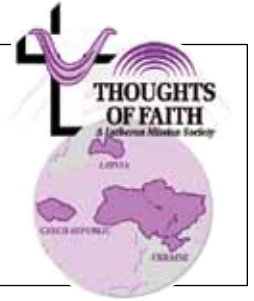


Thoughts of Faith

Thoughts of Faith is a confessional Lutheran mission society dedicated to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Latvia through printed materials and personal ministry.



April 2011
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Donations for the Lord's work in Ukraine, Czech Republic and Latvia may be sent directly to Thoughts of Faith. Please see the enclosed envelope to donate by check or by credit card.

“I Was in Prison and You Came to Visit Me”

Matt. 25:36

“Dear teacher and preacher. It is Sunday morning and I am thinking about your sermon here in prison. I don't know if you remember me but I have been to your church service a couple of times...

“I know, dear preacher, that I have erred and must pay the price for it. Therefore, each day I pray to God to help me and bless me...

“Today I am sitting here in prison and thinking about myself – how I do no good thing – and all of a sudden it all comes to me, just like Jesus Christ does, who leads me and all believers on God's path... Every time I pray to him in silence I feel like I want to belong to him... Then everything falls away from me, I hear nothing, and I see the world spinning around me...

“I am convinced that Jesus Christ is standing by my side and gives me God's love and spiritual purification and I am very happy for that. Though I am a target of gags by the other prisoners, I keep telling them they have their world and I have mine, a spiritual one...

“I know, dear preacher, that you are busy and I am only bothering you with my problems, but please don't be angry with me for I have no one else to turn to...”

“I know, dear preacher, that you are busy and I am only bothering you with my problems, but please don't be angry with me for I have no one else to turn to...”

This is an excerpt from a letter I received in January. Its writer is Ivan F., who had attended our church services in Plzen and asked for financial help. I never refused and I also gave him copies of the sermon and devotional booklets. But Ivan stopped coming and then this letter from prison arrived.



Ondrej, left, and Adam with their poster pause before entering the prison.



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Lent and Easter: Overcoming Death

The old comedian was right: Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die!

Christians sometimes recoil from the thought of death. That's the natural reaction of our fallen human nature, which is guilt-ridden with its sin, and therefore fearful of well-deserved punishment. And if even Christians acknowledge a fear of death, then how frightened must the unbelieving world be as it faces the end of life!

During the Lenten season we are reminded again of man's mortality as the consequence of sin. *As in Adam all die*, Paul says. Now as we approach Easter, we are cheered again by the Good News that Christ lived a righteous life as our representative before God (and we get the credit), died at the cross as our substitute (so we are forgiven) and rose again from his grave as a public proclamation that God accepted what he had done on behalf of all mankind. *So in Christ will all be made alive!* The empty tomb gives assurance that forgiveness has been secured for all and that we, too, will rise from our graves someday.

The Gospel must be preached so that people may possess personally, through faith in Christ, the forgiveness which he won for the world. The churches we support in Ukraine, Latvia and the Czech Republic proclaim Christ as Savior. The same Gospel message we love to hear in our home congregations here in the U.S.

is preached on our behalf in Europe – to people uneasy about dying . . . people for whom the Savior came...people who must learn at last this comforting truth: that because of Jesus Christ, the Christian's death is the way to heaven.

May God grant you a joyful celebration of Easter!

Rev. Steven P. Petersen
Administrator
Thoughts of Faith



Rev. Steven P. Petersen

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We exchanged more letters and I made sure that the clear Gospel message and the comfort flowing from it were always expressed in my writing. One letter from Ivan came with the envelope embellished with a hand-drawn cross and a rose. Soon another convict, Ivan's cellmate, wrote to me. He was full of remorse over failing to be at his mother's side during her last days. My message to him was forgiveness flowing from the cross is the only cure. We also continue to keep in touch.

God has his children, even behind bars. And he is pleased when their brothers and sisters from "the outside" visit them, encourage them and support them. This was the point I made at one of our children's Bible Classes. Two of the students, Ondrej and Adam, decided to visit Ivan. Before the visit, the boys made gifts for Ivan. Adam painted a shepherd rejoicing over finding his lost sheep and Ondrej wrote out the parable of the lost sheep. Their work was placed on a poster that could be hung on a prison wall.

One Saturday in February we stood in front of the Bory Prison. The boys were excited. We entered, were scanned, interviewed and then led, together with the other visitors, to the meeting room. Ivan came and we had a nice conversation. The boys had questions they wanted to ask Ivan about prison life. Ivan was happy to answer them and thankful for the poster the boys brought. He explained how guards and other prisoners marveled that a pastor and two boys

bothered to come to see him.

The Easter victory of our sweet Jesus is what makes such marvelous prison visits possible and comforting for all involved. Indeed, God does not judge by external appearance. Small children are blessed and used by him. Disdained inmates find freedom in God's son. Pastors are encouraged by his grace. You also are a small part of his great plan.

May you have a blessed Easter celebrating with us how Jesus released us all from Satan's prison!

Rev. Petr Krakora
Czech Lutheran Church
Plzen, Czech Republic



The hand-drawn cross.

St. Sophia Seminary Re-Opens

Once again we have proof that the Lord answers prayers. Eighteen months ago St. Sophia Lutheran Seminary in Ternopil, Ukraine, was forced to put its seminary-level program into hibernation due to a lack of students. Now that Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) pastors are forced to supplement their income through secular jobs, it is easy to understand the hesitancy to leave secular jobs and undertake three or four years of theological study. Yet the Lord has given us three young men who have committed themselves to full-time study to become pastors.

St. Sophia was not entirely inactive during the years the seminary-level hibernated. The preparatory department continued to function by preparing three men. However, none of us – including the men themselves – was sure that they would be able to continue as full-time students for three more years. In fact, we weren't sure there would be any students until a week or two before the scheduled re-opening on Jan. 24. To our joy and surprise, God moved all three to come! A fourth student who is married and expecting a child could not come, but is receiving videotapes of some courses, so he can study at home.

Our three students have all been active in their home congregations – two in Ukraine and one in Belarus. Serhiy Berezin comes from Resurrection congregation in Kyiv where he served as a deacon. He taught Bible classes at the Gift of Life Center, was an enthusiastic member of the bishop's traveling evangelism team, and serves on the ULC Youth Committee. Anatoliy Biryukov is from Simferopol in the Crimea. He served as worship leader for a year or so when the congregation was without a pastor. Alexey Zelenko comes from Minsk, Belarus. He was pressed into premature



Left to right: Rector John Vogt, translator Alina Tymchak, Alexey Zelenko from Minsk, Serhiy Berezin (hand raised) from Kyiv, Anatoliy Biryukov from Simferopol, and in the background via video camera student Volodymyr Moskov from Mykolaiv.

service with the sudden death of Pastor Nikolai Badrusov last September. Alexey conducts the worship in Minsk using sermons prepared by ULC pastors. He now makes the 14-hour train trip every other weekend to continue providing this small congregation with a worship service.

The seminary has reached a milestone this year of not needing any American guest professors. All courses are being taught by me and four ULC pastors.

The seminary's re-opening means that the students will also be available for service to the church. They will again be involved in planning and carrying out Youth Forum 2011, to be held April 30-May 2. And they will undertake evangelism projects, such as spending a number of days in Sim-

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First Distance-Learning Graduate

On March 20, St. Sophia Seminary graduated its first distance-learning student. Radoslav Radkov of the Bulgarian Lutheran Church was given his diploma and then ordained in a special service. Rector John Vogt and Pastor Andriy Honcharuk traveled to Varna, Bulgaria, to take part.

When the WELS missionaries were withdrawn from Bulgaria a number of years ago, Radoslav's theological training came to a sudden stop. St. Sophia Seminary was asked to complete his training. Pastor Honcharuk and Rector Vogt have spent time the past four summers in Varna, teaching Rado courses (after Rado returned from his job as a bus driver). During the rest of the year they were joined by Pastor Oleh Yukhymenko. The three offered regular courses via Skype over the Internet. Rado also came to Ternopil a couple of times to attend classes with our other students.

Radoslav is the first graduate in the expanded mission given to the Ukrainian seminary, which is now billed as the Confessional Lutheran Seminary for Eastern Europe. In addi-

tion to Bulgaria, the seminary teaches pastors in Albania and seminary students in Siberia, Russia. Last year, Rector Vogt also travelled to Seoul, Korea, to teach a number of short courses.



Radoslav Radkov with his Varna congregation.

For Some, Easter Traditions Have Come Full Circle

In Ukraine, Easter is called Velikden (The Great Day). It has been celebrated over a long period of history and has many traditions that are no longer fully preserved. In fact, some people lament that many of the Easter traditions and customs have been turned into folklore that reveres created things – fields, trees, water, food -- instead of the merciful Creator.

Ukrainian Easter begins with the Easter matins during which the pasky (traditional Easter breads) and pysanky (decorated) and krashanky (colored) eggs are blessed in the church. The decorated and colored eggs have an important role in Easter rites. It seems the art of decorating eggs and putting them in baskets originated in what is now present day Ukraine. Before St. Volodymyr turned Kievan Rus into a Christian state in 988 A.D., pagans here worshipped the sun. Seeing a parallel between the sun and an egg's yellow yolk, and another between egg whites and the moon's paleness, they believed the egg had magical powers and therefore it was used in worship ceremonies. It was also obvious that the egg could be the source of life. Spring rituals celebrating the return of the sun as days grew longer and the rebirth of the earth after the winter gave significance to the raw, fertile egg as a symbol of life and hope. The root of many Christian traditions can be found in the cultures of pre-Christian times.

When Ukraine accepted Christian-

ity a thousand years ago the egg was adapted as a Christian symbol. An egg is eaten first to break the fast of Lent. ("Fast" in this context doesn't mean starvation, just the avoidance of rich foods.) The decorated pysanky were also adapted by being decorated with designs of Christian importance. The pysanky's new symbolism was as a sign



Decorated eggs have pagan roots and Christian meaning.

of new hope – hope in the promise of eternal life because of Christ's Resurrection. The egg was compared to the tomb that Christ arose from. Pagan symbols were given Christian meanings. Old sun-god designs now stood for the Son of God, triangles stood for the Holy Trinity, stars showed God's love toward man, dots represented Mary's tears, and crosses showed Christ's suffering for us. New symbols were also added: fish representing Christianity, 40 triangles to remind us of the 40 days of fasting by Christ and

the 40 days of Lent, and the butterfly as another sign of the Resurrection.

Ukraine's practice of coloring eggs made this Easter tradition famous the world over. Yet, how many people will color eggs in America and elsewhere in the world without knowing the Christian symbolism involved? Or, how many of those people are actually following an ancient pagan ritual without knowing it? What began as pagan worship and was adapted by Christianity has nowadays often reverted to its origins, just as some modern sophisticated Americans have reverted to nature worship and practices very similar to ancient fertility cults.

If the Easter traditions of some people have come full circle, for us nothing has changed the central truth of Christ's resurrection. It is the single most important Christian belief, reinforcing other important truths such as: God becoming man, the virgin birth, the atonement, eternal salvation paid for by God's son, the Savior. What good is a dead Savior? If Jesus had not risen, he would be no more important than any other religious leader who died and – stayed dead. In Ukraine, and everywhere, we have a RISEN Lord and Savior and so we exclaim . . .

Christ is Risen! Khyrstos Voskres!
Truly He has Risen! Voistyno Voskres!

*Nicholas and Kerry Laper
Gift of Life
Ternopil, Ukraine*

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feropol in June to pass out flyers and invitations to Vacation Bible School.

In addition, the seminary will again host a Summer Quarter for the fifth straight year. This year, President Paul Wendland of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Pastor Andriy Honcharuk of the ULC will be offering courses. Enrollment in previous years has been as high as 30 and has drawn students from Latvia, Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Germany, Bulgaria, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Georgia, as well as Ukraine.

The seminary is funded jointly by the Ukrainian Lutheran Church and the ELS Board for World Outreach. Youth Forum is being funded by a special gift. Summer Quarter is still looking for special funding. Our sincere thanks to all who make the work of St. Sophia Seminary possible through their generous gifts!

*Rev. John Vogt
Rector, St. Sophia Seminary
Ternopil, Ukraine*

A More Dramatic Story to Tell

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." John 11:25

Easter is one of the most festive holidays celebrated by Christians. In Ukraine the Easter egg is the main symbol of the holiday. It is not only a nice decoration for the Easter table, it is a piece of folk art. In ancient culture a painted egg was a symbol of new life; in Christianity it came to be a symbol of the resurrected Christ. Ukrainians have a legend which tells about the origin of Easter eggs:

When the prediction of Old Testament prophets came true and Jesus rose from the dead, the stone was rolled away to reveal that Christ had risen. Frightened soldiers ran to the city to let their officer know what had happened. They asked him not to punish them because they were not guilty. The officer was about to have his breakfast. Boiled eggs were on his table. When he heard the news he began to scream, "You must have fallen asleep and allowed the body to be stolen! How can a man rise from the dead? How can anything dead become alive? How can white become red? Be prepared to die!" The soldiers swore that they told the truth. Suddenly one of them looked

at the table and exclaimed, "Look! Has not white become red? Is it not a marvel?" The officer looked at the table and was shocked – all the eggs that had been white had turned red. It took him a moment to recover. He felt a big change in his heart. He said to the soldiers, "Rejoice because you are saved. I believe you, that the crucified one has risen and I believe that he is God. Go in peace and each take one red egg as a reminder. These eggs have saved you from death." They say that later the happy soldiers told everybody about this miracle and showed the red eggs as proof. From that time on Christians decorated and painted eggs for Easter and gave them to one another. The Easter egg is a symbol of eternal life and Jesus' resurrection.

Teachers retell the legend in kindergartens, where children prepare for the holiday by painting eggs, filling Easter baskets, learning songs and performing plays. Children in one kindergarten here in Kremenets prepare Easter tables. They cover the tables with a white or embroidered table cloth

and put special Easter bread in the middle. The table is often decorated with myrtle and traditional dishes. They may add pussy willow branches and a candle.

We Christians have a much more dramatic story to tell — a much more unbelievable story — yet we believe it because it is true. God became man. Man was born of a virgin. He lived without sin, but loved sinners instead of condemning them. He allowed sinners to kill him! He did not hate those who killed him, but forgave them! And then, most incredible of all, this God-man, who had died – how can God die? – CAME BACK TO LIFE!



An Easter table is a Ukrainian tradition.

In commemoration of these incredible but true miracles, on Saturday evening Ukrainian women prepare Easter baskets that will be blessed at church on Easter Sunday. In the baskets they usually put an Easter bread called pasky, painted eggs, butter, cheese, ham, sausage, salt and horseradish root (to remind us that sweetness and life overcome bitterness). Some people also put a knife into the basket to remind us of Jesus' suffering. The basket is decorated with flowers and

covered with a handmade towel. The Easter service begins with a processional through the church, accompanied by the ringing of a bell. Then the congregation sings, "Christ is risen from the dead." At the end of the service the Easter baskets are blessed. As people go home they greet one another with "Christ is Risen!" The response is "Risen Indeed!"

Easter is a great time for family to gather. But the most important thing about the Resurrection holiday is that it makes us think about the victory of Jesus Christ over our enemies: sin, Satan, death and hell. It is our victory because on the cross Jesus Christ paid for all our sins and overcame our deaths by his own death. The Ukrainian Easter liturgy conveys this marvel very well: "Christ is risen from the dead! He overcame death and gave life to those in the grave!"

*Nina Andrychuk
Gift of Life counselor
Kremenets, Ukraine*

Unique Congregations in Latvia Celebrate Christ's Victory

Each congregation in our Confessional Lutheran Church of Latvia has its own distinct character. The character often depends on whether a congregation is in a big city or small town or whether the majority of members are older or younger. Since our congregations are rather small, a lot also depends on the personalities of the pastors and the most active members. We all know how differences can create problems. However, in the Christian sense they are meant to be beneficial and for the service of the Lord. Here we may use what St. Paul said about different parts of the human body that should work together for one goal. In the same way, we may also think about differences in congregations that as one body work for a common good. Here are a few examples of how our Latvian Church as a whole has benefited from the different talents and abilities that our Lord has bestowed on each of our congregations.

The first congregation of our fellowship was in Kekava and since the very beginning it has been a very active in Christian teaching and practical work. Thanks to its president and other members, it was the first to build its own church building and has provided help for projects at other congregations. Kekava's pastor, Ilars Plume, has been a fruitful theologian and soon plans to publish his book on Christology.

Another active congregation is in downtown Riga. Being a city congregation, it consists of people from different walks of life. But one especially interesting feature about this congregation is that there are many creative people in visual arts, literature and music. And these artistic talents have been serving not only their own congregation, but their art and craftsmanship have become a blessing for other congregations as well. For example, wonderful paintings by Vilnis Heinrichsons decorate the church in Kekava, designers from Riga helped with the interior design in the new church in Ozolnieki and the vocal group from Riga has sung for worship services in many other places.



"On the Way to Emmaus," left, and "Supper at Emmaus" were painted by Vilnis Heinrichsons and hang in the church in Riga. For more artwork, see <http://vilnish.posterous.com>

In the town of Ozolnieki (about 25 miles from Riga) we have another energetic congregation. Just recently, by the grace of God and with the financial support from sisters and brothers in the U.S., the church building has been completed so that, finally this year, the dedication can take place. The distinguishing mark of the Ozolnieki congregation that I have appreciated through the years is its sincere Christian hospitality, friendship and welcoming spirit. Several times they have hosted our church conventions and summer conferences and it has always been a sheer delight to visit there and be in their midst.

The congregation in Aloja is another that offers wonderful hospitality. Aloja is a small town in Eastern Latvia with very little economic activity, few well-paying jobs and no large businesses. Many young people and families have left Aloja for bigger cities or immigrated to Western Europe. So the congregation consists mostly of elderly people who live modest lives and often grow food in their own gardens. But they always receive their guests with the greatest generosity and prepare a

delicious banquet with choice meats, fresh vegetables and fruits and exquisite pastries. It's as if their guests were the highest dignitaries. Visiting there is always a memorable experience.

And finally, I would like to mention our congregation in Jelgava. It has some special traditions and one of them is how they celebrate Easter. They hold their Easter service at midnight to give a unique expression about the greatest event in history when death was overcome by life in the resurrection of Christ. Many believers in our fellowship have attended and appreciated this special celebration at Jelgava.

I hope these vignettes give you a glimpse into the life of the Latvian Lutheran Church as different people in different ways unite in the common Christian faith to celebrate Christ's resurrection and the victory he has won for us all.

"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." (1 Cor. 15:22)

*Rev. Ugis Sildegs
Riga, Latvia*