

# ***Our Road to Emmaus***

*Luke 24:21a*

*Mt Olive Lutheran Church – Columbia, SC – April 30, 2017*

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*“Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!”* The word of the angel spoken at the empty tomb tells us that God has, in His Son, given us Hope for the most hopeless of situations.

Hopeless situations.

Working as the night chaplain at the Medical Center Hospital of Vermont on the night of Valentines Day, February 14, 1990, I was summoned to the neonatal critical care unit around midnight. What I found there was a baby girl named Zoe, born— three months premature, weighing 14 ounces, who could fit into the palm of my hand. The mother had given up on her. She could not imagine how someone born that early could possibly survive. The nurses asked if I would baptize this little girl. They gave me a small bottle of sterilized water and I baptized little Zoe in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and I made the sign of the cross on her little forehead and on her heart, which couldn't have been much bigger than the tip of my index finger. I said I make the sign of the cross your forehead and on your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified.

Hopeless situations? Life has taught the optimists among us that there is no such thing as a hopeless situation – there are only people who have given up hope.

Christine, our oldest daughter, we had dreams for her. She had gone to Texas A&M and flunked out her first year there; kind of a wild child. In April 1996, my wife Margo and I were at an LWML convention that year in the northern part of Massachusetts. Just as the morning devotions were starting I was called out for an emergency phone call. Christine, early that morning, had been in head-on collision. Both cars were destroyed; the driver of the other car was killed instantly. Trauma patients in North Dallas were normally medevac'd to the trauma unit at Parkland Hospital. It's where President Kennedy was taken. But they took Christine to Baylor Medical Center, ironically the place where she was born. She was taken there because they didn't believe she would live and Baylor had the capacity for harvesting her organs when she passed. They told me that if the swelling went down in her brain over then next few days she might make it.

Our dreams don't always come true, do they? All of us know of someone who wished upon a star; who poured out an ocean of wishes upon a galaxy of stars, but their dreams didn't come true, did they? In spite of the easy, comfortable, peaceful life we wish for, disappointment, discouragement, doubt, depression, and death still come.

That was certainly the way it was 2,000 years ago, on the Sunday night after Jesus had been crucified. Two melancholy friends were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Disciples of the dead Jesus, they were doing what mourners have always done: they were reflecting on the life of the dearly Departed.

They reminisced about Jesus' last days. Had it only been a week ago that His future and theirs seemed so filled with promise? Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem as the *“Son of David”*; that's how the crowds had welcomed Him. They had lined His path with their own clothing and palm branches. The

young, and the not so young, let out a roar as they paid homage to Him who had come, *“In the Name of the Lord.”*

“Was it possible,” they wondered, “that less than a week had gone by since Jesus was with them, alive and active?” It was possible. Not only possible, it happened!

On Monday, Jesus had amazed the people and offended the church authorities when He overturned the tables of the shopkeepers and traders and drove them out of the temple. What a display that had been! On Tuesday, Jesus had spoken of how He would come on the *“clouds of the sky, with great glory.”* He had promised a tremendous reward to any of His disciples who remained faithful. What tantalizing, tempting treasures He was offering. All who heard Him might have made a silent, secret promise to be among those who would be singled out for reward. “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there!”

It was Thursday, just three days ago, that things began to unravel. During the evening which had been marked by the Christ showing them how to be a loving servant, they had eaten the Passover meal together. Then, with Judas gone into the night on an unknown errand, Jesus had instituted the new Sacrament of His Body and Blood. A walk to the Garden of Gethsemane; a few moments alone, and then ... and then everything changed.

You know how it feels. One moment you’re the king of the hill and the master of your fate; the next moment you’re in the bottom of the basement, wondering what can go wrong next.

One moment you’re sitting down for a long-expected, peaceful meal with loved ones, and the next, everyone is red-facedly engaged in a heated argument.

One moment you’re driving to finish up some errands, and the next you’re standing in the rain, examining the accident which has made your car unfit for the road.

One moment you’ve having a routine physical, and the next a dour doctor says, “We’re going to have to bring you in for tests on that lump you’ve managed to ignore.”

One moment you’re feeling pretty good about your finances, and the next your taxman tells you exactly what you owe to Uncle Sam.

Jesus’ two disciples would have understood. One moment Jesus had been the great Jewish Hope; the next He had been turned over by a traitor, deserted by His closest friends, locked away, tried, beaten, condemned and crucified. The fall had come so fast, they hadn’t had time to prepare themselves, or even get their balance or breath until some time after the Roman executioner had slid a spear into Jesus’ side and declared Him dead.

Death. You know, all of us can look at life with a more or less optimistic attitude, until death comes. I’m not talking about when death peaks around the corner, or shows himself somewhere down the block.

I’m talking about when death has touched us. When the doctor says, “He’s gone”; or “I’m sorry, we did everything we could for her.”

I'm talking about when the funeral director has been called; when we have to go pick out a casket, order flowers, and bring down clothes for the wake.

I'm talking about when there are no more chances, no more options, no more opportunities.

I'm talking about when hope, wonderful, believable hope is gone.

I'm talking about the moment when mourning begins and farewells must be said.

I'm talking about that moment when no matter how many stars you have wished upon, it will "make no difference who you are." When death has paid you a visit, it is a hopeless situation. That is the way it has been since the fall into sin; that is the way it was for Jesus' disciples; that is the way it still is for millions today.

Death had come. The situation was hopeless. Nobody could argue the fact. The High Priests had delivered Jesus up, and the Roman execution squad had done its duty. Their Teacher was dead and buried, along with their hopes. True, earlier on Sunday, some of the women had gone to Christ's tomb.

They had found the stone rolled away, the guard gone. They reported they had received a resurrection message from an angel. Also true, some of the Lord's disciples had checked out what the women had to say. The most they could do was verify that Jesus' body was not in the borrowed grave. Common sense told them, and Jesus' fearful followers believed this basic fact: "When you're dead, you're dead." They knew that death is the one hopeless situation from which there is no escape.

They said as much to the third Man who joined them on their walk. When He asked about the tone and tenor of their conversation, they retold the events of the past week and then summed up their misery with the words: *"We had hoped He was the One who was going to buy back Israel."*

They were saying, in essence, *"Everything we had dreamed about, everything we had longed for; all the trust we had put in Jesus is gone. A week ago we thought Jesus would make things happen, but we don't think so anymore."* They knew a dead Savior, a buried Savior, is no Savior at all. Theirs was a hopeless situation.

You've been there, haven't you? Possibly you are a widow or widower who has returned home from a gravesite to the emptiness of a house, which had been shared with a life's partner of decades. Perhaps you are a parent who had dreams for a child. You saw the possible paths that stretched out for years before your little one. You dreamed dreams, and those dreams were filled with laughter and life.

Then death came. Death came – as an accident or an illness, it came. It may have come in the daylight or slipped in during the night. It makes no difference. Death came. You know the hopelessness that comes when death comes.

***Unless*** .... And, O my friends, what a wonderful God-given, blood-bought eternity-shaking word is that word: ***unless*** ... ***unless*** you know the living Lord Jesus Christ!

That resurrection day, as the weary travelers made their way along the road, they were joined by a Stranger who was no stranger. The risen Christ, unrecognizable at first to their eyes, fell in step beside them. A living Lord Jesus walked with them and talked with them and explained Scripture to them.

Last Sunday we had Dr. Dale Meyer, President of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, visit Emmanuel in Asheville and preach a great sermon. The neat thing was that he stayed after lunch and lead an excellent Bible Study on I Peter from 1:00 until 4:00. I knew we were in for a treat, not because he carried a briefcase and lived more than 50 miles away. He didn't come carrying an English Standard Version or the King James Version of the Bible, but the Greek New Testament. He translated directly from the Greek as he read. He opened our eyes to I Peter. We saw things that we had not seen before. He was a wonderful teacher and preacher.

But how much more wonderful would be a Bible lesson led by Jesus! And before the evening was over, they found out as millions have found out, that with Jesus as your Savior, there are no hopeless situations. They heard from the mouth of the living Lord Jesus that God had – in His gracious plan to save sinners – sent His only Son into the world. God's Son had come to fulfill the laws humankind had broken; to resist the temptations to which we have succumbed; to die the death that we deserved, and then to rise on the third day so that all might know that Jesus Christ has defeated death, and in so doing, given birth to hope.

In Jesus, death has lost its sting; in Jesus, for all who believe, for all who have repented and are forgiven, the grave has lost its victory. In Jesus there is hope!

It has been quite some time ago that King George VI of England addressed the British Commonwealth on a New Year's Eve. Although the King didn't know it at the time, cancer was eating at him, and he would die before the end of that coming year. The world's future was then, as it always seems to be, "hopeless."

The King spoke these words: "I said to the man at the Gate of the New Year, 'Give me a light that I might walk safely into the unknown.' And he said to me, 'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. It shall be to you safer than the light and better than the known.'"

That is what I say to you this Lord's Day. Let the Lord Jesus Christ take your hand. Hope is a fragile thing, and when it shrivels and shrinks, it takes a miracle to revive it. Hopelessness is a disease of the soul which takes a Savior to bring about a cure. If you happen to be among those almost to the point of despair this evening; who feel you have nothing to hope for; whose days are being spent waiting for a better tomorrow which you're convinced will never come, let me share this miracle: you have a living, resurrected Savior in Jesus Christ.

By the way, I didn't want to leave you hanging with Zoe and Christine. I went to the NICU and I baptized Zoe in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I marked as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. That was 27 years ago. Zoe lived. Last I heard, she was 8-years-old when we moved south. She was small in stature, and otherwise, well. True to her name, which means life, even though many around her had given up hope. Christ lives in her and dispels that hopelessness. At 27 years old, I imagine she quite possibly has children of her own now.

Christine was in 4 hospitals, 3 hospitals in Dallas over a 4-month period. When she was in the hospital, her youth group from Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Carrollton, Texas, would visit her three times a week. They would pray for her and sing her favorite praise songs, not knowing if she could hear them or not. They just assumed she could.

Christine, three months into this ordeal, in early July 1996, asked a hospital orderly if he would take her outside. She was on one of the higher floors of the hospital, so he took her to the rooftop patio of something like the 20th floor. A fountain was there and he gave her a coin and said why don't you make a wish. She threw the coin into the fountain with the wish that she would be able to walk again within a year. And that on the next 4th of July that she would be walking on the beach with her family, even though at the time that looked totally out of the question. A year later, on July 4, 1997, at the Outer Banks, celebrating my parents' 50th wedding anniversary, Christine shared that with me as we walked on beach. What seemed to be a totally hopeless situation again, the hope was in Christ Jesus.

If all you can see is darkness stretching out before you, believe that the Savior's nail-pierced hand is also stretching out to you. Jesus, who has defeated death, can defeat any and all problems that plague you, bring peace to any harm in your heart, bring hope to the deepest of hurts.

In short, life with Christ is filled with endless hope, and without Him there can only be a hopeless end.

Too good to be true? Not at all.

If you ever visit the catacombs in Rome, those underground tunnels where many early Christians are buried, look at the sermons preached by the symbols on their graves. You will, if you look closely enough, see three common signs: a dove, a fish, and an anchor. The dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit, who gives us faith and hope. The fish – in Greek *ichthus* – is an acronym for the words “*Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior.*” Jesus is the basis for all Hope and Heaven.

And the anchor? The anchor says that in seemingly hopeless times, when all is adrift, Jesus is our God-given Hope who anchors our souls – sermons from the grave, hundreds of years old, sermons which say there are no hopeless situations.

Knowing the long-lasting love and great grace of the living Christ, Saint Paul wrote: “*I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:11-13).

“... *all things through Him who strengthens me*” – that is the risen Savior I share with you today. The Savior of the cross is also the Savior of liberation and life eternal; He is the Savior who banishes hopelessness!

Amen.