

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?

The words “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sin” show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.

Jesus was born into and lived in a world filled with any agony we could probably imagine. The technology for creating and sustaining suffering and havoc might have been different when he taught and preached. But we must not fool ourselves into believing that the 21st century somehow has the corner on crime, cancer, and creative lunacy. Maybe people didn't talk as openly about unbelief then as now, but questions of God's goodness and existence are really as old as thinking people have walked the earth. The Bible is full of such ponderous questions.

Long ago, two disciples of Jesus were walking down a seven-mile stretch of road away from Jerusalem (Luke 24). Can you see them walking? Such a distance presents a good long while to ponder a tragedy and try to make sense of faith-shaking events. When things get a little zany in my own pastoral life, about the first thing I do to clear the head is go hiking somewhere. To ground oneself in rock, tree, and sky—the timeless context of creation—often provides perspective like nothing else. Two ex-believers (notice the past tense in 24:21) head away from town. One is named Cleopas. The other is never named. Whenever a character in a Bible story is unnamed, we're all but invited to jump into the action.

I recently had a great visit with two of our church members in Walhalla, Ralph and Delores. It was a beautiful morning and we sat and talked about the past. Ralph struggles with memory issues these days, sometimes profoundly so. But talking about the past or saying the Lord's Prayer or singing an old hymn sometimes awakens his memory like nothing else.

Delores and Ralph just celebrated their 60th anniversary. We talked about their wedding day at a little Lutheran church in Wisconsin north of Green Bay near where Delores grew up on a dairy farm. As a little girl, she used to bicycle six miles to confirmation class every Saturday morning to a neighboring Lutheran church. On the day of their wedding, Ralph and Delores exchanged their vows before about 100 people crammed into that tiny church building, filled to the rafters with love and hope. They had cake and punch in the church basement afterwards and all their guests and family enveloped them as one.

We recalled all of this for awhile, how important such a foundation had been for the 60 years that followed. And then we had communion. The bread and the wine and the prayers. And the words came back for Ralph. There was no forgetting them. And for a moment there, time stood still and it was like we were all on this common road together, leading to the kingdom of God, with Jesus opening our eyes to the goodness of this life and his gifts. For you, for you, for you.

It is instructive (and this, I'll proudly confess, is where Lutherans get this right) that Cleopas and the unnamed companion have their lost hope revived when Jesus does two things in this old story: when he breaks open *the scriptures* and when he breaks open *the bread*. Here is our centuries-old Reformation emphasis on word and sacrament!

“Were not our hearts burning within us when he was opening the scriptures to us?” Those who had once lost hope now regained hope and found new vision not just any old way, but through very specific means: word and sacrament. Notice that Jesus does not just hold the hand of the hopeless, pat them on the back, and say “there, there now.” He draws them back into the story with old words and new wine and a chance to start again.

We cannot control how people come to faith any more than we can control how they might lose it. We can only invite people into a real encounter with God's word and the grace, forgiveness, and new life inherent in the Eucharist.

Something happened to Cleopas and his unnamed companion to make them hike the seven miles back to Jerusalem (back towards the church) after sundown. It's worth asking what sort of news would cause any of us to walk that far after dark.