

Witness
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
April 22, 2012

Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

We’ve now heard this story from two storytellers - first John last week and now Luke. Each gospel author has his own style, his own message he feels compelled to lift up above the rest. John says outright, in case we missed it, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” For John, the signs mattered in proving the messiahship of Jesus. For Luke, it was critical to prove Christ’s humanity, before and after death. As Stephen A. Cooper explains, “Christ’s humanity is essential to humanity’s salvation. Only that which has been ‘assumed’ by God in the incarnation can be saved. The necessity to affirm the full humanity not only of the earthly but also of the resurrected Christ means that Christ’s humanity is not cast off as insusceptible of salvation.”¹

John’s focus is on evidence of Jesus’ divinity. Luke cares more about conveying how the tables will be turned because of Christ’s coming into the world. To have truly defeated death, to turn upside-down the beliefs and understandings of what death meant, Jesus could not return as a ghost but must return as flesh and bone, still human, still hungry! John’s hope is that all will come to believe in Christ. Luke hopes to prod concrete action through belief. Luke’s Jesus says, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Those who believe cannot simply stop at believing but must go out doing and proving and witnessing. Now that the disciples had witnessed that all that Jesus had said was true, and Jesus had “opened their minds to understand the

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 6*, p. 426.

scriptures,” they had all they needed in preparation to proclaim to all the nations. Repentance and forgiveness of sins is the message.

John understands Jesus’ commission to the disciples to go and forgive sins - “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Matthew’s gospel describes the great commission in this way: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Mark quotes Jesus, saying, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” Go! Go! Go! Do not sit comfortably in your familiar chairs in your familiar homes in your familiar lands. Go!

Paul says in Romans 1:9, “For God...is my witness” - here, we are urged instead to be witnesses for God. I’m sure you can imagine many ways in which you, yourself, could witness to God and God’s saving acts in this world, ways in which you could encourage others to repent, to turn toward God, to lean into God for all that we need, ways in which you could assure others that their sins are forgiven and that they are freed to live lives of love toward God and one another without fretting about all the ways they have not. I’m sure you know how you could go and be a witness. And I’m just as sure there are ways which you could witness that you haven’t yet imagined. As today is Earth Day, consider a quote most often attributed to Native Americans: “Treat the earth well: we do not inherit the land from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” From the very first chapter of Genesis, from the beginning, we are all called to be stewards of God’s creation. Perhaps in this day you may find inspiration to think differently, to act differently, to fulfill our responsibility to care for the natural world that has been entrusted to us, to witness to God’s creation.

Today we will be collecting a special offering for the work of PC(USA) missionaries Al and Ellen Smith. We’ll see in a short bit some images of the conditions of the Roma and witness, second-hand, the needs of the Roma people but, before we do, I’d like to tell you more about these two witnesses, from their biography on the PC(USA) website.

“Alan and Ellen Smith were appointed in 2001 to serve in Russia as coordinators of the congregational twinning project in Russia and Belarus, a program that matches interested congregations in the United States with congregations in Russia and Belarus for friendship and mission. After almost ten years in Moscow and a year in the United States on interpretation assignment, the family moved to Berlin, Germany in July 2011, but their ministry in Russia continues.

‘The foundation of the twinning program,’ say the Smiths, ‘is relationship - coming together as brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage one another, learn from one another and deepen our understanding of who we are as the Body of Christ. The program helps overcome Cold War and denominational stereotypes. Out of the relationships, projects often develop that enrich congregations on both continents.’

Under the leadership of the Outreach Foundation, and in partnership with the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) initiated the Russian Twinning Program in the early 1990s to build spiritual connections between PC(USA) and Russian congregations. In the past ten years, the Smiths have worked to deepen the connection with the Baptist Union and to develop connections with the Russian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia and Other States.

Some of the areas in which partners connect to each other are camping ministry, orphanage ministry, prison ministry and ministry to the elderly. Partners come together where there is a sense of a common call and where each partner has strengths to share. As Ellen puts it, ‘This is a partnership, not a sponsorship.’

Ellen also works with the Russian Round Table and the Belarusian Round Table, church structures dedicated to diaconal ministries, with special focus on fighting drug abuse and the spread of HIV and AIDS in Russia and Belarus.

In 2006 Al began to work in Roma ministry, helping to reorganize a network of pastors who work with the Roma people. He is now working in a new assignment, coordinating evangelical outreach to minority groups, including Roma, in central and eastern Europe.

Ellen has been active in outreach ministries of her church for many years. She was a regular participant in short-term mission trips for 13 years, traveling with groups to work in projects on the Mexican border, in rural West Virginia and on two occasions to visit the church’s ‘twin,’ the Transfiguration Baptist Church, in Oryol, Russia. Al held the fort at home to make these trips possible.

From 1993 until 2000 Ellen taught reading, language arts and social studies in middle school in Cumberland County, North Carolina. Al was a middle school and high school math teacher in Robeson and Cumberland counties in North Carolina in 1999 and 2000. Prior to that he practiced law.

Al holds a Doctor of Jurisprudence from the University of Minnesota Law School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Smiths did their undergraduate work at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, from which Al holds a bachelor’s in economics and Ellen a bachelor’s degree in English and history.

Al and Ellen are both ordained to the ministries of elder and deacon and are members of MacPherson Presbyterian Church, Fayetteville, North Carolina. They are the parents of three children, Allison, Margaret, and Emma. Allison graduated from Carleton College in 2006 and is now working in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Margaret is a student at Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. Emma lives with the Smiths in Berlin.”²

Two school teachers, one of whom was a former lawyer. Elders and deacons. Parents of a teenager and two young adults. God said, “GO!” and they went. They went and did and proved and witnessed. The Roma people who have been deemed unlovable in nation after nation are loved - Jesus says so and so do Al and Ellen Smith. Jesus says clothe my children and feed them and visit them and love them and Al and Ellen Smith have and they have facilitated others in clothing and feeding and visiting and loving.

Could there be ways of witnessing that you have not yet imagined? Or maybe you’ve imagined them but they come with big risks and big fears. To the disciples and to you, through all the gospels,

² <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/misionconnections/smith-alan-and-ellen/>

Jesus says: do not be afraid; peace be with you. He doesn't promise security but he promises that the Holy Spirit will be with us and them every step of the way. Al and Ellen Smith know firsthand that there is only a limited measure of security in the work they do, having faced cuts in funding from the Presbyterian Church, just as so many other missionaries and offices and forms of outreach have. And so, in the face of uncertainty, they ask, by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, for help in their witness, for partners in their witness. Maybe you will choose to support the Smiths. Maybe you will choose to support God's created earth. However you do it, just go! Peace be with you. Go!

Let us pray: God, grant us your peace and send us your Spirit that we might be your witnesses. Amen.