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Easter 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“On the Road to Life”

Text: Luke 24:13-35 (Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-25)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

You've all been on the road to Emmaus, like those two disciples on that first Easter night. Maybe you are on that road now. It is the road of disappointment and dashed hopes; the road of fear and uncertainty; when your mind is filled with more questions than there are answers. It is a hard place to be.

We get on that road with our **everyday lives**. For since we are little we have plans and hopes and dreams, don't we? We are excited about life. What I'm going to be when I grow up. A house, a spouse, and children, and happily ever after. The car I'm going to drive, the career I'm going to have, the difference I'm going to make in the world. . . . *And then we find ourselves on the road to Emmaus.* Things didn't work out as planned. It wasn't as easy as we thought. People we thought would help us instead worked against us. There is death and sadness. And so instead of skipping along, we are shuffling down the road, heavy laden, and wondering about life.

We get on that road also with our **spiritual lives**. As new Christians we are excited about the faith. We want to tell others about our Saviour. We look forward to learning about the Word and growing and making a difference. A congregation is started with great hopes and dreams. . . . *And then we find ourselves on the road to Emmaus.* Things didn't work out as we thought they would. We find out that faith is hard and that the Church is not full of wonderful people, but sinners like us! One day our faith seems to be growing and the next we are filled with doubts and fears. There is the death and sadness of folks who leave the Church. And so instead of skipping along, we are shuffling down the road, heavy laden, and wondering about our faith.

Yes, we've all been on the road to Emmaus. You may be on that road now, or maybe you were in the past, or maybe you will be in the future. But that other disciple, walking to Emmaus with Cleopas, *is you*.

For those two disciples, walking to Emmaus that night, had one thing on their minds: **the cross**. They looked at what had happened, and compared that to what they had been hoping for, and they came to this conclusion: **the cross ruined everything!** If it hadn't been for the cross, things would have been great.

We think that too, when the cross comes into our lives. When our hopes and dreams meet the detours of trials and failure and suffering. When sin comes crashing down on us, we make wrong choices, or we become unwilling pawns in someone else's game. When it seems as if things are out of control. We wonder if God sees, or knows, or cares. And we look at what has happened, and compare that to what we had been hoping for, and we too can come to the conclusion: **God ruined everything!** These crosses are not what I wanted. If only He would take them away, or mind His own business, or do what I want, things would be great.

But God won't do that. He simply loves you too much to indulge your sin, your idolatry, and raise spoiled children. And so Jesus came to those two doubting and disappointed disciples, and showed them how the cross was not a surprise and was not life spinning out of control - **but that the cross was necessary. His death was necessary.** Not for ruin, but for good. Not to shatter hope, but to give hope. That the cross was not the defeat that it appeared, but was part of God's plan of victory over sin, death, and the devil. The plan revealed from the very beginning. The plan that He had been speaking of and accomplishing all through the Old Testament. The plan and victory sealed and accomplished in His resurrection that morning.

They listened. Their hearts were burning within them. But they didn't quite get it. They were thick-headed and slow-hearted, just like we often are. Because when you're on that road, when you're in the thick of the struggle, it's easy to hear the words, but hard to believe. Because things look and feel and seem so bad. So contrary to what we're hearing and what we expect.

But is the problem what we're hearing, or what we expect?

And so on the road to Emmaus, Jesus teaches those disciples and unpacks the Word of God. In the reading from Acts, Peter does the same to those listening to him

preach – so that instead of condemning God and turning to ourselves, we would condemn ourselves and turn to God. **That is repentance.** And that instead of relying on our own wisdom and expectations, we would rely on Him and His Word. **And that is faith.** And only in repentance and faith do we have life. True life. Eternal life.

You see, satan does not want you to have that life, **and so he makes life look like death and death look like life!** To lead us away from our Saviour. And he's pretty good at it. He's had lots of practice. And so he tries to convince us that we don't really want to live as Christians – you're just going to get walked on. The Church robs you of life, it doesn't give you life. You have enough to do without the Church, or the Pastor, or anyone else adding to your burden. He makes the road of life look like death. . . . So no, go out and live! Don't let anyone constrain you. Be all that you can be and get what you can – because if you don't, someone else will. . . . But is that life? An endless chasing after pleasures? Every one for himself, or herself? Is that living? Think about it: whatever you may accomplish in this life, whatever plans and glory you may achieve, whatever goals you reach and pleasures you attain, it is all going to end in death. Sooner or later. It is as Peter told us in his Epistle: *“all flesh is like grass and its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls.”* And then what? Then what?

But so that we may have life, Jesus came. If His cross and the crosses in our lives look backwards and upside down, it isn't because God and His ways are backwards, it is because we are. It is because sin has so twisted us and satan has so misled us and deceived us that our thinking and expectations are wrong. He's not upside down, we are! We think life is death and death is life. We think we are good and God is bad. We think we know about things and what we need, and God doesn't. And you know where that kind of thinking puts us? On the road to Emmaus. The road of disappointment and despair, of fear and uncertainty. The road of death.

But Easter and our Lord's resurrection shows us that God *specializes* in raising the dead! That He is not content to let us go and let us die, but has come to do something about it! And so He comes and takes our death-dealing sins, that their guilt be on Him and not on us. He dies our death to destroy the power of death. He will not let satan have his way with us, but has come to rescue us. And all this He does through His cross, transforming its shame into glory, and its death into life. That all who are joined to Him be also transformed, be raised from death to life, and made partakers of His glory and His life. True life. Eternal life.

And that resurrection and work of our Saviour is what we witnessed here today at the font, as through water and the Word of God, little Jocelyn was joined with her Saviour in His death and resurrection and she was raised from the death of sin to life with Him.

And that is also why our loving and gracious Father uses the cross in our lives. He is not playing games with us and our lives; He is not capricious and arbitrary; He does not give us crosses just to make us suffer and pay for our sins – Jesus paid for our sins! No, He uses crosses to make us like little Jocelyn. He uses crosses to kill us. To kill the sinner in us who wants to go his own way. To kill the sinful wrong-thinking in us. To kill our idolatry and pride, so that He can raise us again to a new life. That we rely on Him and not ourselves. That we have His mind and not our own. That we repent of our death-dealing sins and receive His life-giving forgiveness. And so be raised, as children of God. And not *just* on the day of our baptism. That is the start! But each and every day of our lives. For each and every day we need it. Each and every day we need Him.

And then, like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, we will see that the cross did not ruin everything, and that the cross in our lives does not ruin everything – but that it is necessary, and it is good. For it is the death that leads to life. The only one that does. So that though someday, someday, we *will* die physically, yet we will live. For the life of Christ that we receive now is just the beginning. For as Peter told us, yes “*the grass withers, and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord remains forever.*” And “Word of the Lord” there doesn’t just mean the Bible – but the Word made flesh. The One who lived and died and now lives again, so that in Him, we who live and die may also live again. Forever.

But our story doesn’t end there – there’s one more thing. One more thing that (so to speak) sealed the deal for those two troubled disciples: Jesus fed them. It wasn’t just that they recognized Him because they recognized what He was doing – the words and actions. It was that through this meal, their eyes were opened. His Word and teaching and life took concrete form in this eating and drinking, and completed His work in them.

And so too in us. For the same risen Lord who baptizes us and joins us to Himself and His death and resurrection, and who forgives our sins and raises us to life, wants also to feed us – and not just with any food, but with His own body and blood. To

give us the faith, forgiveness, and strength that we need for this journey, for this life. And so He fills not just our ears and eyes but also our mouths with Himself, that we do not grow weary and lose heart, but receive from Him all that we need. Receiving Him and His life, until we join Him at the feast where *He* will never leave, and *we* will never leave: the feast of Heaven, which will have no end.

Until then, we go back, like those two disciples – back out into the world, back to our lives – with good news. To love and serve and proclaim the life that has been given to us. Because there are so many looking for life. So many walking that road to Emmaus, frightened and alone. So many asking “*What shall we do?*” Perhaps it is through us that Jesus will go to them and give them hope. Perhaps it is through us that Jesus will raise them and give them life. Perhaps it is through us that they will hear what they have never heard before. That like those two disciples on the road, and like Peter, we may proclaim *Christ is risen!* [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

And that He is here for us, and for all.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.