

BLACK EASTER and the CHURCH BEHIND BARS

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009 – SONrise Sermon

By Pastor Vern Oestmann

In 1940's, Communism took over China and close to a thousand missionary personnel were trapped. The China Inland Missions ordered a total evacuation in January 1951. Arthur and Wilda Matthews applied for exit visas on January 3rd. Was it too late? Communists were killing foreign missionaries. Wilda had converted a footlocker into her personal prayer closet. Every day Wilda prayed for safety. Arthur was approached by the Communists to secretly work for them. Every time, Arthur refused. Everyday Arthur would say goodbye to his wife Wilda and their little daughter Anna. Shots were heard over and over again and the wondering of when it would come into their home was constantly on their minds. Finally, Arthur had enough of the requests and he told the Communists bluntly, "I am not a Judas. If you expect me or any others of the missionaries to sell out on their friends, they were asking the wrong people. We cannot do it, Arthur said.

Days and weeks passed by and still no exit visa was granted. Sunday, March 21, 1951 arrived – Easter Sunday. Arthur, Wilda, and Anna sneaked into an Easter church service held in the Russian Orthodox church. When the hymn "HE Lives! Was to be sung, Wilda could not get the words out of her mouth. When they made it home, Wilda went to her prayer closet and with trembling fingers opened her Bible to 2 Chronicles 20:17. It read, "You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

Two years past before Arthur, Wilda, and Anna received their exit visas. They were the last CIM missionaries to leave communist China. All of the CIM missionaries had escaped without harm. It was the greatest exodus in missionary history. Wilda later wrote in her diary, "What, at first glance was a Black Easter, became the true freedom unto life."

Christians have been through much persecution down through the centuries for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is what we have celebrated this past week and today. It is the Good News of salvation that comes to a world under the oppression of sin and death. Many Black Easters have been observed and lived throughout the generations by those who proclaim Jesus Christ as the risen Lord and Savior.

Today we stand here, early in the morning, at the light of dawn to celebrate the message that was proclaimed by the angel, "Why do you seek the living amongst the dead? He is not here. He is risen!"

This message has resounded through out the world in all places, even in prisons. Let me tell you about a church behind bars in Montana. Chuck Colson, a prisoner once himself, heard the message of salvation and became a believer in Jesus. He dedicated the remainder of his life traveling to various prisons and sharing the Gospel with the inmates.

On one occasion, Mr. Colson was booked to come to a prison in Montana where he had been ten years earlier. Chuck had traveled to many prisons on this specific tour and was very tired. He held his first service and felt that he was not getting the message across. He went into the Chaplain's quarters before the second service to rest. He was so exhausted and felt such despair that he wondered if he could go through the next service.

As he entered the meeting place, there were hundred of inmates awaiting him. Before Chuck could say anything, an inmate stood up and addressed Mr. Colson. He said, "Ten years ago you came to this prison with the governor and some newspaper reporters. I was in my cell and had no intention to going to a church meeting. I knew you were a phony and I wanted nothing to do with Christianity. But everyone in the prison was talking about your visit. I thought, if Colson can get the governor to come to the prison, I might as well see what it was all about."

Then the man continued, “I listened to you preach, and I was impressed, but I wasn’t buying it. When the meeting ended, I headed for the door, but you beat me to the exit and you stopped me before I could leave. You asked me a question, ‘Do you know Jesus Christ as your risen Lord and Savior?’ I looked back at you and said, No! I’ll never forget what you said next. You looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Well, why are you here, then?’ You’d better get with it.”

“That exchange haunted me. It was the beginning of my spiritual journey where I gave my life to Jesus Christ, and everything has been different ever since. From the day I confessed Jesus Christ as my risen Lord and Savior, I’ve been sharing the Good News of salvation to every prisoner in here. Today, these men are here because of that saving message. The church is alive behind these prison bars because Jesus Christ is alive in us!”

People of God, the church will always remain alive with those who take it seriously and who allow the Good News to change their lives. The message of Easter morn is the powerful message of salvation. He is not here. He is risen!

Let that message resound in your heart and life so that it goes forth to those around you who are still sitting behind the bars of imprisonment caused by sin and feeling the oppression of a Black Easter because of the threat of death.

We have a mighty God that we come to worship. We have a loving God we come to worship. We have a forgiving God we come to worship. We have a saving God we come to worship. We have a life-giving God we come to worship. We have a risen God we come to worship. Because He lives, we shall live also.

The Lord is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

(The two illustrations are taken from Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, & Quotes, compiled by Robert J. Morgan, Copywrite©2000; Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee.)