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News from Slovakia

Prajeme vám pekné a požehnané veľkonočné sviatky.
(We wish you a nice and blessed Easter holiday.)

March, 2008

Easter greetings from Slovakia!

Dear Supporters, Friends, and Loved Ones,

We send this letter with gratitude for your friendship and partnership with us as we continue our ministry in this country. We hope that wherever you are, you are experiencing the joy that this season brings.

This coming Sunday begins the high point of the Christian year as we remember the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As you undoubtedly are doing in your worshiping communities, we also are planning several special services to mark this Holy Week.

Here is a little information for you about Holy Week in Slovakia:

- Maundy Thursday is called in Slovak "Zelený Štvrtok". (It's even harder to say than it is to spell!) Zelený Štvrtok translates literally as Green Thursday. The name probably came from the tradition of eating only green vegetables on this day, a practice which used to be observed by most people on Maundy Thursday. In churches, of course, this day is observed as time to remember Jesus' last night with his disciples and his institution of the Lord's Supper.
- Good Friday is known as Veľký Piatok, literally Big Friday or Great Friday. As important as this day is for all Christians, it is not hard to imagine why it came to be called big. Just as we do in the U.S., Slovak churches read and remember the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death at worship on this day.
- Easter is called Veľka Noc. As you can perhaps tell from the similarity to the term for Good Friday, this is another "big day". The word noc, however, is actually the word for night. We're not sure why this is, but we assume it is because Jesus' empty tomb was discovered by the women at dawn. This would mean that he must have actually risen before sunrise, thus Veľka noc --big night. As is the case in many countries, going to church and being with family on Easter is very important in Slovakia.
- Slovaks not only celebrate Easter Sunday. They also have Easter Monday (called Veľkonočný Pondelok). Easter Monday is another day of worship with services being held at almost all churches. Some of the nonreligious Slovak Easter Monday traditions are quite unusual. To learn more about these, go to <http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/407>.

In our international congregation we will enjoy festive services on Palm/Passion Sunday and Easter Sunday, and hold special times of worship on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But because most of our members do not come from Slovakia, we don't hold services on Easter Monday.

Stories from our life in Slovakia...


Worship lies at the heart of any congregation's ministry, but among the most important work our international congregation does is to provide a sense of community and connection for people who are far from home. The following story illustrates how this recently happened.

This is a story that comes out of our congregation's choir. We have been successful in building a nice choral program this year. (Since much of our membership turns over every year, we often have to start from scratch in the fall to build a new choir.) Like all of our congregation our choir is very diverse. At any given practice we have singers from places as varied as the U.S., England, Slovakia, the Ukraine, and a couple of different African nations. As we were preparing for an Ash Wednesday service a little over a month ago, one of the songs we practiced was the hymn, "Abide with Me." At the end of our practice a woman from Cameroon, who happens also to be a refugee in Slovakia, said she wanted to share something with us about this song. This is what she told us:

When I was a girl my younger brother became very sick and passed away. Very often in the years that followed, I would hear my mother singing "Abide with Me" as she went about her work. When I finally asked her why she did this, she told me "Abide with Me" is the song that was sung at my brother's funeral. After that whenever she was feeling weak or sad, this is the song that would give her tremendous strength, because those words, "abide with me," reminded her how close God was in her moments of sorrow. Because of my mother this song became a symbol for me of God's presence. And when I had to flee my country, and ended up here in the refugee camp in Slovakia, I was often so lonely and in such despair. In moments like that I began also to sing this song to myself, and I found it gave me the same strength that it had given my mother. That is why it has meant so much to me to sing it with all of you tonight.

As we listened to her story we were touched by the wonder of this night. Here we were, a diverse group of people from around the world sitting in a church in Bratislava, Slovakia, singing an English hymn and connecting with the sorrow and struggles a woman and her family many years ago in Africa. It is an amazing thing to belong to God's global family.

We pray that the same comfort that our friend found in this hymn may be yours as you journey once again to the cross and the empty tomb during this season. We close this letter with the final verse of this great hymn. As you read these words, may you again know the victory of Easter

 **Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.** 