -- trying to feel the world around them 'by' filling up their lives with false highs -- whether from booze or dope or constant pleasure seeking.

God deliver us from this kind of death in life. And that's exactly what happened to the two followers after they spent several hours with Christ. They describe their experience by saying that while they were talking to him their "hearts burned within them."

It was during those moments that they really EXPERIENCED THE MAIN POINT of their religious faith -- because it was during those brief moments that they really encountered that God's concern for them was very much alive; not dead as they thought.

Here was a God who was not afraid to tell them that they were DULL -- that they had missed the whole point of resurrection faith. I think that's a message that needs a lot of communicating from Christians and to Christians.

Too often we just take ourselves too darn seriously -- we just get too darn caught up in our problems and perplexities. We hardly live like we're expecting a resurrection -- we live like the whole of eternity is wrapped up in this bad little moment. Too often we live making the superficial stuff of our Christian faith INTO THE MAIN POINT. Too often, we're DULL!

We get all hung up about crosses and crucifixes and styles of praying and flowers and folk songs and pretty buildings etc. etc. etc. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ DOES NOTHING FOR US -- there is no burning at all in our hearts FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

Well - there's not a person in this room WHO HAS NOT experienced a burning in his/her heart. Everyone of us -- at least adults -- have had a moment WHEN OUR HEARTS HAVE BEEN ON FIRE (and I'm not talking about heart-burn).

Maybe it was back there on our honeymoon -- maybe it was as recently as our last date. But we've all had that experience.

Well - that's the feeling that you and I have constantly WHEN WE OPEN OURSELVES TO THE POWER AND MISSION OF CHRIST. The two followers on the road FINALLY opened up their lives to Christ and they really became charged up for his mission.

But as long as the resurrection was just a story -- as long as it didn't mean anything to them personally -- THEY WERE JUST A COUPLE OF DULL FOLLOWERS. They talked about Jesus -- but they were not confident about his resurrection or their own.

But once resurrection became a reality -- their zeal could not be stopped. They no longer tried to avoid Christ -- but now they offered his love EVEN AT THE RISK OF DEATH. But they were no longer afraid to die -- because they were confident NOW of the resurrection.

It is my sincere belief that you have come here this morning NOT TO BECOME ANOTHER DULL follower of Christ -- but rather to SET YOUR HEARTS ON FIRE WITH the love of Christ.

God has again recharged you with his power and promise of forgiveness and the promise of the resurrection. Either you will leave here RENEWED and a little more on fire with that love -- or you will remain dull and lifeless -- STILL MISSING THE MAIN POINT.

God leaves the choice up to you. AMEN

EASTER III
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
April 29, 1979

"HEARD, SEEN & FELT"

John writes: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." I John 1:1

For most of us - what happens between Monday thru Saturday is far more important than what happens on Sunday morning. Why is that so? Why does Sunday morning often have relatively minor significance in our lives? Why do we get so excited about a sports event - or a rock concert at Pine Knob - a weekend vacation - etc. etc. Why do these things so often have much greater impact than Sunday morning worship??

I'm sure there are many different reasons swimming around in your minds. But I would propose a more universal reason - namely: too often Sunday morning is overly SPIRITUALIZED. Or as I have said before, too often Sunday morning is so heavenly oriented that IT'S NO EARTHLY GOOD!!

Today's lessons from 1st John and St. Luke clearly reestablish that TRUE faith is more than spiritualized religion. More than heavenly talk. More than nice-sounding choirs and stained-glass preachers. In short, John emphasizes that Jesus Christ has the greatest impact upon us when he is HEARD, SEEN, AND FELT! when we experience the love of God with all of our being, not just our ears.

In the gospel this notion is dramatically reinforced by Jesus. He says to his freaked-out disciples: Look at me! See my hands and feet! Touch me! I'm real! I'm not some phantom ghost up in heaven -- I'm right here with you. I can even eat broiled fish as a resurrected person. I'm not only spiritual -- I'm physical! And that's why the resurrection of Jesus Christ had such an impact on the disciples ... BECAUSE THEY HEARD...

THEY SAY ... AND THEY TOUCHED AND WERE TOUCHED BY
JESUS CHRIST!

And so John reflects the feelings of the apostles in his letter when he says: "we have heard... we have seen ... and we have touched with our hands." Their joy was complete because they had experienced more than a spiritual Christ -- they had encountered a physical Christ -- a physically resurrected Christ. And from that day forward - these same apostles offered the power of Christ in physical forms. The Word of Christ was not only heard -- it was seen and felt ... it had a physical impact on life!!!

Just reflect upon your own life for a moment. When has Jesus Christ been most real for you?!?! When have you really seen and felt the power of God?!?! When have you really known that God was present in your life?!?!

I would venture to bet that for most of us -- the power of Christ has been most real when we have been physically touched in some way -- when we have experienced God not only in spirit, but in mind and body as well.

I know how true that has been for me!! You've heard my story before -- it was a story of near death in a very good hospital. And it was through the physical dedication of doctors, nurses, a pastor -- and especially a Roman Cath nun -- that I came to know that Jesus Christ was very much alive -- physically and spiritually helping me!!

You have just heard from Skip and Kathy May. Do you think they feel the way they do about refugees because they heard about them from friends or because they read about the plight of refugees in Time magazine. They are concerned because they have been physically involved -- they have heard, seen, and felt the compassion of Christ through their physical association with refugees.

Many of us have been confronted by moves and transfers. But when families do move from the Master, they usually tell me that the most difficult aspect of their moving WILL BE LEAVING THIS CHURCH. They say this not because they're trying to inflate my ego -- not because they want to suggest that we are a self-righteous church - bu

Because this ^{all physical} body of Christians is more than a Sunday-going church -- most of you have sought to have more than a spiritual suntan from your faith. You've gone beyond that superficial level-- you've given of yourselves in very visible - very tangible - very feeling ways. You've committed yourselves TO TOUCHING THE WORLD beyond these four walls. You have deeply touched me and each other -- and I hope and pray the character of this congregation never changes.

Last night - we asked each person at the Orientation to share a SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE OF HIS/HER LIFE. Not one person in the room shared an other-worldly, visionary experience. All the experiences were very down to earth -- they involved relationships -- deep, touching, earthy, gutsy relationships. It's that kind of life involvement THAT IS TRULY CHRISTIAN ... truly religious.

That's why for most of us - Monday thru Saturday is so very important --- or at least more important than Sunday morning. Because it's Monday thru Saturday where we really get involved physically with life. During those days we are physically nourished by the grace of God... through our jobs, our families, our associations, our homes, our schools, our paychecks, our spouses, our fiances,

It's Monday thru Saturday THAT GOD COMES TO US in more than a spoken word from the pulpit. It's on those days...and every day... that God comes to us in physical and well as spiritual forms.

Believe me - I'm not trying to "put down" the spiritual word. I'd be putting myself out of a job. But I am trying to say that as Christians we've got to get our understanding of God & faith

into proper balance. To be a Christian is TO UNDERSTAND that physical life without the spiritual Word of God IS ETERNAL EMPTINESS. But likewise, the spiritual Word without the thankful recognition of God's physical presence through food, clothing, friendships, family, vocations.... the spiritual Word without God's physical & material things IS A RELIGIOUS WELL WITHOUT WATER.

The evangelist St. James said it this way:

¹⁴ My brothers, what good is it for someone to say that he has faith if his actions do not prove it? ~~no~~
~~no~~ ¹⁵ Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. ¹⁶ What good is there in your saying to them, "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!"—if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

So it is with religious faith! If we say we have faith... and do not include actions of mercy in that faith, then our faith is dead!

But these are not the facts of our faith!

- You and I have great potential! Because God has blessed us NOT ONLY with his redeeming Word in Christ -- but he has double blessed us! He has graced our lives with a phenomenal abundance of physical and material things!

And so the question that really faces You and Me every day of life is: How am I going to thank God for blessing me NOT ONLY SPIRITUALLY... but also PHYSICALLY & MATERIALLY! We have not only heard the Word of God -- we daily SEE IT and are TOUCHED abundantly by it IN A VERY PHYSICAL WAY!!

So again - taking the Word of our brother James: Suppose that you and I know of brothers & sisters

living in refugee boats or camps ...and we also know that they need clothes, food, and a place to live. What ~~good~~ is there in our saying to them: "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!" and then turn around and not give them the necessities of life?!?!?

So it is with faith. If it is all heavenly words without any earthly actions -- then it is a dead faith!

Friends in Christ - that has never been the faith that has characterized Church of the Master in recent years. Our heavenly words have continued to be extended in earthly deeds that are seen and felt by others. I can only believe we will do the same when challenged by this ministry to refugees. Because these are people, just like you and me, who need more than to hear a heavenly word -- they need to see and feel the physical presence of the risen Christ.

AMEN

EASTER III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

April 17, 1983

Peter R. Martyn , Pastor

"FROM BEGGAR TO BENEFACTOR..."

Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel..."

Acts 9:13-15

I'm certain I've told the story before -- possibly here at Hope, and possibly in one of my former congregations -- but I haven't found a better lead-in for the focus of today's text of St. Paul's conversion. It's the story of the outcast beggar who was sitting across the street from a famous artist's studio. The artist was peering out of his large studio window; he caught a glimpse of the desparate beggar across the street; immediately, he brought his canvas to the window and began painting. It was a hurried job -- but within a little more than an hour, the portrait was finished.

The artist called the beggar "Hey, you -- come here, I've got something for you." The beggar rambled across the street. The artist then said, "Here, I'd like you to have this!" The beggar stared dumbfounded at the portrait. He obviously didn't recognize the self-portrait that the artist had drawn. Finally the beggar asked: "Who is it?" The artist merely smiled and said nothing.

The beggar looked more deeply into the face of the portrait. With amazement - he finally said -- "I think them are my eyes, aren't they?" With much hesitation he asked: "Is this a picture of me?" The artist replied: "This is the man that I see in you." And the beggar then stated: "Well, if this is the man that you see in me, then this is the man that I will be." I'm told that this same beggar became a great believer in God and himself -- and became a great pastor to skid row bums.

"If that's the man you see in me, then that's the man that I will be." Those are words of conversion. Words of radical change. To be converted from beggar to benefactor is no easy change. But

we all know that these miracles of conversion occur every day.

We all know of someone who has given up of someone who has become depressed ... of someone who has threatened suicide. And we all know of times when someone else -- possibly you or me -- has come along and helped that other person to again see their real potential -- to see their reason for being and going on -- to see renewed purpose for living and giving. There is nothing greater than to share that kind of moment of conversion!!

In the story of the beggar turned benefactor -- it was the simple talent of an artist that offered the resurrection power of renewal to that beggar. It would have been so easy -- so very tempting -- so very natural for that artist to look across the street and say: "Oh my God -- look at that good-for-nothing bum over there ... he must be waiting for his daily handout from someone -- why doesn't he get lost and make something of himself!!" Yes -- it would have been so easy for the artist to see the negative -- to offer only words of condemnation -- to view only the beggar's faults, and not see any of the beggar's potential goodness (or shall we say Godness?!)

The same was so true for Ananias -- who is the real unsung hero of Paul's conversion. He knew only too well how evil Saul had been. And yet God told Ananias that Saul was his special chosen instrument. Essentially God was saying to Ananias -- "Don't let your impression of Paul's past determine your thinking about his future! I have great plans for him! And so Ananias became the bearer of good tidings for Saul -- he became the source of conversion for Saul!! God used a simple man to turn Saul from persecutor to proclaimer of the faith!!

Just like Saul -- Ananias and the artist could have merely perpetuated persecution! The artist could have heaped persecution upon the beggar -- after all, the beggar was making a bad image for the art studio. Likewise, Ananias had very good reason to give Saul a good dose of his own destructive medicine. The temptation in life is always to do just exactly what Saul had done for many years -- to persecute and put down anyone who is different ... especially those who worship differently!

Unfortunately -- too often in our attempts to be devout and pious believers -- we do exactly what Saul did -- we persecute the Church of Jesus Christ and in the process often persecute one another!! There's hardly a week that I don't see evidence of this in the life of the church. For instance -- this past week the Communion Survey Committee shared with me some of the comments written on the returned questionnaires.

Dear friends in the risen Christ -- let us become the people of Hope that God has portrayed us to be!!

AMEN

Quite frankly, I was stunned by a few. Not only stunned by the persecuting comments about other Christian denominations -- but especially stunned by the handful of derogatory comments toward the committee members and their committed labors in this church!!

Obviously -- there are a variety of opinions about Communion practices in the church --- and that's the way it will always be. There will never be any one way or any perfect way for any church body to implement the Sacrament of the Altar. That was the very reason for the survey in the first place -- to surface some of the diversity in the congregation. But when we as Christian brothers and sisters use a "growth opportunity" to attack one another for sincere Christian efforts -- then we have lowered ourselves even below Saul!! At least Saul was a Jew -- he had good reason for challenging the sonship of Christ. But we who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior -- we have absolutely no justification for attacking his divine sacrament or those who seek to study it more carefully! For to attack the sacrament is to attack Christ himself -- and there is no greater sin of persecution in the church.

Yes - it truly amazes me how fellow Christians can assault other Christians who have dedicated themselves to serious study and difficult research. I am always flabbergasted by church people who haven't seriously cracked a Christian study book for decades -- but somehow think their grade-school understanding of decades ago will carry them through forever! God doesn't change -- but our understanding of Him and his Word certainly does -- that's why we send our pastors and educators to be trained by scholars and historians and theologians!

As I recently stated at our successful Lenten study this year --- so often in the church we see the same 100 to 125 faces show up week after week for Christian nurture and study. But when the non-attending families are hit by serious tragedies ... or serious illnesses ... or life-threatening diseases ... or by death itself -- then I will often hear the same worn-out song: "Pastor, why doesn't the church do anything to prepare us for these realities?!" "Why doesn't the church help us to cope with cancer ... and strokes ... and tragic happenings ... and heartache and grief ... and of course the list goes on."

Just like good old Saul --- so often we are so quick to persecute the church and its people and its leaders rather than to rejoice for the Good News and the helpful gospel that the church shares week after week --- day after day -- year after year!!

We can go through an exhausting Lent and Holy Week --- we can go through a resurrecting Easter celebration -- and too often there is just a deadening silence of thanksgiving for the good news of Jesus Christ. But let there be one mistake in the bulletin or newsletter -- or one omission from a list of contributors -- and that's the kind of news that too often we will ~~share with vigor!!~~

Sadly but truly -- too often as Christians we choose to be beggars rather than benefactors! We go through our Christian routine complaining and criticizing instead of celebrating the Good News that we have to share!! And certainly at Hope Church -- there has just been tremendous good news to share in 1983!! But too often we would rather concentrate on the negative -- finding fault instead of lifting up the joys of our life together as God's servants!!

But God will not have it that way!! Today through Ananias and the artist in our earlier story -- God says: I have a different way for the Church of Jesus Christ! Through the life of Saul who became St Paul, God ~~says~~ with absolute clarity == yesterday's faults are not the basis for today's celebration!! And if there was ever a man whom God could have condemned for yesterday's evil -- it was the man Saul become Paul.

But that is not the nature of the God that you and I live for and believe in! God says to Ananias about this past persecutor: "He is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel!"

God will not allow our past persecutions to determine the future of his glory! Just as he saw great potential for Paul -- he sees the same potential for his people of Hope. God seeks to daily convert us -- daily to resurrect us from beggars who merely take from life -- to benefactors who seek to give life to others!

God calls us to paint a LOVING PORTRAIT OF HIS CHURCH - regardless of the denomination. As he did with Saul -- God says: Enough of yesterday's petty persecution. Get on with the good news! Begin to lift up the potential that I have created in you! Become the saints that I have made you through Jesus Christ!

St Paul allowed a simple man named Ananias to turn him from a persecutor to a proponent of the love of Christ. Today God takes another simple man named Peter to tell the people of Hope that he has great expectations of us -- and that we are to put an end to all of our former persecutions.

Dear friends in the risen Christ -- let us become the people of Hope that God has portrayed us to be!!

AMEN

EASTER III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

April 21, 1985

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NOT YET FULLY DONE!"

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." I John 1:8-9

"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Luke 24:36

Most of you do not know Jerry, but many of you have had a Jerry in your home. Jerry loved to help his mom make gingerbread-men cookies. One day when Jerry was helping his mom, he said: "Mom, this is kind of like the way God made us out of clay, huh?" His mother thought for a moment, and finally said, "I guess it sort of is, Jerry."

As Jerry was popping the gingerbread dough into his mouth, he asked: "Mom, how come we have to bake 'em. I think the dough is good this way!" His mom answered, "Well, Jerry, it's important that our gingerbread men are strong and sturdy -- we don't want their arms or legs or heads to fall off, do we?"

Jerry quickly agreed. But then he asked: "Does God have to bake us first?" His mother was really puzzled now. "Well, Jerry, in a sense God bakes us. He wants us to grow up strong and sturdy in our faith. And that takes a long, long time. In fact, for our whole lifetime God continues to show us what he wants us to become. I guess that's a little like baking a gingerbread man, isn't it??"

That night Jerry was helping his mom serve the gingerbread men to the guests at their house. One of the guests gave him a wink and said, "Jerry, what are you going to be when you grow up?"

Jerry paused for a long time, ... then he looked at the tray of gingerbread men, and finally said to the whole group: "Well, I guess I don't know yet ... cause God hasn't finished baking me yet."

I don't know if Jerry knew how sophisticated his theology really was ... but he really summarized a basic reality of faith: GOD ISN'T FINISHED BAKING ME YET. Or stated somewhat differently: WE ARE NOT YET FULLY DONE. Even though Christ has been raised from the dead, we are still in the "baking process" -- we are still becoming what God wants us to be. Not one of us has yet arrived. None of us is fully baked; no matter what our past or present, GOD IS NOT YET FULLY DONE WITH US.

On Saturday morning, Pastor Bob walked into the church office and yelled somewhat facetiously to me: "Hey, Peter, not yet fully done, eh?" And I quickly quipped, "you bet your life I'm not fully done yet ... and in fact, I never will be fully done with this sermon."

The manuscript is now finished, but the sermon is by no means DONE. Even though I'm already preaching it, this sermon is far from BEING DONE. Because preaching a sermon is but one small part of the sermon ... in fact, probably the least important part. The words of this sermon are but a trifle compared to its fulfillment IN MY LIFE AND YOURS. It is the living out of this sermon that is THE BAKING PROCESS. Preaching is merely the cookie cutting part. And the living out of these words IS NEVER FULLY DONE ... NEVER COMPLETELY ACCOMPLISHED. And so Pastor Bob and each of you, please be assured: THIS SERMON IS NOT YET FULLY DONE!

Some friends were over to the house this week and one of them asked me: "Peter, do you feel your sermons are better at the early or late service?" If I had been really honest with that person I WOULD HAVE SAID "NEITHER!" Because I never feel fully satisfied with my sermons or preaching. I never feel "THEY ARE FULLY DONE." I always feel they fall far short of what they should be.

Because God's word is so comprehensive -- so inexhaustible -- so beyond capsulating in a 15-16 minute Sunday sermon. That's why I'm often troubled with worshippers who only come once or twice a year -- they're just getting a miniscule taste of the Good News. The process of spelling out God's Word is a lifetime event ... never fully finished ... never sufficiently stated in one sermon ... always ongoing. God has revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ; and yet, the reality, the comprehension, the fulness of that revelation IS NEVER FULLY DONE.

What we are talking about today is the religious concept of CONVERSION. Conversion is being changed into what God wants us to be. It's the process of renewal, of reformation, of revitalization, or what was classically called sanctification. Conversion is starting over again ... beginning each new day BRAND NEW. That process is an ongoing one. Or as Jerry said, we are NEVER FULLY BAKED.

There are some Christian traditions which seem to indicate that CONVERSION IS AN INSTANT REALITY. You get zapped by God -- and from then on you're forever perfect, righteous, all-together. In essence, those traditions are saying we have a "once-in-a-lifetime" conversion experience. Not so for us. Conversion is a never-ending process. God is always seeking to change us. As our texts reflect, God is always seeking to bring us FROM DARKNESS

INTO CHRIST'S LIGHT. BUT DARKNESS IS ALWAYS WITH US ... SIN IS ALWAYS HAUNTING US ... THERE IS A NEVER-ENDING NEED FOR CONVERSION ...not a once-in-a-lifetime need. We are always being baked ... YET NEVER FULLY DONE.

This conversion process occurs in three ongoing stages: VERIFICATION, EDIFICATION, AND MAGNIFICATION. In today's Gospel text, Jesus comes to the disciples TO VERIFY that he is risen. He asked them to "handle him," "to see the nailholes," "to touch." He ate broiled fish to assure them that he wasn't a ghost. He spoke of himself as "flesh and bones." He was VERIFYING the resurrection ... verifying that he was present and alive for the disciples.

We still need that VERIFICATION today if we are to continue to believe and grow in faith. And so Christ continues to VERIFY his presence. He comes today to Jonathon Patberg; and through his Word and water, his power is planted deeply into Jonathon's being. Jonathon is forgiven ... never to doubt that Word again. Jonathon is assured of a never-ending relationship with God ... never to doubt that promise. Jonathon is converted to Christ ... forever to have the peace of Christ even amidst the turmoil of the world.

But not only in Baptism do we have Christ's presence. Each time we "eat his bread" and "drink his cup" he is fully present for us and within us. In Communion, we receive the power of Christ's forgiveness. He verifies that his sacrificial body and blood is ours to have and to hold until death do us part.

Each time Christ verifies his presence through these sacraments, we are again converted ... changed into his likeness. And yet, we are NOT FULLY DONE. There is more than verification to conversion. There is also the need for EDIFICATION. We need more than his presence; we need his Word. That's why Jesus interpreted the scriptures for the disciples. BECAUSE THAT'S A NEVER-ENDING NEED FOR TRUE, CONVERTED CHRISTIANS. Like the disciples, we must continually have "our minds opened to God's truth."

As we weekly hear the Scriptures and seek to interpret God's word, we come to know God's purpose for us: THAT CHRIST CAME TO LOVE US, NOT TO IN ANY WAY REJECT OR CONDEMN US. Through Scripture we come to see that God wants us to be intimately his. He always seeks to change our minds from the darkness of sin to the light of his love and forgiveness. Through Scripture, we see the way back to God: THROUGH JESUS CHRIST. We are EDIFIED ... DAILY RENEWED AND CONVERTED TO THE LOVE OF CHRIST. Totally accepted by God. Our minds are transformed to be like Christ's.

But that's not a once-in-a-lifetime reality: that's a never-ending process. EDIFICATION NEVER STOPS. We are always being drawn back to God through Christ. That's why St. John says in today's lesson: "Every time we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and PURIFY us from all unrighteousness." The purification process is never-ending. As we all know, growth and newness only come when we daily admit our imperfection and need for purification. Edification enables purification -- our never-ending return or conversion.

But once God's presence has been VERIFIED ... and when we have been EDIFIED in God's redeeming love -- then there can only be one response: MAGNIFICATION. We magnify the Lord with our lives -- we live as his witnesses, his advocates. The death and resurrection of Christ assures us of our forgiveness and victory; but we are called to bear the results of Christ's life, death and resurrection: WE MAGNIFY THE LORD BY BEING HIS ADVOCATES IN THE WORLD.

The gospel says: "Beginning in Jerusalem, repentance and forgiveness of sin will be preached in his name to all nations." We are called to magnify the power of Christ -- to be his advocates throughout the world.

Our task is like Bobby's mother. While tucking Bobby into bed one night, he snuggled beneath the covers and said: "Mommy, you do the praying for me tonight." His mother quickly responded: "But Bobby, you can say your own prayers." Without missing a beat, Bobby quickly rebuffed: "Well, mom, God and I aren't on very good terms today."

Bobby's mother was a bit shocked and asked him, "Now why do you feel that way?" "Well mom, Billy Simpson and I filled Mrs. Allen's mailbox full of mud today." His mother responded: "Don't you think God can forgive you if you're sorry?" Bobby answered, "Well, maybe, but if he's half as mad as Mrs. Allen will be when she goes to get her mail tomorrow, I don't think he'll feel much like forgiving me."

"So you think I should say your prayers for you tonight," his mother asked. "Well, you see mom, I was sorta hoping you'd put in a good word for me."

Bobby was asking his mom to be his advocate with God. That's the role God asks of us -- TO MAGNIFY Christ by always advocating his love and forgiveness for anyone who repents. Our call is always to PUT IN A GOOD WORD FOR ONE ANOTHER. And that's a never-ending call: WE NEVER STOP BEING ADVOCATES FOR CHRIST OR ONE ANOTHER.

Conversion is a never-ending process of verification, edification and magnification. None of us is ever fully baked; NOT YET FULLY DONE. There is nothing more revolting

to a Christian than another Christian who acts as if "he/she has arrived." Who acts as if his/her life is all together -- no imperfection, no blemishes, no darkness, no need for renewal, totally converted, once-and-for-all! That's the greatest hypocrisy of all!

Like Jerry's gingerbread men, we are all yet being baked ... NOT YET FULLY DONE. None of us dare claim to be without sin -- for we truly deceive ourselves when we do. But thanks to the verifying presence of Christ and the edifying power of his Word, we continue to be converted to his light and truth ... we are in the process of being fully clothed in his power.

Easter gives us that victory. Pentecost gives us the verification and edification of Christ's earthly power. So let us magnify him who converts us from darkness into his light.

AMEN.

EASTER III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 13, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"CLOSED: GONE FISHING"

"I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into a boat, but that night they caught nothing. ... Jesus said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. ... Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.

John 21: 3,5,12

It's exactly two weeks past Easter. The trumpets have not sounded for 14 days! The great "Hallelujah Chorus" has been filed again for a yet more glorious day! The Easter flowers, once adorning the chancel, are now withered and gone! The great Easter attendance has dwindled to less than half. The sun-bathers are back home from Florida to business-as-usual. And that's not only life in Lake Wobegan, but also in Toledo and New York and Minneapolis and Milwaukee and all over America.

One pastor several years ago once talked about having a nightmare two weeks after Easter. In his dream, he was heading for the church two Sundays after Easter. When he arrived, there was a large sign plastered across the front door. "CLOSED: GONE FISHING!" was all it said. That's the way he was feeling after Easter! Might as well close up shop and go fishing with everybody else who's doing it. A psychoanalyst would have a ball with that dream -- and yet, I'm sure that's the way most pastors feel after Easter.

Let's face it -- there's a lot of truth in that dream! We gear-up for Easter! We work hard to make Holy Week exhilarating. We spend more than 50 hours rehearsing for "Resurrection." We pull out all the stops; we bring in all the goose-bumps! And then two weeks after Easter - we put the sign out on the front door: CLOSED--GONE FISHING! It's back to the mundane again ... back to business-as-usual ... back to the same old stuff!! What happened to all the flashiness of Easter ... the ecstasy, the brilliance, the glory, the heart-throbbing anthems, the almost erotic, upbeat energy?!? Is it any wonder that two weeks after Easter we put up the sign: CLOSED: GONE FISHING!?

Simon Peter was not too much different from you and me. He had seen the risen Lord in the Upper Room. WoW! That was ecstasy! But where was this Lord now?!? One moment he appears through the walls; the next moment he's gone! Where's the lasting stuff -- the eternal resurrection?? Just

like the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter wanted a constant presence of this resurrected Lord (at least that's what some scholars say). And since that ecstasy was not a permanent reality - he might as well go back to business-as-usual: "I'm going fishing -- anyone want to come along??"

You and I aren't so much different from Peter. We too want an everlasting resurrection -- we want the "high" of Easter to last forever ... to be forever present. And when we don't feel it -- we say: "Might just as well go fishing ... there's nothing happening here anyway!" Is it any wonder there are some who only worship on Easter?!? They only want the "highs" of religion; they only want ecstasy. They don't want the lulls ... the lows ... the lingerings! They only want the big hurrahs. And when the glory and glamour don't seem to be there -- it's back to the old fishing pond again. Someone once said, "If you scratch deeply enough into an atheist, you'll really find a disillusioned idealist." Many of us are often like that -- almost atheistic because things just aren't ideal enough in the real religious world.

So we go fishing -- back to the routine, the mundane, the things we have always known and trusted. And let's face it -- fishing is often good therapy. But fishing can also be very lousy therapy -- at least if you're a fisherman like this Peter. Periodically, I love to go fishing. But I'm a lousy fisherman. Because when I fish, it's like everything else -- I want a big catch! I don't go fishing just to relax and take it easy; I go for the "ecstasy" of it -- to get the big haul ... to win the big prize. For some of us - it's really hard to just "go fishing." It's like we're never satisfied in just being patient ... waiting for God to provide ... to offer the stimulus. We seemingly want everlasting ecstasy - even when we're fishing.

This past week I was again reminded how much I am like Simon Peter -- always tempted to look for ecstasy ... even when I'm fishing. The bishop of the Wis.-Upper Michigan Synod called and said, "Peter, we'd like you to come back to your old fishing pond. We'd like you to consider being senior pastor of one of our top congregations ... over 2000 baptized members." Just like Peter - "Wow ... it's ecstasy ... it's the resurrection! It's alive ... it's new ... it's dynamic ... it's not business-as-usual in Toledo." It's amazing how the tunes of bigness and glory sound like the resurrection. I started thinking -- golly, the first five years I was here we averaged 750-800 on Easter; this year, 7-yrs later, it was only 637. Things are dwindling; it's getting ho-hum; maybe it's time for a new fishing pond. How tempting it is when everything isn't ecstasy -- to run off to a new fishing pond ... thinking it's going to be better over there! After all, it's a much larger fishing pond!

Well, on Friday I called the bishop. And I said, "You've tempted me with the fishing back home, but there's still a lot of ecstasy and fine fishing right here in Toledo. Thanks for your thoughtfulness, but Jesus Christ has resurrected here as well as there ... and we still need to stimulate that resurrection at Hope Church!

There are those mundane moments when we need to stop and listen for Christ saying: "Hey, Peter, throw your net down on the other side!" We need to stop, and let Christ speak to us in our mundane, business-as-usual moments. We need to realize that he is very much alive wherever we are. We need to take the time to ascertain his presence and Spirit in this place. And then we have to be willing to respond -- with renewed vitality and commitment. And as we make that renewed commitment -- he promises there will be a "big catch." But we have to get beyond our "Ho-Hum" attitude toward Him and his ministry! We have to let him "be alive and live" through each of us! That's exactly what Peter finally did -- he responded to Christ's direction for his life! And the catch was big!

But we also run a risk in the opposite direction. Some scholars believe Peter said, "I'm going fishing" because he was still not convinced! He was still overcome by his grief and depression. And we all know how grief, depression, and tragedy can really get us down! We all know exactly what we do when we are feeling disappointed or rejected or somehow abandoned? We run! We go back to the way we used to do things ... we run away from new challenges and new threats. Whenever we want to forget about our shattered dreams or hopes ... we run back to the old fishing pond ... to those places that are familiar and nostalgic and non-threatening!

But is there any hope in "running?" Peter ran away from reality. He said, I've had it - I'm going fishing. And then those powerful words -- "That night they caught nothing!" Running away from reality always leads to "nothing!" There's no hope in avoiding reality! There's no cure in taking sedatives or tranquilizers when "death" or "disappointment" must be faced. Running only delays reality.

With Jesus Christ, every moment is a new moment. The past is forgiven; the future is new life! There is no reason not to live and be alive in the present! The risen Christ turns gloom into glory! Doctors assert that half the mental hospital beds would be emptied overnight if people really believed the Easter reality of forgiveness. There is no everlasting guilt with Jesus Christ; there is no eternal failure with God. Each day is a new opportunity to live gracefully ... thankfully ... vitally ... and forgivenly!

Jesus appeared to Peter and the others and said: "Have courage! Don't give up, even when the results haven't been perfectly fruitful! Hang in there! Take courage, for I am always watching your efforts. Do not let the present failure dictate your future goals. Try new methods. Throw the net on the other side. Keep on fishing, even when you've caught nothing! Don't give up when the going gets rough! "Lo, I am with you always ... even unto the end of the age." Ultimately I promise you success!

The message of this text is profound, yet so simple. Life is lived between the ecstasy of resurrection and the agony of defeat. It is not all ecstasy; it is not all defeat. But it is a matter of allowing Jesus Christ to fortify us through them both! That's the meaning of breakfast on the beach. Christ comes to fortify our mission and ministry - both in moments of ecstasy and agony. This 21st chapter is St. John's epilogue to all future ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

Christ's mission is not constant ecstasy. Nor is it constant agony. But it is a mission that requires a labor of constant love and commitment. We're told that the disciples caught 153 fish. Some scholars speculate that this number represents the total number of varieties of fish in that sea. Whether they are right or wrong will never be known. But the number is indicative of Christ's mission: TO ALL NEEDY PERSONS IN THE WORLD!

One of the greatest sins of religion today is in the church growth movement. This movement says - "Be successful - only go after homogeneity -- only go after those who are just like you. This is the mentality of Robert Schuller ... and it is the reason his Crystal Cathedral is so successful. Only go after the rich, the white, the well-educated, and the suburban. That's the mentality of "success;" but it's not the mentality of the resurrection!

The resurrected Christ says - "Go after all 153!" There will be moments of ecstasy; there will be moments of agony! But through them all, I will be there to fortify your mission. Don't run away from it! Don't give up when it seems mundane and ho-hum! Don't throw in the towel when faced with defeat or death. Live my life always! Live my spirit of resurrected love, and you will always have the fortification for a vital and energetic ministry.

AMEN.

EASTER III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 17, 1988
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"IT'S THE REAL THING!"

As (the disciples told of seeing the risen Lord), Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. But Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." ... Then he said, "Have you something to eat?" They gave him a piece of boiled fish, and he took it and ate it before them. Luke 24:36-40,42-43

Each of us have heard about it a million times. You can't go through a week without seeing it or singing along with it. Whether on a highway billboard or the TV tube at home -- you can't avoid it: "IT'S THE REAL THING!" To be an American, is to know that the "real thing" in this world is Coke - whether Diet, Classic or Caffeince Free ... It's the Real Thing! Whoever created the marketing genius for "coke as the real thing" ...has been singing that tune to the bank every day!

But Coke is not the "real thing" for our reflections today. Today's gospel text graphically says the "real thing" is life after death ... real life after real death ... real physical life and real physical death! As Christians, we call it the resurrection of the body. But regardless of what it's been called, it's always been life after death.

That's the first real thing that needs to be said about today's text: LIFE AFTER DEATH IS A REALITY THAT HAS BEEN MANIFESTED BY HUMANITY FOR CENTURIES. Primitive societies often painted the dead body of a loved one with red paint, and put it into a cave in a folded position. Such a position seemed to indicate that they made a connection between death and the state of the fetus before birth.

This primitive "life after death" expression is probably most similar to today's belief in reincarnation. As Christians we do not affirm reincarnation, but it certainly is a belief in life after death. In fact, Sylvia Cranston says in her recent book "Reincarnation" that Gallup poles now show 38 million Americans believing in reincarnation. It has again surfaced as one of the most popular expressions of life after death. Possibly, that's because many of us agree with WWI British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. He says:

When I was a boy, the thought of heaven frightened me more than the thought of hell. I pictured heaven as a place where there'd be perpetual Sundays with never-ending worship services ... I felt there would be no escape ... the Almighty, assisted by choirs of angels, would be on constant lookout for non-attenders. As a youth, the vision of angels perpetually singing drove me mad ... so after being an atheist for ten years, I became a reincarnationist!!

*see your
eye to level
member of top
my favorite
Mark*

There are probably some catechism students here today who would agree with Prime Minister George. But reincarnation is not the only persistent evidence of life after death. Almost all societies have placed favored objects in the grave along with the body ... thinking the deceased might need them in the life to come. Food, tools, money, clothing -- these all show the expectation of a life hereafter.

We all have heard of the Egyptian pyramids, where earthly needs were buried with the dead kings for their eternal needs. But not until reading a commentary by another pastor was I aware that sometimes the Egyptians even entombed personal servants with the dead kings ... so that the kings would be served in the afterlife.

Again, we are all familiar with the Greek tradition of immortality of the soul -- wherein a spirit is released from the dead corpse and lives an ongoing existence with the gods. In ancient Rome, it was the law that if you came upon a dead body and did not have time to perform proper burial ... just throwing a few handfuls of dirt on the body would cause the spirit to be released to the nether worlds. Among the Hopi tribe of native Americans, the dead were buried clasping a stick projecting from the grave. By means of the stick, the soul escaped to the world of the spirits.

Likewise, many of us from small towns know the strong feelings of life after death that caused these communities to build their cemeteries on the other side of the river ... because people believed that spirits could not cross water. Among the Australian natives, the right thumb of an enemy was cut off before burial to prevent the spirit from returning and causing harm. Obviously, the hand without a thumb could not throw a spear or wield a club.

These are but a few evidences of the universal belief in life after death. But most of us would agree -- these universal yearnings and speculations for life after death ARE NOT THE REAL THING!! They are telling observations that humanity believes in life after death ... that life after death is a real thing, BUT NONE OF THESE TELL IT AS THE REAL THING!

The facts are that God has not left life after death as a speculative philosophical idea. God has conclusively given us LIFE AFTER DEATH as an absolute reality -- GOD HAS GIVEN US THE REAL THING: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! Isn't it funny -- we all want to believe in life after death, yet when God gives us the goods - what's the disciples' first response: "they were startled and frightened, supposing they had seen a spirit." Instead of belief, they were troubled and questioned the reality!

And if you and I are really honest today, that's probably how

many of us have felt at one time or another about the resurrection: SOMETIMES IT'S JUST TOO HARD TO BELIEVE THAT IT'S THE REAL THING! Is it any wonder that God revealed this text to us: LUKE 24 IS THE REVELATION OF THE REAL THING! Last week, Luke 24 revealed the "real thing" through the person of Thomas. This week, Luke 24 reveals "the real thing" by answering the nagging questions on our minds: What will it really be like? Will it be a physical reality? Will we be recognized? Will other's know us? Will it be the real thing?

First and foremost, this text answers: the resurrection involves the whole person, the whole body, the whole self -- not just some kind of disembodied spirit or soul. Each of the gospels attests to the empty tomb. There has never been any evidence that any fragments of the crucified Christ were ever found. The real thing is total resurrection of bodily life!

Secondly, the text before us clearly asserts that resurrected life is recognizable! Those who saw Jesus knew it was him. Even Thomas, who doubted, changed his mind when he touched the wounds of the risen Lord. It was through the fellowship of breaking bread and the revealing of the Old Testament prophets that Jesus further confirmed that his resurrection was the REAL THING -- THAT GOD HAD BEEN VICTORIOUS OVER DEATH!

Thirdly, Luke 24 makes clear that the resurrection is not some kind of Gnostic spiritualized resurrection of human gas: what a tragedy if only human gas (human vapor) was raised from the dead. Jesus was not some kind of ghastly apparition ... he was the same Jesus the disciples had known before the crucifixion. He asked for boiled fish, and he ate it before their eyes. His resurrected form was not unlike his earthly form.

Fourthly, somewhat different from what has just been stated, there is something far different about the resurrected body: IT IS NO LONGER LIMITED TO EARTHLY TIME AND SPACE! At one moment Jesus was not in the room, and then he was in the room. At one moment in Emmaus, at the next moment in Jerusalem. Resurrected life is not limited to the time and space considerations of earthly life. Nothing could more clearly say that God's time and space is radically different from our time and space: WE ARE SO LIMITED IN THIS LIFE; RESURRECTED LIFE WILL BE A MUCH FULLER AND PANORAMIC EXPRESSION OF LIFE!

Finally, the real thing of the resurrection is that even though beyond earthly time and space limits -- we will still be ourselves. Somehow -- God will see to it that you are you, and I am me. Somehow - God will see to it that we will know each other, just as we have known each other. That premature baby who died so long before it's expected time on earth -- that child will be known and loved in the resurrected life. That's the real thing! That young son or daughter, who had so much promise and potential, who was tragically taken by the drunk driver or senseless suicide -- that love will be renewed in the resurrected body! That's the real thing! Even the

cremated life that I ~~was~~ buried in a favorite sandtrap for a former parishoner -- that life will be fully ~~re~~^{trans}formed by the power of God through the resurrection. For that's the real thing that we proclaim!! Moreover, that resurrected body will be superior to this earthly body. Those who have lost a limb or organ in this world ... those who have been devastated by shrapnul or nuclear bombs -- they will be given whole life again!! Likewise, those who have known only weakness or suffering in this life -- they will finally experience the fullness of resurrected vitality!!

The resurrection to new life is the real thing!! It's the good news of the gospel! It's the future of our faith! It's by far more real and lasting than any size Coca Cola. It's the real reason that Easter is celebrated by Christians every day of the week. It's the real reason that you and I can finally surrender to death when there is no longer any reason to live on this earth.

Such was certainly the story from a pastor colleague. One of his female parishoners had been hospitalized with cancer for nine weeks. During her last five weeks, she wanted nothing to eat and even refused IV's. During his final visit she said to him: "These things are all so trivial."

Obviously, she did not mean her death nor her life. But at the doorway of death, all the things that we make so important in life are so trivial -- food, fun, and future earthly necessities! This woman had strayed from the church, but now she was in God's hands. Her final comment to the pastor was: "I'm so glad you've been here; it's just so good to know that I'm really going home!" God gives the real thing -- the free ticket to eternity with him and one another!! There's nothing greater!!

So what does that mean for today? Is the resurrection only a great hope for tomorrow, or does it have something to say for today? Since we no longer have to speculate about our future with God ... since God has sealed our faith with the resurrection ... that means we can live as new people now!! Christians don't wait for the resurrection to become servants like Christ -- they become servants like Christ first and then wait for the resurrection. Since the resurrection gives us total confidence and completeness for the future -- we can live now AS REPENTANT, FORGIVING SERVANTS! Because of the resurrection we have already been changed and made new!

Maybe that's best illustrated by the priest who showed up for Saturday evening mass in his jeans and T-shirt. In his hurry to get cleaned and changed, he passed an elderly lady and apologized for not having time to talk. She responded, "Why don't you just come out like that? Start something new! Take time to love in your jeans and T-shirt ... I'm sure God won't mind!!"

Sometimes little elderly ladies know the gospel in far more comprehensive but simple terms than theologians: THE RESURRECTION OF LIFE NOW ... THE REAL THING NOW ... is always to start something new in the name of Christ! If you've been hurrying too much to love, then slow down ... start something new by loving more slowly! If you've been slandering and slouthful ... then start something new, start living the new life of compassion and concern for others! If you've been greedy and obsessed with self ... then start something new, start being generous before you're dead and can no longer do anything about it! IN SHORT, START LIVING TODAY AS IF THE RESURRECTION HAS MADE A REAL DIFFERENCE ... BECAUSE THAT'S THE ONLY WAY THAT JESUS CHRIST WILL MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE FOR TOMORROW!

Let's face it -- we've already been guaranteed the real thing in heaven! So how can we show our gratitude to God for such good news? We can make a real difference on earth every day by serving one another with the real love of Christ! After all, that's the real thing!!

AMEN.

"RENEWED VISIONS OF HOPE"

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See (Behold), I am making all things new." Revelation 21:5a

Twelve years ago - on what was then called Hope Sunday - I reflected on this same text for the basis of my sermon and Annual Report. It's normally the designated text for Easter V; but I couldn't resist using it two weeks early. It lends itself so beautifully to a Sunday in which we are reviewing past accomplishments and envisioning future opportunities. In May, 1980, I began by comparing and contrasting the two decades leading up to the 80's.

I characterized the 60's as the decade of NEWNESS - a new breed of media politics had been born in America, a new ideology of radicalism had confronted previously untouched institutions, a new kind of role for women was aggressively being advocated, a new stance on morality was urging "permissive" freedom, and a new kind of democratic and social consciousness was challenging doctrinal and denominational "sacred cows" in the church. I went on to further characterize the 60's as a decade without roots. Everything seemed to be in flux. Newness was often advocated simply for the sake of newness. There were new technologies enabling travel to the moon, new life styles, new hair styles, new mini-skirts, and even new body organs if a match could be found for worn-out body organs. This spirit of newness also saw expression in the life of the church; there was hardly a Sunday without some new form of liturgy: worship had to be groovy and guitar-grounded. It was truly a decade where only the new and avante-guard was craved and credible.

Then came the 70's. All of a sudden, everything had to be old. People began purchasing old houses and old furniture and old antiques and old records and old cars. Nostalgia was "in." I was even able to play my accordian in this decade without being laughed out of the room. Everyone was searching for his or her authentic roots; the 70's became the decade of the quest for roots ... for the true self ... the search for self-understanding, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. "I'm O.K. and You're O.K." was the pop psychology of the day. And along with seeking one's authentic self came the search for things old and things authentic ... a return to the good old days of yesterday. Likewise a new emphasis was given to the old basics: the old emphasis upon reading, writing and arithmetic. Old songs, old traditions, old values, even old fashioned honesty and integrity -- "telling it the way it really is" - "getting down to your gut level" -- these became the trademarks of the time.

But the search for what was old and authentically one's inner self would gradually give way to an outer new order of the 80's: GETTING IT ALL FOR MYSELF! The 1980's became the decade of avarice and "anything goes," as long as you could find a legal loophole and still come out ahead. Conservative analyst Kevin Phillips, in a New York Times article on his book, The Politics of the Rich & Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate after Reagan, comments as follows:

"The 1980's were a triumph of Upper America - an ostentatious celebration of wealth. Money, greed, and luxury became the stuff of popular culture. The rich got richer, while nearly all the rest of us paid the price. Many corporate presidents and CEO's feasted, while 1.5 million mid-level managers lost their positions and possessions." Phillips goes on to say: "For the first time in the 1980's, it was no longer significant to be a millionaire in America -- garden-variety millionaires became so common that by 1989 there were 1.5 million millionaires in America. You were only somebody by the late 80's if you were a mega-millionaire or a billionaire." Phillips concludes: "Like never before for America, our nation consumed, rearranged, and borrowed more than it had built. It had become an era of greed and glitz."

So goes the three decades up to the present. And what have we learned that's NEW from the past 30 years? We have learned exactly what we knew from the beginning of recorded history: we can too easily become obsessed with newness, with oldness, or with ourselves. The new politics and radicalism of the 60's did not solve the world's problems; the return to nostalgia in the 70's did not offer any everlasting resurrection for the future; and the obsession with wealth and deregulation in the 80's has hardly guaranteed global markets for anyone, and certainly not for Americans.

So the question in May of 1992 is no different than it was in May, 1980: WHAT IS REALLY NEW? If I'm honest with myself, and your honest with yourself, sooner or later we must confess that only God can foster true newness - real renewal. Only God can create something out of nothing. Only God can give new life to death. Only God can TRULY MAKE ALL THINGS NEW!

As for you and me, we do not make any thing really new! We may manipulate something old into something new. We may reactivate or recharge, revitalize or refurbish, but we do not create or make newness. We only reshape or reform that which God has already given to us. And that is exactly what God is calling us to do: TO RESHAPE AND REFORM, TO REACTIVATE AND RECHARGE, TO REVITALIZE AND RENEW his created order of life. That is His purpose for us from the very beginning: we are commissioned to be his instruments for making all things new on this earth ... his instruments of renewal. As he stated in Gen. 1:28 - "I am putting you in charge of everything ... I am giving you dominion over all living things."

So when God says, "Behold, I am making all things new ..." we understand that he is the generating source of renewing power for our lives; we are but the human muscle to get things moving in his direction. He is the One who brought the whole new vision for life in the babe of Bethlehem. He is the One that made life forever new (and forgiven) through this Son's sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. He is the One who will not allow even death to separate us from his everlasting realm of life. Can there be any question? He is the author of everlasting newness! He is the designer of everlasting forgiveness and love. He is the producer of everlasting grace and mercy, goodness and generosity on this earth. He calls us, his body, to be the muscle and the might for implementing his newness, his forgiving love, his grace & mercy, his goodness & generosity in this world. That is our mighty mission as his church - to continually

exercise his directives for renewal so that our life together will not become a flabby or atrophied or out-of-breath expression.

So what does that mean we do with the old: the old customs, the old ways, the old buildings, the old pastors, the old people? We revere, we honor, we recognize, we love them for being special vehicles of God's grace ... for they have brought us to where we are today. But we do not idolize anyone or anything old, just as we do not idolize anyone or anything new. Our mission is to bring the old with us into the new -- to let God transform and reshape all things.

So let us get on with this mission of letting God make all things and all people and all expressions of life NEW! Let us NOT make this hope and vision only the pastor's job; rather, let us be a congregation that makes this hope and vision a harmonious response from all the people: let us be a rhapsody of his spirit of newness for our families, for our earth, for the needy here and worldwide, for the homeless and the homebound, for this old facility and its new future, for our gatherings and meetings and studies and worship services. Let us implement God's new vision of forgiving ... merciful ... resurrected ... and everlasting HOPE ... for every day, whether that day is filled with rain or sunshine, sorrow or joy, pain or pleasure. For only God makes all things new EVERY DAY! AMEN.

And so with this preface in mind, I offer the following RENEWED VISIONS OF HOPE. To the degree that my visions reflect God's visions and subsequently your visions for Hope, I am confident that we will render a dedicated and harmonious response TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW in the life of Hope.

VISION ONE - PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

It was thirteen years ago at this same meeting that the "Official Call" to serve as Senior Pastor of Hope Church was extended to me. That was and still remains a great source of God's hope and joy for my life; I hope my presence and leadership has brought similar expressions of God's hope and joy to your lives. Needless to say, lots of things have changed over these thirteen years. I have matured and grown (thanks to your prodding and God's); and I am hopeful that you have matured and grown (thanks maybe to a little of my prodding and God's). What is most obvious is that Hope Church has matured and grown. The numerical statistics dramatically reflect that maturity and growth: increased membership (from nearly 900 to over 1400 baptized); increased budget (from \$150,000 to nearly \$400,000 plus outreach giving); increased staff (from six to eleven); increased educational programming and bible studies (from one Sunday study to a weekly & Sunday variety); increased building improvements (new organ, renovated sanctuary, new lounge, new parking lot, renovated offices and main floor, etc. etc. etc.). These have been thirteen strong years of maturity and growth.

The other pastors and I have been graced with Council and congregational support over these years. In fact, each year I have asked for and usually received a verbal or written assessment of my leadership. However, it has been rare for the congregation as a

EASTER III
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 13, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“Checking The Vital Signs!”

“Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness ... and you know that he was revealed to take away sins ...” I John 3:4a;5a “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and rise from the dead ... and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all peoples ... You are witnesses of these things.’” Luke 24:45-48

Our Easter III texts call for the classic story of Johnny who was besieged by nightmares. Every night Johnny’s mom would be awakened by his shrieking cries. After comforting and consoling him, he would slowly go back to sleep. Finally one night in desperation his mom said, *“Johnny, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Jesus is right here. He’ll be with you and hold you in the dark.”*

Without missing a beat, Johnny responded: *“I know that Jesus is with me, but I need a Jesus with some skin & bones ... I need Jesus to really hold me and hug me!”* Just like you and me, Johnny wanted more than “Jesus-talk” ... he wanted the real presence of Jesus ... he wanted a Jesus with skin & bones ... he wanted a “holding & hugging Jesus.”

Let’s face it - if we’re honest with ourselves, most of us are like Johnny: **WE WANT A DOWN-TO-EARTH JESUS** At the Lutheran Homes meeting Mon. night, Prof. Murray Harr said, *“most people find church boring because their leaders don’t preach sermons that correlate religion to real life.”* For instance, he said most Lutheran clergy *“rarely preach on Genesis because there are too many stories about sex & real life issues in Genesis.”* Like Johnny, most people want a faith that says, *“Come on, Jesus -- hold me, handle me, hug me, touch me, stay close to me ... let me feel your down-to-earth real presence!!”*

So let’s be honest enough to confess that ONE VITAL SIGN of Christianity is a RELIGION that believes in a down-to-earth Lord who is willing to say: *“Hold me; Handle me; Touch me; See me; Eat with me!”* That was Jesus’ proclamation to the disciples after his resurrection: *“I am a Lord with skin and bones who wants to touch you and hold you!!”* And today Jesus’ body, called the church, is asked to do the same -- to be His body willing to touch and hold people who are hurting and need comforting.

Prof. Harr also told about one of his pastor friends who went to India to minister with Mother Teresa. On his last day there, he was following Mother Teresa into the chapel for the final Communion Service. He was ecstatic that he would be standing next to this great saint while receiving the body of Christ. *Just as they were to enter the chapel, she turned around and took him by the arm into the streets of Calcutta.* They got to a dirty, dusty corner & found a body covered with a filthy sheet. She told him to remove it. There lay a starving man full of body sores and bugs all over him. She told this pastor:

"Please lift up this man and hold him in your arms!" With great reluctance, the pastor lifted the man. And then Mother Teresa said, **"The body of Christ given for you!!"** Mother Teresa knew this pastor needed a down-to-earth experience with the skin & bones of Jesus. That pastor has never forgotten that moment of Holy Communion with his Lord Jesus.

Yes, first and foremost, Jesus Christ calls us to be his body ... his skin and bones in this world--willing to uplift & care for those full of body sores & bugs! **But while we do this -- we are to recognize who we are and whose we are!** Or said differently - we are to recognize that we too are full of body sores and bugs -- we reek with sin. Our text today says, **"everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness."** And some 3 verses later we read, **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us!"** The second vital sign of every faithful follower of the resurrection is that we **CONFESS OUR SIN!**

Dear friends - that is a difficult task in this world. Our modern culture says there is no such thing as SIN. **New Age religion proclaims all is relative & changing - there is NO Absolute Authority or God!** Thus, there is no sin. In such a society, there is no responsibility to a higher power known as God. Such a **world says there is no confession to wrongdoing or sin -- there is only better education, drugs, psychotherapy & engineering improved genes.** Obviously, there's some truth in these options, but not at the price of eliminating sin.

A **VITAL SIGN** of a resurrected life is a healthy recognition of sin -- a recognition that there is brokenness and alienation in this world! A recognition that **SIN & GUILT** can be good! **Because only when humanity recognizes guilt & sin is there a chance for people to say: "We can do better ... we can make this world a better reflection of God's image!!"** That's why we begin almost every worship service with confession: **BECAUSE AS BELIEVERS IN THE RISEN CHRIST, WE BELIEVE THAT SIN IS NOT ONLY REAL ... BUT THAT ONCE CONFESSED ... WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!** We can change our way ... we can become what God wants us to be - yes, we can!!

And obviously--that's the third & final **VITAL SIGN** of the resurrection: **REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS!** Once we have confessed our greediness, lustfulness, selfishness & conniving, rottenness to the core -- then God says: **REPENT--GO THE OTHER WAY--GO WITH ME!** That's what repentance is -- "going with God" instead of "going with our own selfishness!" But "going with God" sounds a lot easier than it really is. **It's not only believing in God ... it is doing what God wants us to do!**

The story of 1800 Un. Methodists at their annual ordination conference in Indiana best illustrates this point. Right in the middle their guest bishop's sermon, a bomb threat was received by telephone. Immediately the building was vacated. All 1800 Methodists had to stand outside in the rain (had they been Lutherans, they'd have gone to the corner pub for a beer while waiting). After a 50-minute building search, the area was deemed clear and everyone re-entered. As the wet Methodists filed back in, security guards at the doors said:

"Enter at your own risk!" How would feel every week if our ushers said: "Enter at your own risk!" Well dear friends, I hope you saw the banner over our entrance today saying "Enter at Your Own Risk" rather than "Enter in Silence!" Because every time we enter this place -- the risen Christ offers His powerful Word: "Repent - Repent - Repent - then forgive the sins of all other peoples!"

Jesus never says: "Enter and I will make you feel good!" or "Enter for your own selfish needs!" No where in scripture did Jesus ever comfort his followers without challenging them at the same time!! (WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY; "LET HIM WHO IS WITHOUT SIN CAST THE FIRST STONE - BUT GO & SIN NO MORE!") Time after time after time he said, "If you want to follow me, then take up your cross and be prepared for a rough ride. Don't think I've come to bring peace on earth (meaning a jovial spirit of getting along) ... I've come with a sword (to separate you from everything that is false!). Take no gold or silver in your belts ... just take enough to get along. And when you enter a house, say: 'Peace be with you' and if they won't accept your peace, then shake the dust off your feet & move on. You will be like sheep among wolves ... people will flog you & you will be dragged before the authorities in my name--but do not be anxious, let my spirit of mercy & grace speak thru you!"

Do you see why it might be more appropriate for the ushers to say every week: "Enter at Your Own Risk!" Too many preachers and too many Christians have taken the VITAL SIGNS out of our resurrection faith. We come here not only to be "touched" by the real presence of Jesus -- but also to be empowered by His Spirit. And his Spirit is one which calls us to first CONFESS our lustfulness and greediness ... and then repent BY TAKING UP THE CROSS AND FOLLOWING HIS LEAD!!

WELL ... what do you think?? Do you want to continue to follow a boring religion which says, "Enter in Silence ... and just sit there rather than being moved by a resurrected Lord!!" Or do we really want to be followers of a risen Lord who says, "Follow me at your own risk ... but just know that once touched & hugged by me ... then you must clean up your act ... and then take up your cross and be willing to sacrificially surrender your life to me!?!" Well, I can't answer the question for you -- but that's the question the down-to-earth Jesus leaves with you this Sunday!

AMEN.

Easter III
April 25, 2004
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Guest Preacher

More Than Just "Normal"

*Jesus said to the disciples, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.
John 21:12*

April 25, 2004 – just fourteen days after the greatest day of the year on our spring Christian calendar. So, how would you say your Easter spirit is doing after only 14-days past the big Sunday?? Depending upon what you've experienced in the last several weeks – there are probably a variety of answers to the question. But some things are pretty obvious today. (1) The volume of people in this sanctuary has diminished since April 11th! (2) I would even speculate that the level of excitement is not quite the same today. (3) The sanctuary has lost its Easter glow of flowers and special adornments. (4) And the gospel story today rather than telling of excitement at the empty tomb simply recounts a typical fishing expedition in the Sea of Tiberius. And then to top it off – (5) you've got a guest preacher who hasn't been preaching as a regular routine week after week.

So all of this begs the question: Has the resurrection of Jesus Christ really made a huge difference for you and for me? Has it been just another normal spring expedition through the stories of Lent and Easter? Again, I would expect a variety of responses to these questions. Regrettably, we don't have the time or the place to share these reactions. But this year I didn't have to wait until April 25th to be confronted with a challenging reaction to the resurrection. My challenge came from my own daughter about 20 minutes after the Easter Service on April 11th. On the way home from the service, Sarah, who is now 23, asked me: "Dad, do we really believe that Jesus is the only, true God?!? Of all the other religions, are there no other great prophets that can claim equality with Jesus and God?!?" Wow! Nothing like getting to the point with dad when he hasn't been hitting the theological trail too much lately. Sarah was asking the question that most college students confront early in their university lives: "How can we say Jesus is God when so many other religious prophets make similar claims of godliness?" What makes Jesus so different from all the other religious figureheads from other religions?"

I'm certain that many of you, like me, would have been tempted to give the classic biblical answer from John 14:6 ... where Jesus says, *I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me* ... or others from John's gospel where Jesus says He and the Father are One (Jn 10:30). But the discriminating student wants more than simple self-assertion. So I

spent time sharing with Sarah how the totality of Jesus' life is a reflection of the Way of God and therefore our reason for confessing Jesus as truly God. But today's gospel text gives another angle (like many texts) to help us to again answer the question: "How can Jesus truly be God?"

First, this text just like last week's lesson about Thomas, forces us to see that Jesus can no longer fit into the human description of "normal." To appear to his disciples after the crucifixion and be recognized by them is simply "more than just normal." Likewise, to have breakfast with his disciples after crucifixion is simply "more than just normal." And again, to tell his disciples to put their nets on the other side of the boat and then gather a huge catch is simply "more than just normal." That is one of the chief characteristics of Jesus after the resurrection: **HE IS NO LONGER JUST NORMAL ... HE IS MORE THAN JUST NORMAL.** Now he is recognized not merely in his humanity ... but now he possesses a divine essence. In fact, he has crossed over from normal human life to what we might best call extraordinary life. Now He is not God because of a special birth in Bethlehem ... now he is not God because of his great moral teachings and lifestyle ... now he is not God because of his empathy with the outcasts and sinners of this world ... **BUT NOW HE IS GOD BECAUSE HE HAS DEFIED THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMANITY – HE IS RESURRECTED FROM DEATH.** Unlike Buddha or Mohammed – Jesus has not been defeated by death. So there is Easter's greatest truth: the resurrection confirms Jesus' **ONENESS WITH GOD.** And because he lives, he is worthy of our worship as the only, true God!

But there is another dimension of this text that uplifts Jesus as someone "more than just normal." In the courtyard Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus turns to Peter and asks him three times, "Do you love me?" And Peter responds each time by affirming that love. But Jesus wants more from his disciples than "just everyday, normal verbal affirmation." Jesus wants Peter and each of us to do what too often is seen as **ABNORMAL** with his love: to feed others – not only with food but with forgiveness, mercy, compassion and extra-mile kindness.

Brian Cavanaugh tells the classic story of what it means to follow a Jesus who is not just another, normal everyday prophet. He writes: "Several years ago a group of salespeople went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. They assured their spouses that they would be home in plenty of time for Friday night supper.

One thing led to another and the meeting ran overtime so the associates had to race to the airport, tickets in hand. As they barged through the terminal, one man inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping they all reached the plane in time and boarded it with sighs of relief. All but one. He paused, got in touch with his feelings, and felt a

twinge of compassion for the little girl's apple stand that had been overturned. He waved goodbye to his associates and returned to the terminal. He was glad he had done it. The ten-year old girl was blind. So the salesman gathered up the apples and obviously noticed that many were battered and bruised. He took out his wallet and said to the girl: "Please take this money for the damage that we have done; I hope we didn't ruin your whole day." As the salesman walked away, the bewildered girl called out to him, "Are you truly Jesus Christ?!?"

As the story illustrates, Jesus is one with God when day-to-day encounters show his love as something more than normal church-talk. After the resurrection Jesus gave Peter a new definition of "normal" ministry. Normal ministry means to "tend and feed" the sheep? Today it means the same thing that it meant to Peter in the first century: **TO DO THE WILL OF GOD** wherever there is human need. So what does it mean to live this resurrection spirit here at Glenwood? It means that we don't rush with the crowd just to take care of ourselves! It means that we stop amidst the rush of things to see how many apple-carts have been dumped by careless and greedy living. It means as Pastor Kris has often said that we must open our eyes to the challenges of the community right around us. Wherever there has been battering and bruising around us – the Jesus who is God calls us to show his spirit of compassion and concern. And then bewildered children will watch us and they will say: "I think I have just come face to face with Jesus Christ, risen from the dead!"

Thankfully, Jesus directs the final challenge to Peter directly: to be willing to become a martyr for the sake of the risen Christ. Certainly that requires more than "just normal" commitment. For most of us, that kind of martyrdom is not among our normal sacrifices. But even with our reluctance, Jesus has made a more than **NORMAL** commitment to you and to me. First he fulfilled his Father's will by dying on the cross so that our normal battering and bruising of one another will be forgiven! Wow, what a relief that is! Then he rose from the dead to assure us that he is truly God and that we too will be given that gift of life with him. Why in the world would anyone want to choose allegiance to any religious figurehead other than Jesus? There is no other religious prophet who assures us that we are both redeemed from sin and resurrected from death!! Thanks be to Jesus Christ, the one and only true God!

AMEN.