

“Beginning in Jerusalem”

Acts of the Apostles 1:6-11

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I like the idea of devoting a whole month to a particular theme for the preaching calendar. March is Mission month! Once that had been determined, I knew where I would begin: with the final words of the Risen Christ to his apostles, just before his ascension into heaven. The Risen Christ gives them a charge to carry the life-giving message forward and to proclaim it first in Jerusalem, then in Judea, then Samaria and finally to the ends of the earth.

If you look at a map of the Holy Land, you see that he was talking in concentric circles. Begin in your own back yard, then move out gradually until the entire known world has received a taste of the Good News.

I often hear people say, “Charity begins at home.” Unfortunately, what they really mean is, ‘charity begins and ends at home.’ The Risen Christ saw some logic in starting out in the home village, but clearly had a vision of love penetrating the hearts of all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

It is thrilling for me, as a pastor, to see how this church has captured and lived into this Biblical vision of mission work. Many of us now drive by the ABC House on the New London Turnpike and give a little salute to the students who live there, inner-city students who are in Glastonbury for A Better Chance. Our third golf outing next September will put us well over the \$5000 mark in support for the ABC House, that abode where motivated high school students realize their academic dreams as they become adults in a progressive environment.

When we support the ABC House, we are loving the neighbors in our own village, in our own back yard. It's what Jesus meant when he instructed the apostles to begin in Jerusalem. By the way, The ABC House is always looking for new board members and for host families! Hint. Hint.

A few months ago, one of our church members brought a concern to our mission ministry team regarding a homeless shelter on Hungerford Street in Hartford. It's the Immaculate Conception shelter. We discovered there is a vital ministry going on there, not just sheltering homeless folks by night, but transforming lives by day. The staff there works intimately with each resident toward achieving educational and occupational goals. We sent them \$1000. Then, last week, they invited me to come and spend time with their staff. A number of deaths within their homeless community had left everyone grieving. It was such a privilege to invest some time with these caring men and women who devote their lives to loving homeless souls into self-respecting human beings.

When we support the Immaculate Conception shelter in Hartford, we are claiming the vision Jesus raised up for the apostles: to carry the love beyond Jerusalem to the surrounding towns in the region of Judea. I tell you it's exciting to watch a local church in the suburbs move out of its comfort zone and into a neighborhood where the first language is Spanish and where fast food means rice and beans wrapped in a corn tortilla.

Now the Risen Christ charged the early apostles not to stop in Judea, but to move out into the next concentric circle, the land known as Samaria. Though Samaria was a specific geological location, it was also a symbol for people who were different from the dominant tribe. To carry the Good News of God's redeeming love to Samaria was like Harvard opening its doors to women or like Vassar opening its doors to men!

This had never been done before. Samaritans were considered second class, even third class citizens! The apostles must have quaked in their boots at this assignment! The Risen Christ was now stretching them further than they had imagined being stretched. Christian discipleship tends to have this effect.

I remember the radio program, Red Ryder, and the weekly question broadcast into our living rooms, “Who will carry the mail through dead man’s gulch?” And the certain reply would follow, “I will,” said Red Ryder.

The Risen Christ asks, “Who will carry the Good News to God’s forgotten people?” “We will,” say the apostles. “We will,” says South Church in 2013.

So when we surrender our regular offering each Sunday, some it finds its way out to the Sioux YMCA, that Christian outpost in a barren land dominated by alcoholism and cultural depression. Some of you have surrendered some of your time and have gone there to be a summer camp counselor, to repair homes, to supply a food pantry, to bring a little of that Christ love to a modern day Samaria. When South Church partners with Dave Bald Eagle and Leslie Bobtail Bear and Faye High Elk, we are being faithful to that vision the Risen Christ held up for the apostolic church.

That might have been far enough, but ‘no’ the Risen Christ pushed them a tad further, to the ends of the earth. Why stop in Samaria when you have a life-giving message to share? Why stop in Samaria when hope abounds?

You have heard me speak of a place called Chezi. It is just up the road from Mvera which is just down the road from Lilongwe. In this bump in the road African village, there is an orphanage that is home to 150 children. For the most part, their parents died of the AIDS virus.

Attached to this amazing home is a clinic staffed by nurses and volunteers and by an occasional physician on loan from some foreign government or perhaps from Doctors Without Borders or from a religious organization such as South Church. This clinic dispenses medications that enable children to have a minimum of health care, an inoculation or two, an anti-biotic when necessary, an aspirin when a fever rages.

This health care facility has outfitted a Land Rover to be a mobile clinic driving out to all the surrounding villages where well-baby clinics are held each week. I got to ride in this Land Rover five years ago and I will again in July. Mothers line up with their babies. A scale hangs from a tree limb and the women weigh their infants and carefully record each ounce gained or loss. Then on to the Jacksoni station, that's where inoculations are given, then on to the nutrition lecture where moms learn to put groundnut flour into baby's porridge, then onto the vitamin table, and so on.

When you are there, and step back to take in the big picture, what you see is a love feast! Here at the ends of the earth in what used to be known as Nyasaland, Christ love is delivered not in words but in the kind of ministry that allows families to be hopeful about their children's future. Some of you have been there in person. All of us have been there through the annual grants made by our mission ministry team.

I thank God for a church that claims and lives into the full vision for mission that the Risen Christ articulated: beginning in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, then to the ends of the earth! I name my gratitude in the greatest of hope! Amen!