

Luke 24:13-35

Martin Luther was having a bad day. He was down in the dumps and he wasn't getting over it. His wife, Kate, suddenly caught his attention. She was dressed all in black. Had someone died?—the surprised Luther wanted to know. “Why, I assumed that God was dead,” she responded, “because of the way you've been acting.”

The two men from Emmaus were not dressed in black, but you couldn't tell from their attitude. They were moping along the road; their faces were downcast. There was nothing for them to be happy about. In their mind and heart, God was dead. And this was not Good Friday. It was not Holy Saturday. It was Easter, sometime in the afternoon. They had heard the women say that Jesus had risen, but they refused to believe it. Their names were not Thomas, although they could have been. The name of the one was Cleopas. They were heading back home to carry on with life as best as they could. They would go to work on Monday morning. They would provide for their families. They would eat, sleep, and meet with friends and neighbors to discuss the day's events. But life would never be the same—Jesus was dead. At least, for them He was.

What good is a dead Jesus? Not much. He's a memory, that's all. “Ah, yes, I remember Jesus,” they would forever say. “He was a prophet, mighty in word and deed; and we had all these hopes about Him—but alas, now He's dead; nothing more than just a memory.”

What good is a memory? We have good memories and bad ones. Some memories we cherish; some we'd rather forget. A memory, good or bad however, cannot take the place of the real thing. I'm sure that we're all planning on eating a meal later today. Allow me to suggest that instead of actually eating the burger, or the roast, or the potatoes, or whatever food is set before you—just picture it in your mind. Form a good memory of the food. Picture how it tastes. Imagine yourself eating it. Don't actually eat the food—just picture yourself eating it in your mind.

It won't work, will it? It's a silly suggestion. A memory of food won't feed us—we need the real thing. And that is also true with regard to Jesus. We need a real, living Savior—not a memory of Jesus. Because our problems in life are not imaginary, they are real. We really get sick. We have real financial burdens. Our strained relationships are real. Our sin is not a memory—it's very real. And so is the hell we deserve, real. And one day you and I will die—for real.

What can a memory of Jesus do to help with our real problems? Nothing at all. That's why Cleopas and his friend were in such sorrow as they walked along the road to Emmaus. For them, Jesus was not real anymore—only a memory. They believed, not in a Risen Lord, but in a dead Jesus. All their hopes were dashed. Like most people today. Most everyone in the world is walking along that road to Emmaus—walking in unbelief; living without hope—for a dead Jesus offers no hope. And most do not believe that Jesus lives, or they do not care.

Now Christians should be much different than that. Christians believe, not in a dead Christ, but in a living Lord. Except that many who wear the name “Christian” do not believe in a **present** Lord. “Yes, He lives,” they'll admit, “but He lives in heaven, not here with me. His flesh and blood are not given to me in the Lord's Supper. He is not truly present in His

Word and Sacraments...but at least I do remember Him there. When I eat the bread and wine I remember Jesus, and so, although He is not really present, I am nourished in my faith.”

But that’s as silly as saying that a memory of food can nourish my body. We don’t need a memory—we need the real thing! And in the Word and Sacraments we need the real Jesus to be present. An absent Jesus is no better than a dead Jesus. If Jesus is not present for me in the Lord’s Supper, and in the water of Baptism, and in His Word proclaimed—then it’s all up to me to take care of my own problems; to work out my own salvation; to win the favor of God on my own. For then, Jesus is not truly here in these holy things...for me.

Those who live with the idea that Jesus is living, but absent—will not have a deep desire to come to His Sacred Meal—He’s not there! They will not be driven to bring their children to Holy Baptism—He’s not there either! They themselves will see no need to come often to the Divine Service—after all, I can remember Jesus as easily at home as I can in church. But there is more here than just a memory. There are many today who have memories of a dead pope—but we have a living Savior! We have the real Jesus who comes to be present in our worship to give you real forgiveness; real joy; to give you real help for your problems; to give you real hope; real life in heaven.

On that Emmaus road it was the real Jesus who began to walk with those two men. Their hearts were burning, they later said, because He was working His Spirit within them. Through the Word of His teaching, Jesus was replacing their unbelief with real faith. Later at their home, as He gave them the Holy Communion, they recognized that it was Jesus. No longer a memory—now they knew that the real Jesus was with them. Their lives were changed. Their attitude was different. They didn’t mope along anymore. They rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples, “The real Jesus really appeared to us in the flesh! And in His Meal we recognized Him.”

And that same Jesus is really present today. “This is My body...This is My blood...” He tells us. By faith, Jesus also allows us to recognize Him as He gives Himself to us in the bread and wine of His Sacred Meal. And because He is the Resurrection and the Life, all who die in the faith abide now and forever with Christ. So that, when Christ comes to be with us in our worship, He brings with Him our loved ones who are now in heaven with Him.

This Communion Table does not stop at the wall of the church building. It is not just a half-circle—it is a full-circle. For when we commune with Christ here, the saints in heaven commune with us on the outer circle. Christ at the center—sitting on the altar within the bread and wine, and feeding us with His body and blood, forgiving our sins, nourishing our faith, giving us that eternal life which our loved ones who died in Christ are even now enjoying in total bliss. And they complete the circle. We, the saints on earth, with the saints in heaven, and Christ Jesus truly present here with us all.

You may have wonderful memories of your loved ones who are in heaven, but when you come up to Christ’s Table, He gives you more than just a memory—He gives you the real thing. Your loved one—their soul, which is with Christ, is here with you. And it is Jesus who brings us all together as one. One Church—the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. Not a memory, but the real thing. Real saints with the real Jesus. Why?

Because He who died, really rose. And He is really present with us in Word and Sacrament, to turn your unbelief into faith; to turn your sorrow into joy; to forgive your every sin; to heal your broken relationships; to bring you together with your loved ones in heaven.

Because Jesus really lives, it means that when your pastor speaks the Word of Forgiveness, it is not his word, but Christ who speaks to you. “**I** forgive you,” He declares. Because your living Lord is here present, when your pastor pours the water of Baptism on your head, it is really Christ who is washing you clean of your sins. When your pastor places the bread of the Sacred Meal into your mouth, it is really Christ’s hand that is feeding you and nourishing you in your faith.

We’re not here today, you and I, because of some good memory we have of Jesus. We’re here for the real thing. The living Lord, Jesus Christ is here with us. And within His Word and Sacraments He will always abide with us, until that day when we commune with Christ, not on this side of the circle—but on the other side, with all the saints triumphant—who abide with Christ forever in glory. Amen.