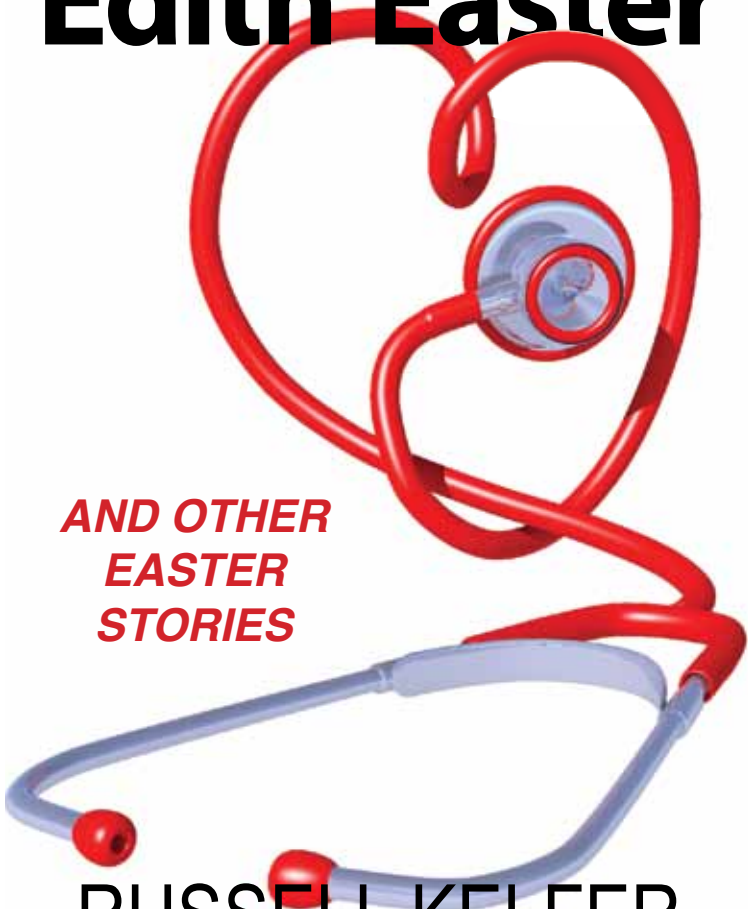


# The Story of Edith Easter

*AND OTHER  
EASTER  
STORIES*

RUSSELL KELFER



Edith Easter  
and other Easter stories  
by Russell Kelfer  
(1933-2000)

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## Table of Contents

The Story of Edith Easter .....	9
Resurrection!.....	27
A New Heart for Alex.....	45
The Least Likely Angel of All .....	65



## Dedication

To Dr. A. A. Baker, President of A. A. Baker Communications, a well-known conference and seminar speaker, who has faithfully introduced “Edith” to countless people all over the United States.



## Foreword

Jesus often taught by using parables.

While the works of Russell Kelfer are primarily in the style of straightforward Bible study lessons which strive to make pertinent application of principles found in Scripture, his legacy also includes many fictional stories. Often these were centered around holidays.

Although the characters and situations are indeed imaginary, like the parables of Jesus, they contain rich truths designed to lead the reader into a deeper understanding of the God whom Russell served for 47 years.

In this booklet are gathered the four Easter stories which celebrate his risen Lord. By far the most widely circulated over the years has been "Edith Easter". Edith has become a figure familiar to untold thousands of people around the world; were she a real person, Edith and Russell would probably be worshiping together around the heavenly throne right now.

In the other three stories, you will find additional facets of the precious gem that is Easter. This collection is presented in the hope that these stories will once again warm the spiritual hearts of readers who have already experienced their own personal Easter... and that they will bring to others the kind of new heart Alex found. Russell would have been blessed by that!





*The Story of  
Edith Easter*



## *The Story of Edith Easter*

It was not your typical doctor's office. Great pains had been taken (I understand doctors don't like that expression) but great pains had been taken to create the atmosphere of a family room rather than that of a waiting room.

In one corner, a large TV screen which dwarfed a row of small chairs was designed to make restless children feel at home. The idea was to divert their attention, at least momentarily, from the unpleasant possibility that a hypodermic needle full of penicillin might be a part of their fate on the other side of those big double doors.

Behind the TV screen was a window which connected the waiting room to the business office and a video recorder which saw to it that the children were watching something edifying and not something too realistic like the emergency room scenes on hospital shows.

Tiny headphones at each chair allowed the children to view the likes of *Mary Poppins* without poppin' the eardrums of the ailing or aching adults who waited across the way in their own little world — a world that included a plug-in sound system that let them choose their own music.

Behind the vine-covered opening with the electronically controlled window was the receptionist, Brenda Carter, who laughingly admitted she was hired because of her knowledge of electronics, not because she knew an appendectomy from a tonsillectomy. Alongside her appointment sheet was a console of switches that looked like a good prop for a *Star Wars*' episode, and above her window was a bronze plate that read "Will Phillips, M.D., General Practice of Medicine."

Unfortunately, today was not an unusual day in the life of this family doctor. Dr. Phillips had been awakened from, believe it or not, a sound sleep at 3:30 a.m. by Bea Foster, a widow who had been troubled for years by a bad back. She

## The Story of Edith Easter

had awakened in the night, tried to walk, and had fallen and bruised herself badly, requiring X-rays and the works.

At about 5:15 a.m., when Mrs. Foster was finally resting comfortably in her hospital room and Dr. Phillips was headed for the elevator, he heard the familiar sound of his beeper and immediately knew that another emergency was about to usurp the place on his schedule that had been marked breakfast. This time it was Billy Reynolds calling. His son, Tom, was on the way to the emergency room with what sounded like possibly the doctor's 37<sup>th</sup> victim of a new strain of flu bug that was making the rounds most indiscriminately. By the time Tom was treated and released, 10:00 a.m. had rolled around, and Dr. Will, as he was respectfully called, arrived just in the nick of time to greet an office full of patients who were patiently waiting.

As he entered the front door — he always came in that way so he could greet those who were waiting — his very presence seemed like a ray of sunshine. His 6 foot 3 inch frame was indeed imposing until you looked into his eyes — then you forgot how big he was!

Those eyes showed an amazing mixture of strength and compassion, of objectivity blended with sensitivity.

It was a look that seemed to say to people: "I know what I'm doing," and yet at the same time, "I care about what I'm doing," as well.

It was, as we said, not an unusual day for our family doctor, but he carried an unusual burden as he entered the waiting room that Friday morning — a waiting room that was packed. Yet as Will Phillips' eyes scanned that crowd, he did not see a throng of people; he saw individuals, each of whom he cared about a great deal.

There was the Perkins boy, Freddy, crippled from birth, and yet not at all crippled in spirit, now grown into a strong young man preparing to enter medical school. What a positive influence Will Phillips had been on his life.

There was Mary Fletcher, the school teacher who so often appeared with a carload of children from the poverty ridden area where she taught, always paying their bills herself.

There was Bill Norris, the drug salesman from up state

## The Story of Edith Easter

who always had the latest news on the latest cures, and whose friendship with Will spanned the twelve years Will had been in practice.

But as he glanced through the room, and his eyes moved to the west wall, suddenly his heart seemed to stop beating, for sitting on the edge of one of those comfortable leather sofas was none other than Edith Berns, 82 years young, and without a doubt the godliest woman Will Phillips had ever had the joy of knowing.

There she was, her open Bible on her lap, her hand gently squeezing the hand of a troubled young mother who “just happened” to be sitting beside her. You can just bank on one thing — she was talking about Jesus!

Edith Berns’ conversations always centered around Jesus, for Edith Berns’ *life* centered around Jesus!

She always had the time (at least she always *took* the time) to stop and tell anyone who would listen that there was really only one reason for living . . . and Jesus Christ was that reason!

And you just knew how she started the conversation, too — with a sparkle in her eye and a captivating smile that had become such a natural part of her that the lines on her face had formed around it. She would say, “Hello, I’m Edith Berns. Do you believe in Easter?”

Since it was October 25th, that question seemed even stranger than it would have in March, but Edith had found it was an ice-breaker that almost always led to the heart of the Christian message and yet never seemed to be offensive.

The knot in Will Phillips’ stomach this Friday morning in October, however, was not because Edith Berns was using his waiting room as a fish pond for her evangelistic endeavors; that delighted Will. His burden was the result of a lab report he had received the day before. That lab report meant that Edith Berns just might not live to celebrate another of those Easter Sundays that had so highlighted her life.

Will’s job this morning was to break the news to Edith that the diagnosis was that her disease was inoperable, untreatable, and incurable and that the next few months would surely be characterized by a great deal of pain and

## The Story of Edith Easter

suffering. He had faced this unpleasant task many times before for a man who was only 38 years old, but none had grieved him like the encounter that awaited him this morning.

So the doctor took an abnormally long time with his first three patients. He reasoned that he wanted to give Edith all the time she needed to talk about Easter to her captive audience in the waiting room, but his real reason was that he couldn't face the prospect of describing to that precious saint the possibility of the pain that awaited her.

By 10:45 Will had run out of excuses, and he reluctantly motioned to his nurse, Beverly Timmons, and said, "Bev, send Edith in."

A few seconds later the door opened again, but it wasn't Edith. It was Nurse Timmons instead with a big smile on her face.

"Mrs. Edith and that Thorndale woman are praying at the moment, Doctor," she reported. "I believe our waiting room is about to become a delivery room again. I think another new birth is taking place."

You see, Bev Timmons understood. She had become a Christian herself in one of Dr. Phillips' treatment rooms, about two years before. She was taking Edith Berns' pulse at the time, and out of the clear blue sky, Edith had asked her;

"Bev, do you believe in Easter?"

"Of course I do," Bev had answered. "I love Easter. Now lie still, Mrs. Berns."

"Oh, I do, too," Edith had continued, "What *do* you believe about Easter?"

Bev would have been annoyed, but you just couldn't be annoyed by Edith Berns.

"Well, I believe it's a day of joy!" Bev had responded.

"Indeed it is," Edith went on, "Indeed it is. Why is that, Bev? Why *is* it such a day of joy?"

Lovingly, Edith had framed question after question that ultimately led to the one question in life that leads to the answer.

"Is there life after life in your life?" she had asked lovingly, "Do you know for sure about Easter?"

That afternoon, Beverly Timmons had experienced the

## The Story of Edith Easter

reality of Easter . . . and had never been the same since.

So the drama being re-enacted in Will Phillips' waiting room was nothing to be taken lightly to Bev. She knew it was a matter of life and death.

But in a matter of minutes Edith Berns came scurrying down the hallway, Bible in hand, her big black purse over her shoulder, and a smile on her face so wide it even tested those wrinkles that her godly smiles had already formed.

"Is Mrs. Thorndale in the family?" Bev asked as she hugged her spiritual mother.

"Oh my yes," Edith answered, "I completely forgot. She just discovered Easter. You go out and tell her you're a Christian, too. And give her one of these," Edith went on, as she pulled from her huge handbag which was half purse and half Christian bookstore a booklet she had written herself for her newborn spiritual babies. It was entitled, *Either side of Easter!*

"And tell her I'll call her tonight," Edith added. "Now run along, Child, I must see if this dynamic doctor of ours is spending enough time in the Word."

With that, she winked at the young physician as if to assure him she would always be there to look after him, which didn't make his job any easier.

"Doctor, Doctor," Edith began before Will could so much as open his mouth. "You look troubled! Didn't Jesus tell you to be anxious for nothing? I'm afraid you're spending too much time working and not enough time praying," Edith exclaimed. "Paul said to pray about everything and God's peace will flood your soul.

"You need to get a day alone with your Jesus," she went on, "then you'll be in control of your practice instead of your practice controlling you."

"Edith!" the doctor interrupted. "Just which one of us is the doctor? I appreciate your diagnosis. I'll take it to heart. Now let's talk about yours!"

It came out so fast, Will stunned himself! He was so burdened that he had been abrupt with the very person he was burdened for. "Forgive me, Edith," he asked sheepishly, "I didn't mean to be sharp, but I do have something very

## The Story of Edith Easter

important to talk to you about.”

With that, both parties were back at the starting gate, and Dr. Phillips began his painful conversation.

“Edith,” he began, “we got your test reports back last night. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but the results are more traumatic than I had even imagined. You complain so little about pain and seem so happy all the time, I never expected to see the disease so far advanced.” Doctor Phillips dropped his head at this point.

“Will, are you alright?” Edith asked. “Bless your heart! Son, you don’t think God up and made a mistake, do you?”

With that, the good doctor jerked his head nearly out of its socket and stared in disbelief at this incredible woman.

“My, my Will, I’m surprised at you!” Edith went on. “I’m just fixin’ to rush into the arms of my Jesus, see my dear husband again, worship with all my friends who went and beat me to heaven — I’m about to spend eternity in Heaven doing the one thing I love the most — *celebrating Easter* — and you’ve got a face so long your chin’s gonna get run over by a grasshopper. I’m gettin’ sent home at last, and you’re afraid to give me my ticket? Shame on you, Will Phillips!”

“*Praise God! An eternal Easter!*” she went on,

“How long do I have to wait?”

With that, the big doctor broke out into a grin himself, relieved at the unexpected turn of events, and answered almost triumphantly,

“About six months I’d say, Edith. I’d say you’ve about six months to wait.”

Suddenly, he was gaining her perspective of death, and it made so much sense he was excited.

Edith thought for a second. “Well, then, I’d like an appointment to see you at least twice a week,” she announced. “At least twice a week!”

Will interrupted rather firmly.

“Edith! I’m the doctor, remember?”

“Now I’d like to see you about — about — twice a week,” he stammered. “How’d you know that, anyway?”

“I didn’t,” she chuckled, “but I need that many days a



## The Story of Edith Easter

week in your waiting room to fish for souls. Only the Lord could be so good — a ready-made fish pond and a soft leather sofa to boot! At least twice a week,” Edith went on, “at least twice a week!”

“Twice a week will be fine,” Dr. Phillips replied, “just fine!”

“And Edith,” his long face beginning to return, “there, uh, there, uh, will be . . .

“Pain?” Edith said the word for him.

“Yes,” Will responded, ashamed that he couldn’t say it himself.

“It will be nothing like the pain my Jesus suffered for me.” Edith quietly added, “Paul said we must suffer with Him if we’re to reign with Him. I only pray that my pain might honor Him,” Edith went on, “and that I might never become bitter or angry. Will, I have a good bit of that pain already,” Edith continued.

“I thought maybe you did,” the doctor acknowledged.

“And you know what?” she added, “It’s caused me to trust Him even more. Will, you’re a marvelous doctor and a precious friend. Thank you for making this such a special day,” she concluded as she rose to her feet.

Will had no answer for that! He had given many patients bad news before, but he’d never been thanked for making their day special by doing so.

“God bless you, Edith,” he blurted out, and that was all he could manage to say.

The next few weeks were a little like Pentecost in Dr. Phillips’ waiting room. The first week Edith came for her two visits as expected, but she came about an hour early so she could be sure to talk to somebody about Easter. But by the second week, Brenda noticed that Edith was appearing every morning, whether she had an appointment or not.

She’d bring in her knitting and her big black purse stuffed with New Testaments and books to give away, and she’d bring a lunch so she wouldn’t have to leave at noon when the working women came in to get their flu shots. She’d just spend the day!

Brenda asked Dr. Phillips what she should do about it, and he replied, “Be sure she has some iced tea to go with

## The Story of Edith Easter

her lunch and pray that God will send just the right people to sit on that couch. God has sent a short-term but full-time missionary right into our waiting room,” he nodded in amazement. “What a great God we have!”

So on through the Christmas season, Edith Berns sat on that couch in Will Phillips’ office and talked about Easter and Jesus, and scarcely a day would go by that someone didn’t discover the reality of Easter.

Dr. Will’s office was closed, of course, for the New Years weekend. When they reopened on January third, Brenda kept her electronic window in high gear as the waiting room loaded up with patients.

More than a few of those openings were to allow Brenda to peer cautiously towards that sofa on the west wall to see if that amazing lady with the big black purse and the even bigger smile would be manning her post as usual as God’s ambassador for Easter.

But this day as the clock on Brenda’s desk moved towards lunch time, Edith Easter, as they had come to affectionately call her, still was nowhere in sight. They had tried to call her house, but they got no answer.

It was about 2:30 in the afternoon when the phone finally rang. “Hello, Dr. Phillips’ office,” Brenda answered. “He’s with a patient just now. Who shall I say is calling? Mercy Hospital?”

“Yes, Edith Berns is our patient. She’s where? Is she . . . is she . . . alright? I see. Yes, of course, just a minute. I’ll call the Doctor.”

Dr. Phillips hurriedly picked up the phone.

“Will,” said the cheery but a bit impatient voice on the other end of the phone, “Will, this is Edith!

“My old body is sending me signals that are saying Edith, I think God wants you to tell your Easter story down at Mercy Hospital for awhile. I didn’t want to bother you, so I took a cab, but this young lady in admitting won’t let me in without an authorization from a certified M.D. You are certified, aren’t you Will?” she chuckled.

“Then tell this nice lady to assign me to a room with two beds. And tell ‘em to keep sending me ladies for roommates that need to hear the Easter story, will you, Will? And Will,

## The Story of Edith Easter

you tell Bev I'm assigning that couch on the west wall to her. Tell her God's moving me on to new territory.

"I'm gettin' closer to home, Will," she whispered, "I'm gettin' closer to home!"

"Let me speak to the lady, Edith," Dr. Phillips responded, a bit emotionally, "I'll see that you get that room with two beds, one for you, and one for whatever ladies God wants you to tell about Easter."

I guess it goes without saying that the 8th floor of Mercy Hospital had never experienced anything quite like the presence of Edith Berns. It was obvious she was in a great deal of pain, but you never once heard it mentioned — she only talked about Easter!

"Weeping endures for a night," she would tell her roommates. "Oh, but joy comes in the morning!"

Nearly every week a new patient would be moved into Room 824, and nearly always when they left, they left with a song in their hearts, a song planted there by Edith Easter.

The nurses soon sensed an aura of joy in Room 824, too, a joy that they couldn't explain, so you would often find that whenever it got a little slow on the floor, they would gravitate towards Edith Easter's room.

All of them, that is, but one! The head nurse on the evening shift, one Phyllis Cross, who seemed to perfectly live up to her name, intentionally kept her distance from Edith. She would refer to her as that "religious nut in 824", and, in general, seemed determined not to let Edith's Easter story rub off on her.

There was a time or two when no one else was available to give Edith her medicine, and Phyllis was forced to go in. But even then she maintained her icy composure and refused to respond to Edith's cheerfulness with so much as a smile.

It was a Monday night late in February, and Edith had taken a turn for the worse. An infection had set in, and her temperature had skyrocketed. Around the clock care was ordered, and being two nurses short, Phyllis Cross herself drew the duty in Room 824.

Edith was in great pain and nearly delirious from the fever,

## The Story of Edith Easter

but somehow when Phyllis entered the room, she managed an incredible smile and took the nurse's hand, and squeezing it with what little strength she had left, whispered, "I love you, Phyllis, and I'm praying for you."

Now Phyllis Cross was one tough woman. She had been a head nurse in a military unit for 11 years and worked as head nurse in the emergency room for 16 years before that. She had been through three marriages and lived through several personal tragedies. Her face was hardened by the ravages of time and temper. Her eyes possessed a quality of iciness that indicated that all of life was cold and calculated. Whatever fire of warmth that might once have been there had long since been extinguished. In all her years on the 8th floor at Mercy, no one had ever seen her shed a tear; but when that dying woman, whom she had so avoided, squeezed her hand and said, "I love you, and I'm praying for you," something inside of her began to melt.

The irony of it all was more than Phyllis could bear. Here was a dying woman (with no hope) praying for *her!* Somehow it seemed as though it should have been the other way around. But, of course, Phyllis and prayer were not compatible terms.

The mechanical nurse, as they called her, sat down by Edith's bed and squeezing her hand said, "Thanks dear, but there's no use praying for me. God gave up on me a long, long time ago."

"No he hasn't!" Edith answered, almost defiantly, "and I've asked Him not to take me home until you're in the fold, too! All these nurses look up to you, but you're not looking up at all! You've done a lot of livin', Phyllis, but you've never really experienced life!"

"If you're asking your God to keep you alive until I'm in the fold," Phyllis responded, "either He's gonna let you down or you're going to be the oldest patient in the history of this hospital. Religion has never done a thing for me."

"I love you," Edith said again, "and God loves you, Phyllis. Oh, how God loves you."

Phyllis froze, expecting this incredible spirit to toss out her Easter question at any moment. It was almost as if Edith sensed that, and knowing the time was not right, she saved

that question for the perfect moment.

“I love you,” she said one more time, and with that, Phyllis Cross muttered something about needing to check another patient and slipped hurriedly out the door. This woman’s very presence was more than she could handle. She had watched patient after patient assigned to bed two of Room 824 leave that hospital transformed. She had seen four of her nurses demonstrably changed from spending time with Edith Berns after their shift was over .

In fact, the greetings on her floor among the staff were as often handclasps and “Happy Easter” as they were “Good morning.” Something miraculous was happening on the 8th floor. To some degree it irritated her, yet still something inside of her wondered if this delightfully different dying woman did not have the answers that had so eluded her about the real meaning of life. And the stream of visitors that literally flowed in and out of that room — all of them so joyful! All of them so encouraging! All of them greeting her with “Happy Easter, Edith!” They talked about her being their “spiritual mother,” and many referred to “that day” on the couch in Will Phillips’ waiting room.

Something truly remarkable was happening in Room 824. The question Phyllis Cross had to answer was, “Am I going to be touched by it? Or avoid it at any cost?” For truly, you had to work at it to avoid being touched by it.

It was late in March when Phyllis Cross could contain herself no longer. Early one morning, just after her shift had ended, almost uncontrollably, she was drawn to walk into room 824 before she went home.

The streams of sunlight that flooded the room heightened the beauty of the wall to wall floral arrangements that kept pouring into Edith Easter’s room, but the brightest light that morning was in Edith’s eyes. It was almost as though she had never been sick.

Oh, the pain was still there! But you seemed to sense that the fragrance of victory made the pain almost of no consequence. “Good morning, Phyllis,” Edith beamed, “I was expecting you.”

“You were?” Phyllis answered, but she never got around

## The Story of Edith Easter

to asking why. Instead, she sat down on the edge of Edith's bed and just blurted out,

"How come you've never asked *me* about Easter?"

The godly old woman smiled and squeezed Phyllis' hand. "I was waiting for *you* to ask *me*," Edith answered, "and now you have!

"Phyllis, do *you* believe in Easter?"

"I guess I don't," Phyllis Cross replied. "At least not the way you do.

"I've always celebrated Easter; always gone to church. I always gave my children Easter eggs. I've always celebrated Easter . . ."

"Ah, but Phyllis," Edith asked, her big blue eyes literally aglow, "you have celebrated Easter, but have you *experienced* Easter?"

"Phyllis, do you really believe in life after death?"

"Do you believe your *real* life is yet to be lived when this life is over?"

"Phyllis, do you believe that the real reason for this life is to store up treasures for the next — treasures of lives that have been touched by yours?"

"Not really," the aging nurse replied, "not really!"

"Do you believe in the death of Christ?" Edith went on intensely, but gently.

"Of course," Phyllis answered, almost relieved that she could give a "yes" answer to something.

"Then will you read something for me?" Edith quickly responded, as she pulled out a Bible so worn it looked like it had been used to test the endurance of paper and asked Phyllis to read from I Corinthians, chapter 15.

"Begin with verse 3!" she said.

Phyllis read these words,

*3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.*

*4 And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.*

*5 And He was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve,*

The Story of Edith Easter

*6 After that He was seen of about five hundred brethren at once.*

“Don’t you see, Phyllis,” Edith interrupted her momentarily, “The whole gospel is the gospel of Easter.

“Jesus died for our sins, just as the Scripture says.

“He died on the cross so Phyllis Cross could have eternal life.

“Phyllis, do you *know* you have eternal life?

“Do you *know* that Jesus Christ lives in your heart right now?

“Have you ever acknowledged to God that *your* sins nailed Jesus to that tree and asked Him to forgive you and come into your life?

“Oh, Phyllis, that’s Easter! He died for your sins according to the Scriptures, He rose again so you could never die. Read verse 13, Phyllis.”

Phyllis read,

*13 If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:*

*14 And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching in vain, and your faith is also vain.*

*19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*

*20 But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept.*

Edith’s eyes met Phyllis’ head on.

“Phyllis, you have *celebrated* Easter for years, but you can *experience* Easter for the first time this morning. *Jesus Christ is waiting to be resurrected in your life* — to give you a taste of Heaven on your way to heaven — where you will celebrate Easter forever!”

For the first time in years, tears began to roll down the cheeks of Phyllis Cross as she knelt beside the bed of the first person in years who had told her they loved her, and she asked Edith’s friend Jesus to become her Saviour and her friend as well. As she rose from her knees, Phyllis Cross glowed with a joy she had been certain would never be hers.

“Do you know what day this is, Phyllis?” the sweet old

## The Story of Edith Easter

saint asked.

“It’s Good Friday!” Phyllis answered.

“And do you know what day it is for you?” Edith asked.

“It’s Easter!”

“Happy Easter, Phyllis, Happy Easter!”

With a clasp of the hands that seemed to signify a bond that would last for eternity, Phyllis Cross literally ran from Room 824 a new person. For the first time in her life, she was *really* celebrating Easter!

It was late that evening when Phyllis returned to duty on the 8th floor of Mercy Hospital. There was a spring in her step she had never experienced before. The smile on her face seemed almost out of place, yet it was incredibly welcomed by the rest of the staff.

She came to work not only with a spring in her step and a smile on her face, but with an armful of Easter lilies for that special lady in Room 824.

As soon as she had checked on all the emergencies that seemed to always wait for her arrival, she rushed, flowers in hand, into Edith Easter’s room. She tiptoed as soon as she realized Edith was asleep, as always, with an open Bible in her lap.

There was a beautiful smile on Edith’s face — you could tell she had fallen asleep reading from what she called “God’s love letter to her.” It was open to John, chapter 14, and underlined with a bold, yellow marker were these words:

*I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also.*

Phyllis’ smile broadened. For some strange reason, she reached down and took Edith’s hand and squeezed it. Only then did she realize — Edith Berns was home at last!

As she reached down to take the Bible from her, she realized that Edith’s other hand was slipped in between the pages of Revelation chapter 21, where she had carefully underlined verse 4. It read,

*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying,*



## The Story of Edith Easter

*neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things  
are passed away.*

Phyllis Cross looked down and started to speak to the lifeless body that lay before her. Then suddenly, she looked straight up instead, and shouted at the top of her voice, “Happy Easter, Edith! Happy Easter!”

One thought raced through her mind and caused her to smile even more as she moved quietly towards the hallway. It was Edith’s vow, “I’ve asked God not to take me home until Phyllis is in the fold.” God had kept His word — and just in time for Easter.

As Phyllis walked down the narrow hallway to the nurses lounge, the words “they need someone to look up to” kept ringing in her ears.

Entering the room, she saw two brand new nurse’s aides who had just finished their first shift at the hospital. They were busily chatting, mostly discussing how they would each spend Easter Sunday.

Phyllis glanced around the room, studying their faces, then quietly she said,

“Hello girls, I’m Phyllis Cross. May I ask you a question?”

“Do you believe in Easter?”

“I mean *really believe?*”

You can count on one thing. Before she left the room that day, they did.

Do you?



Resurrection!



# Resurrection

The sky that afternoon in Parasinna was a brilliant blue. Brightly colored flowers planted only by the hand of God highlighted the hillsides as though a Master Painter had carefully chosen every one; which indeed, He had. The majestic Pilgrim Mountain stood in the background like an awesome monument, a protector, as it were, from the dangers that possibly lurked on the other side.

The trees were a lush green, and the tropical climate had produced vegetation of every form until even the tall, healthy weeds that grew as high as man could see seemed to be a part of the Master's Plan, forming a third-dimension, as it were, to the pathways the natives had cut to go from village to village.

Parasinna was the end of the world. It was, even to the explorer, an off-limits kind of paradise seen only by those who dared fly over in some form of aircraft to view its beauty and wonder if there lurked below any form of human life. Only God knew. But, of course, God did. For wrapped in the camouflage of God's foliage were a people He had created, a people He longed to have to know His Name, to understand His Plan. They had no Bible, had met no missionaries, understood no theology. But it was as the apostle Paul proclaimed it would be when he said:

*For the truth about God is known to them instinctively;  
God has put this knowledge in their hearts.*

*Since earliest times men have seen the earth and sky  
and all God made, and have known of His existence and  
great eternal power... (Romans 1:19,20 TLB)*

It was true! The natives of that little self-encased world had always sensed the presence of Something or Someone greater than themselves. God had seen to that. They saw it in the majesty of the mountains; they saw it in the fury of the raging rivers; they saw it in the consistency of the change of seasons. Even in the vacuum in which they lived, they knew

## Resurrection!

that a Master Architect, one far greater than they, had upon the tablets of Eternity, sketched out a world for them to live in. To them, that tiny world was all there was.

Primitive was hardly an adequate word from our point of view. Here they were living in today's world without a book, without any means of communication, without any type of transportation, without any kind of information... even the knowledge that other people lived besides themselves. They had never seen plumbing, never heard of electricity, never seen a clock, never been exposed to money, or stores, or things as we know them.

Theirs was a self-contained existence that knew nothing else. Their pagan customs had evolved from generations of superstition; their manner of life was patterned only after the traditions of their forefathers, for no foreign influence had dared to force its way into their protected little world. None, that is, until today.

For this was the day the first human being from the outside world would set foot in this tiny tropical paradise. Whether it would prove to be a blessing or a curse was yet to be determined. Whether this intrusion into their self-satisfied world would be welcomed or not, no one knew. Only one thing was certain; it was certain to come.

It was not by chance, either. For on a faraway continent, in a place named America, a group of people who called themselves "missionaries" had been praying and planning for seven years for the people of Parasinna, (should such a people exist). The more they prayed, the greater their burden became.

So for eighty-four months they had labored under the assumption that, cradled beneath that dense cover of nature's green blanket, was indeed a civilization, a people who needed to meet the God whose universe so clearly spoke His Name. Thus began their incredible journey into a land where no one had gone, to visit a people no one had seen.

There were five of them altogether. The Jensens, Richard and Ellen, were a young couple from the Midwestern United States who had spent the entirety of their lives on the mission field; he with his parents, she with hers, before their marriage six years before. There were the Andersons, Beth and Allen,

## Resurrection!

along with their son, Rob. Rob was fifteen. To take him was the ultimate decision — a decision that took the mission board over two years to make. From previous experiences they knew the value of the natives seeing children and recognizing the family unit, and this was a young man far more mature than most adults, one who was totally committed to giving his life, if need be, to take the message of the Cross to a people whose vocabulary left no room for such a word.

There was, of course, no language to learn, because there was no way to know, even if there were a people there, just what kind of dialect they would speak. The two families did, however, spend twelve months studying the tongues of native tribes who were known to exist in those regions, just in case similarities existed.

As the Jensens and Andersons watched their plane land in the capital city of this land of contrasts, they could not help but be awed at the difference between what they were seeing, and what they were about to see; for as the giant aircraft lowered itself to the ground, they witnessed from the sky a portrait of a modern city, not at all unlike New York or Chicago or Dallas. Modern freeways stretched their circled limbs through the metropolis like the web of a mighty spider. Swimming pools, shopping centers, and motels spelled out the image of a “little America” transported thousands of miles from its shores. What a poor picture of life they gleaned from their first glimpse of the big city. What they were seeing was the plastic cover the world had placed over a sea of broken hearts, empty stomachs, and dying souls. What they were about to see was that only hours away from this transplanted version of suburbia was a people who lived in a world that was frozen in a capsule of time thousands of years before. Which of these peoples would be most likely to respond to their message? That was a question unanswered for the moment. Nonetheless, one thing was certain, these two couples knew for sure to whom they had been sent. They were reminded momentarily as their taxi sped through the winding streets, dodging both motorcycles and donkeys, that both groups lived in jungles, in a sense; and neither understood anything else.

It was an eighteen hour drive to the outskirts of the unknown world to which they were headed. All that was

## Resurrection!

necessary to see a grown man run, they discovered, was to ask him to take them there. They offered to hire taxi drivers, bus drivers, and anyone else who seemed to have a vehicle capable of holding five Americans, their belongings wrapped in backpacks, and their seemingly indomitable spirits. They had no takers. So that night, the Jensens and the Andersons spent most of their first evening in the country they longed to call home on their knees praying for a miracle. That miracle was a God-provided vehicle and an individual willing to take them to the edge of the precipice; the outer perimeters of the jungle they simply knew would lead them to the people for whom they had prayed so long. Strangely enough, it was young Rob Anderson who seemed to sum it all up and make the rest of the prayers redundant. After what seemed like hours of interceding, pleading with God to provide the right person, it was Rob's turn to pray. His prayer was so simple; yet so profound:

He prayed:

*“Lord,*

*You may be taking us to a whole new life; you may even be taking us to our death, which would be to real life, but whatever you're doing, you didn't send us to rot in a Holiday Inn. Give us the patience, Lord, to wait for the right person, and the vision, Lord, to see him when he comes. Thanks, Lord; you're wonderful.*

*Amen.”*

Nothing of substance could be added to a prayer of faith like that. It was almost as though a burden was immediately lifted, and the two families rose to their feet and began to sing hymns of praise, thanking God for whoever He would send, rather than fretting over if He would.

Their singing was interrupted by a knock on the door. The natural assumption that their joy had overflowed into the ears of those around them who were trying to sleep was allayed as they opened the door, only to find a young man, neatly dressed, with a smile that stretched almost all the way down the hall. His eyes were a mixture of alertness and compassion, and he seemed as though he already knew the Jensens and the Andersons, although to them he obviously was a total



## Resurrection!

stranger. It was only moments, however, before they realized that this ruddy-looking man, smiles and all, was an angel sent from God to deliver them to their destination. He was the pastor of a local church who had been praying for three years that God would send missionaries to search out the hills of Parassina, looking for a people God had created, who knew Him not. As “circumstances” would have it, his son had been in the hotel lobby that afternoon and overheard the Jensens asking for transportation. He was offering his services free to take them where they wanted to go. Chuckling, he added, His Sovereign God had provided the church with a Toyota van only days before, obviously for this trip.

While his parents were still talking to their “angel” of transportation, Rob Anderson fell to his knees by his bed and began to weep. “Oh, dear God, how perfect are your ways,” he prayed, remembering a lesson he’d been taught years before about never forgetting to stop to say thank you when God has obviously answered a prayer.

The next two days were filled with both excitement and activity. Pastor Ben, as they came to know him, arrived the next day, Toyota and all, and their trek into the world of the unknown began to unfold so quickly that even they were not sure they were ready for it. Finally, that Tuesday morning arrived when Ben, by now a faithful friend, had to say goodbye, for his Toyota had more than stretched the limits its creators in Japan had placed upon it when they indicated in its advertising it could go “almost anywhere.” In fact, the grateful missionaries were more concerned about Ben and his new set of wheels making it back to the highway than they were about their making their “who knew how many days” trip to the foot of that marvelous creation of God they called “Pilgrim Mountain”.

To describe the next few days as “rugged” would have been to have understated the situation immeasurably. By the third day, water began to run low; mosquitos and crawling insects of every variety seemed to have become part of the family; and the intensity of the heat far exceeded the hot hours spent in that training camp the past two summers.

Prayer times became times of simply crying out to God for strength. Doubts began to form in their hearts to tempt them;

## Resurrection!

doubts that perhaps these people they had come to accept as real did not really exist at all. Yet, the thought of turning back never really entered their minds; even though they knew that every day they trudged farther into that jungle, they were that much less likely to return. It had been made clear before they left that no area existed sufficient for a plane to land to rescue them. So on they went, five people with a mission; people with eyes so focused on one objective, that their own safety or even their lives were of no consequence to them.

On the fifth day, as the morning sun lifted its head off a pillow of clouds in the east, seven years of waiting came to an end. As Richard and Al were packing up for another day's journey, suddenly they heard a rustling noise behind them. Al Anderson turned around with a start and began to speak, only to feel what appeared to be a hand covering his mouth, and something as sharp as he had ever felt penetrating his side. With lightning-like speed, Rich, too, was grabbed, thrown to the ground, and surrounded by ten of the most ferocious looking humans ever seen on planet earth. They were all tall, dark complected and literally evil-looking. Loin cloths of some kind of animal skin were all the clothing they wore, other than the most hideous kind of wooden rings that protruded from their noses. The smell confirmed that, at least to them, soap had not yet been invented in their world, and the grunts they exchanged, along with the glances that passed between them, immediately told the story. This was no welcoming committee. They had indeed found the lost people of Parasinna, and they had entered their lives as mortal enemies, unwanted intruders into a private world never before inhabited by a stranger.

It appeared to be only seconds before the entire group was awakened by the noise. The missionary women screamed at first, simply out of fright, realizing that they had rehearsed this incident over and over in their plans, and screams were not in the script. Nevertheless, the gruesomeness of the appearance of these men who seemed almost to be half human, half animal, exceeded even the most extreme image formed in their minds these past seven years. While they spoke of danger and prayed about danger with all the calm of seasoned warriors, when the moment of truth arrived, faith gave way, at least for a second or two, to sheer panic.

## Resurrection!

The next few hours cannot be described with pen and ink. They were so wrought with emotions — mixed emotions — the blending of faith with fear — the merging of the fulfillment of a dream with the reality — that the dream was turning into a nightmare. The men, including Rob, were bound with strong, green vines and treated with a kind of roughness that indicated their lives or their safety were of no consequence. The women, on the other hand, were treated as though they had some rare, contagious disease. No one wanted to touch them, but still they were seen as mortal enemies. The women tried to reason with the leader of the group using hand signals, of course, to no avail. The men wanted to silence them, but their culture apparently included some inexplicable kind of respect for women which simply would not allow them to be harmed in any way. They were protective of the wives, but stayed at arms length. The women were urged to follow, which of course, they did.

The leader of the group was an angry looking man, whose eyes were alive with hostility and whose every movement simply defied anyone to resist. He moved around with such arrogance, one would think for sure he had seen an old Jimmy Cagney or Humphrey Bogart movie and was trying to become Hollywood's next "tough guy." How they had made the sharp objects that looked and felt like knives, no one knew; but there was little doubt that they could penetrate any animal that posed a threat or that was needed for food, and there was little doubt but that, at this moment, they would be used on these intruders with no sense of remorse, should they make one false move.

The women continued to smile. They had been taught to do that. They smiled, and they very quietly sang hymns of praise, as they were marched to their appointment with destiny an appointment that God in His infinite wisdom had brought to reality at last.

The walk was not a long one. Apparently the two families had camped that last night within a mile of the cluster of straw and bamboo "shacks" (we would call them) that made up, believe it or not, the "headquarters" or "Capital village" of the Parasinna tribes. The sun was really just beginning to release the intensity of its mid-morning brilliance when the two families were led captive into the lives of a people for

## Resurrection!

whom they had poured out their hearts in prayer day after day after day. Their welcome was hardly overwhelming, but the reality of knowing that these people really did exist was overwhelming, to say the least. The very way they moved and communicated and behaved left no doubt that they needed to know the God who Created them and needed to know that He had paid the price to redeem them, as well.

The eyes of the two women darted about excitedly as they searched for, and began to see emerge from these little dried huts, real live women and children, lost women and children, whom a patient God had singled out and placed on their hearts seven long years before. These women had been praying for them, even though they knew no names. But as the native women, frightened out of their wits at seeing these pale, strangely covered creatures, who could possibly be human beings, began to surface, Ellen and Beth immediately began to feel their hearts break with love for them; and for the moment, at least, their fear for their husbands' safety melted into an ocean of compassion. They imagined in their own minds that what these women were experiencing must have been far more traumatic than the feelings we would have were a visitor from outer space to land on top of our church building one Sunday and bring his family with five ears and ten eyes apiece inside to worship.

It became immediately obvious that the five uninvited guests, who had appeared to alter the Parasinnas' lifestyles for all eternity were being taken somewhere specific. It was one of those "Do not pass go;" "do not stop at Boardwalk" type movements that make it clear there was no aimless wandering taking place. Soon there loomed on the horizon another grass and stick dwelling, a good bit larger than the others. Brightly colored paintings of some sort, paintings that looked strangely like huge butterflies, hung on some kind of skins on the outside of the hut. It could have been the "Butterfly Diner" for all they knew, and they might have been headed for a steak dinner, but of course no one in that group drew that conclusion. (In fact, were there to be a steak dinner at that time, it seemed almost obvious who would be the steaks.)

Our five visitors from another world were not prepared for what was inside that hut. As they entered by way of a finely

## Resurrection!

woven net, they were immediately attacked by a swarm of flying objects. Once their eyes adjusted to the light, however, they were able to see that their “attackers” were only a band of confined butterflies! Once past what must have been the “butterfly room,” they were led into another room behind the first one in which a mound of dirt had been piled, and lo and behold, perched atop that mound was a man; a somewhat kindly looking, elderly man, believe it or not. He, too, had one of those things sticking out of his nose that looked like it came out of a “Crackerjack” box, and atop his head was something that looked like it came out of an old Carmen Miranda movie, or if that’s not familiar to you, something the Three Stooges might have dreamed up. It was a mixture of skins, died in bright colors with something, tied together with vines and sticks. Finally, the light dawned. This was their king, and this was his idea of a crown. Some basic concepts seem to work their way into any civilization, even one with no contact with the outside world.

The king, whom they later learned was called “King Butterfly,” made a sweeping movement with his right hand, indicating to the captors to loosen the vines that bound their captives — vines tied so tight that the circulation in the mens’ hands and arms was slowly beginning to disappear. That, it seemed, was at least a start. Then the king, much to the chagrin of his subjects, ordered the others out of the room. Apparently he saw these pale, strangely dressed intruders as harmless; or else he was a man of extreme bravery himself.

Once the others had left, the king began to grunt incessantly. He was obviously trying to communicate, but none of the syllables even resembled the languages the missionaries had studied before they left. All the five “sent ones” knew to do, then, was to smile, simply praying that they were not smiling at the wrong time. They were careful not to grin, only to smile pleasantly. There was an eternal pause, then King Butterfly’s mouth began an upward turn, and he, too, began to smile.

Al Anderson took his right hand and pointed upwards to the sky, then pointed to his heart, and said “God.” He knew the somewhat comically arrayed monarch didn’t understand the word, but he wanted to begin some kind of dialogue that might indicate why they had come. He pointed again to the

## Resurrection!

sky, then to his heart, then to each of the other four. Each time, Butterfly would look up, stare into space, and scratch his head, which must have been itching anyway from a combination of lice and that horrendous, overweight laundry bag on his head. Then Al would smile. The king would smile, and that would be that. Long periods of silence were followed by repetition, and then more silence. But each time Butterfly smiled, the missionaries felt a weight released, and they continued to pray for this turban-topped ruler whom they now knew held the key to the hearts of the entire tribe.

Finally, the king grunted loudly, and the ten unfriendly messengers who had fetched them returned to the room. Butterfly grunted again, then pointed to Rob. Three of the men grabbed the boy and literally whisked him away so fast his parents barely saw what happened. The old man spoke once more, and the other seven strong men took the four remaining visitors by the arms, led them away to a straw hut not too far from Butterfly's palace, and pushed them through the door. Then the leader of the group opened his mouth and smiled a big semi-toothless grin. That grin let them know two things: that they were not in immediate danger, and that a dentist would be a welcome addition to the next mission team.

To say that the next few hours seemed long would hardly be adequate. In fact, the next twenty-four hours seemed incredibly longer than the seven years it had taken them to get where they were. They knew nothing of what was happening to Rob, but somehow a mother's instincts told Beth Anderson that all was not well; and she began to weep and pray intermittently for her boy, pleading with God to protect him at first, then quietly praying, "Nevertheless, thy will be done." She knew he would never want protection at the cost of the kingdom. He treasured the lives of these people he did not know far more than his own. God seemed to have supernaturally given him that level of commitment, almost since his conversion nine years before. Twice that day two natives walked past the men who were "guarding" their house of confinement and brought them "food". What it was they did not know, but the men stood over them and silently dared them not to eat it. So eat it they did, forcing the most hypocritical smiles of their Christian lives in the process. It was a meaty substance, a delicacy they later learned was

## Resurrection!

made of beatles and tree bark. One thing they could praise God for was that they didn't know that at the time.

As the night passed, the hands on their watches seemed to move only a minute or two every hour. The heat was virtually unbearable, as the natives had covered the windows with skins to keep the curious children from looking in at their visitors from outer space. They prayed, and they recited passages from the Psalms, and they claimed the promises God had given them seven years before, until finally one by one, sleep overtook them, at least for a brief season, as a loving God seemed to tenderly place his hand under each of their heads on that straw covered floor, gently closed their eyes and gave them rest.

They were awakened the next morning by the sound of a chanting crowd outside their hut. Whether they were coming to hang them or to greet them, no one knew; but one thing was certain, they were now the center of attention. Soon one of the "guards" opened the little shield of skins they used as a door and ushered them outside. It was a bright, hot morning, and the sun's reflection off the peak of Pilgrim Mountain seemed almost to give off a heavenly glow, as though God were about to reveal Himself. The four missionaries were led in single file to King Butterfly's palace, followed by the chanting natives who kept crying "hil-cal; hil-cal, hil-cal!" a word they later learned meant "life".

Once they reached their destination, they stood motionless as the crowd chanted even more fervently, "hil-cal, hil-cal, hil-cal!" Finally their ruler, comical turban still atop his obviously bald head, emerged. He raised his right hand and immediately there was total silence. It was almost as though God had spoken.

Beth Anderson's eyes never stopped moving about, searching frantically for some sign of her son, but to no avail. Suddenly, there was the sound of shrieking and chanting a few yards away, and there emerged from another hut, another group of natives. Their entire bodies were smeared with some kind of bright yellow substance. Their heads were covered with a kind of straw, woven into tightly webbed saucers, and they were carrying a huge box made of dried lumber and tied together with thick, green vines.

## Resurrection!

The natives brought the box and laid it at King Butterfly's feet. With one sweeping motion, he pointed to the sky, raised his voice to its limits and cried "Hil-cal; hil-cal; hil-cal!" Then his head fell, he moved his arms and all of the natives fell to their knees, and he simultaneously did two things: he opened the wooden box, and he flung open the door to his "butterfly room". Beth Anderson fainted. The other three missionaries fell on their faces weeping. For inside that box was the body of Rob Anderson. He was now in the presence of His Jesus. What the natives had done, they did not know. That he was dead, they knew.

Little by little, the pieces began fitting together in their grief-torn minds. Even in their self-enclosed pagan world, these people somehow believed that out of death came life. So this king, who thought he had "discovered" this principle, collected caterpillars and spent his life waiting for them to emerge into something beautiful. When they did, he would hold the butterflies captive, until once a month when the natives would kill an animal as a sacrifice, he would then release the butterflies signifying new life, crying "hil-cal, hil-cal, hil-cal." Even in their ignorance they had grasped the concept that life somehow came from above, and that sacrificing something which was alive somehow pleased whatever it was in the sky who was the giver of life. So every time someone died, an animal was killed in hopes that the death of one would give life to another.

One other concept had somehow crept into their minds as well. It was the concept that one person could die in place of many. So whenever a member of one of the tribes wanted to join another, someone had to be killed, in order for the others to be accepted. That sacrifice would usually be the son of the person wanting to join the tribal group. King Butterfly did not know from whence these white men had come. But when they pointed to heaven, he assumed that they wanted to join his tribe, and that they had brought a son to be sacrificed in their place. So a Sovereign God had prepared their hearts to understand His plan in ways no human mind can comprehend.

Beth Anderson, even in her grief, could not help remembering what day it was. Had they been at home that day, they would have been pressing Easter gowns, and getting ready



## Resurrection!

for a big Sunday at church. It was “Good Friday”, the day Christians remember another time when one life was given as a sacrifice for many. The king, witnessing their grief, was momentarily stunned; then, recovering, he ushered them into his now empty “butterfly room” and began grunting unceasingly.

Al Anderson, heaving inside with grief, forced a gentle smile and reached out his hand to the puzzled king. The king, not knowing what a handshake was, drew Al’s hand to his heart to indicate he wanted to be a friend. For he saw something in these strangers — something more than a different colored skin and weird looking clothes. He saw a special love in their eyes he had never seen before — a love he had been searching for all of his life.

Using hand motions, Al Anderson, holding back the tears, kept pointing to the lifeless body of his son, then to heaven; then motioning with his arms as though they were surrounding someone, and he would say quietly, “Resurrection!” Why he chose that word, only God knows. He pointed to heaven again, then pointed to the entire crowd gathered so curiously outside the hut, as if to indicate that someone had already died for all of them. Then he would whisper again; “Resurrection!” Then Al pointed to one lone butterfly, who somehow had missed his escape cue and was flitting helplessly about the room, opened the door and allowed him to go free, and whispered again, “Resurrection!”

Now you know and I know that there is no way, humanly speaking, that two people who cannot speak one word of another’s language can communicate something as profound as the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You know, and I know. But that is humanly speaking. When God begins to speak to a human heart, however, the words men use are not the issue. God was speaking, through the death of a godly young man, to the heart of a searching native, a native who held the key to the hearts of a whole tribe of men and women God desperately wanted to redeem.

The four remaining missionaries were led back to their hut, and for the next two days they wept and they prayed. They were given no food, saw no people, heard no sounds. They were, as it were, in solitary confinement. Hunger was

## Resurrection!

hardly an issue. In their grief, food was the farthest thing from their minds. Again and again they remembered Rob's words as he had prayed in that motel room, "Lord, you may be taking us to our death, which would be to real life." They kept remembering the passage in John 18 where Caiaphas counselled the Jews that it was expedient that one man die for the people.

Should even one Parasinnian native find Christ through Rob's death, they knew Rob would be in heaven praising God for the privilege he had been given to die that others might live. That thought brought great comfort to the broken hearts of Al and Beth Anderson, a comfort that lived on with them in the years to come, every time a native said "yes" to Christ.

It was two days later, early in the morning, when the doors of their hut were loosened, and the two couples, totally at peace with their God and ready, if He deemed it proper to die as Rob had, were ushered into the sunlight once again. Standing before them, the crown no longer atop his bald head, was King Butterfly. He was surrounded by literally hundreds of natives, obviously his tribe plus several others. The absence of the crown was puzzling at first, but soon they understood.

For as they walked into the center of that waiting mob, suddenly the king raised his hands to the sky, and pointing to heaven, shouted at the top of his voice, "Resurrection! Resurrection! Resurrection!" Soon the whole crowd began chanting at the top of their lungs, "Resurrection! Resurrection! Resurrection!" And as they were shouting, King Butterfly turned around, picked up his once-famous "crown", threw it at Al Anderson's feet, and pointed to the heavens, indicating that he was no longer worthy to wear that crown. He did not understand it all, to be sure, but something inside of him had revealed that there was a real King, someone who had given His own Son, once for all, for the sins of the world. Don't try to explain it. You can't. But glory in it, beloved; this man understood resurrection!

Beth Anderson suddenly began to glow with an excitement she could not contain. Two thoughts flooded her mind. The first was a picture of her son, Rob, kneeling at the feet of Jesus, shouting in unison with the natives, "Resurrection;

## Resurrection!

resurrection; resurrection.” And the other was the realization that this was Easter Sunday. Here they were, ten thousand miles from home, standing before a people who had never heard the gospel before, having a sunrise service, with a whole choir of natives singing “Resurrection”. “Oh, dear God,” she whispered, “How great thou art!”

The Andersons miss their son. But they understand, now more than ever, the price their precious God paid to bring eternal life to fallen man. Somehow that personal understanding has given them joy unspeakable.

Four years have passed now. It is once again Easter Sunday. As the morning sun begins its ministry of light, literally hundreds of smiling natives are gathered inside the enlarged “Butterfly Room”, which now houses what you and I would call the “First Evangelical Church of Parasinna”. There the Andersons, as they do every Sunday, teach Sunday school classes in a native tongue they are finally beginning to master. And then, Pastor Butterfly, now, a simple servant of the King of Kings, rises and begins his sermon. It is a simple message, but it is nonetheless profound. For he speaks of a God who loved a people so much that He gave His only Son, as a once and for all sacrifice for the sins of His people, so that all anyone would have to do was to accept that sacrifice and invite that Son into their hearts. Do that, Pastor Butterfly concludes, and it will be Easter.

Then the kindly old man’s eyes meet the eyes of Al and Beth Anderson, and a look of love overwhelms them. It is then that the entire congregation begins to shout, “Resurrection! Resurrection! Resurrection!” The entire congregation, that is, plus one. For up in heaven, where it is always Easter, Rob Anderson accompanied by a choir of angels, is joining in the celebration, singing “Resurrection! Resurrection! Resurrection!”

One of these days, (if you are a Christian), you too, will be gathered around God’s throne with the angelic host singing His praises forever, and you just might come across a quartet of very happy people with their arms about each other, singing a resurrection song.

Stop and ask them their names. One will probably be a lad named Rob, joyfully reunited with his mom and his

## Resurrection!

dad. Another will be their wonderful friend, a man named “Butterfly.”

Chances are they may just keep singing “Resurrection” for all eternity!

And you may want to stop for a while and join them. Because, for you, and for them, the resurrection will be complete at last!

# A New Heart for Alex



## A New Heart for Alex

The rugged lines on his face told a story that could not be written in words. They wove tales of disappointments, setbacks, and failures that somehow engraved themselves into crevices that formed around his eyes. They could be seen in the color of his eyes as well; eyes that penetrated beyond just seeing. They seemed to look through you rather than at you.

His name was Alexander Richland. His 67 years had not been dull ones, nor had they been what the world would call “spectacular”. He had embarked on many ventures, encountered many obstacles, and only on occasions, had there been what his peers deemed “success”. “Success,” Alex would say, “is the measuring stick by which others compare your objectives with theirs. That makes it subjective, at best, and artificial, for sure.”

And truly, by his own agenda, Alex Richland had succeeded. He had raised three children, now had seven grandchildren, had managed to make a reasonably good living, was considered a pillar in the community, and was as close to a pro as an amateur golfer could get. His oldest son, Gerald, was the president of the local bank; his daughter, Amy, the first woman to sit on the city council; and his youngest son, Brent, was in seminary studying to be a preacher.

“Every man for himself,” Alex responded when told of Brent’s decision to enter the ministry. “I guess the world needs preachers to keep cable TV in business,” he would say, taunting Brent about the so-called hypocrisy of television evangelists. To Alex, anyone in the ministry was of about the same ilk. To him, there had to be a hidden motive to make a man go into a career field as unstable and seemingly unproductive as that one.

“Most preachers are good golfers,” Alex would continue, “that ought to tell you something about the profession. And

the ones I meet on the course have tempers that will put mechanics and car salesmen to shame. You guys need to clean up your own act before you start preachin' to others." With that he would pat Brent on the back, offer to pay for his schooling, and imply that, hopefully, he would warm up some day to the idea of getting a "real" job.

By now, you can probably picture Alexander Richland in your mind. He was a self-styled entrepreneur who had "pulled himself up by his own boot-straps," and without so much as a high school diploma had managed to start three businesses, hold down several jobs, and win the admiration of the whole town. God, however, was a nuisance factor for Alex. If there was a God, and He was, as others preached, man's only source of strength and peace, then how had he managed to do so well without so much as paying lip service to some unseen deity?

His wife, Marianne, was a devoted Christian woman. She had held down virtually every job in the church but organist, and since she couldn't sing or play a note, that was to be expected. She saw to it that the three children went to Sunday School, took communion, went to Vacation Bible School as kids, and, when possible, read their Bible stories before bedtime. I say, "when possible," because the ribbing she and the kids got from Alex almost made it a futile effort.

"A fish swallowed that dude, did he?" Alex laughed as Marianne read the story of Jonah and the whale. "Sure he did. And I'll bet a chicken ate the fish, and they made stew out of the lot," he joked as he slammed the door to the kids' bedroom. You can imagine how that made the children feel about the stories Mom was reading.

But whenever Dad was out of town, which was about half the time, Mom would slip her Bible storybook out from behind the washcloths in the bathroom closet, and sitting at the edge of one of the children's beds, she would say "Let's see what God's Word has to tell us tonight."

Amy had taken the "Christian stuff" in whatever doses Mom gave out, but the medicine never really took. Too much of her Dad had rubbed off on her. "How could a man die on a cross for a crime He didn't commit and still be God?" she would ask her weary mother. "Seems to me if He were God,



nobody could lay a hand on Him.” You could tell where her skepticism came from. It was so carefully cloned from her Dad’s sarcastic pokes at Christendom that you could almost imagine someone had laid his mind on a Xerox machine and given her a duplicate.

Gerald, our budding banker, was not as skeptical as Amy. He was just disinterested. He felt that if his Dad had managed to be a success with no education and none of this “God-stuff,” then surely he could add education and class to his life and do at least as well. So he would make church when his wife and kids insisted, give a token amount to the building fund, and appear whenever he felt it helped his cause at the bank. Cynical, he wasn’t. Interested, he certainly wasn’t.

There had been many crises in the Richland household: an infant death, financial reverses, lingering illnesses in grandparents, accidents, a fire that nearly wiped out their life savings, and a bankruptcy to name a few. But Alex had taken them all in his stride, and his seemingly invincible ability to bounce back gave him the nickname “Spunky” in the lodge to which he belonged. To Alex that was the highest compliment a man could receive. It meant that the troops around him thought he was capable of overcoming just about anything with no help from anyone, particularly someone he’d never seen who was supposed to live in heaven, wherever that was.

Spunky Richland was an avid sportsman. He loved to hunt, loved to fish, and as we mentioned before, he was “Awesome Alex” on the greens. Some of his business problems, in fact, came about during a year when Alex toyed with the idea of becoming a professional golfer and spent so much time on the links his newly budding dry-cleaning business was “pressed” to its limits. The fact that a national chain opened up across the street only added to his demise. But Alex didn’t let it keep him down, and within three years he had taken a job with a textile manufacturer, become their top salesman, and opened his own little textile business on the side. No, Spunky was a hard man to keep down — a hard man, indeed.

Few women in the world were more in love with their husbands than Marianne Richland. Though his taunting of her religious fervor discouraged and sometimes brought her ridicule from her church-going friends, she nonetheless held

to the Bible passage in I Peter, chapter three, about living so graciously and humbly with your husband that he might be changed by the life you live without pressure and harassment. That passage had been her lifeline.

Granted, as the years had passed, she had become increasingly discouraged at the religious apathy of her two oldest children. She knew, as well, that their challenging and apathetic view of God was nothing more than the result of a marriage that was divided at its roots where concepts of God were concerned. But she persevered, whispering throughout the day, “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up.”<sup>1</sup> With those verses as her guide, she loved Alex Richland as perfectly as if he had the same zeal for her God that she did.

Alex had always been a healthy guy. Exercise, good food, and a basically strong body had kept him away from Doc Burrow’s office the better part of his 67 years. Oh, he fought off the flu, a couple of serious bouts with pneumonia, and a cataract in his early 60’s; but otherwise, he would be the strong one when the rest of the family was downing pills and running to the doctor for the latest cure.

That’s why this episode in “Spunky’s” life was so critical. He had sort of based his rejection of a hereafter on the strength of his here-and-now body, and somehow his mortality was never an issue for discussion.

It was on a Friday afternoon late in January, and Marianne was busy in the kitchen making a batch of her seemingly world-renowned lamb stew. It was Alex’s favorite dish, and the very aroma of it brewing in the oven caused him to gravitate towards the kitchen like a pup ready for chow.

Something today, however, was different. Alex had come home from work early, mumbling something about “catching up on his rest,” and had gone into the bedroom and shut the door. Even the fragrance of Mom’s specialty hadn’t been magnet enough to bring him out. Just before supper Brent arrived from the seminary, which just happened to be only a mile down the road from the house. The instant he entered those hallowed halls he was greeted by the aroma of what he knew was Dad’s favorite dish.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 13:4 (NKJV)

“Hi, Mom, I know what’s for dinner. Where’s Dad? I saw his car. I want to show him the grade I got on my Greek dissertation on Romans. Prof Simpson said it was the best he’d read.”

“He’s in the bedroom, Dear,” Mom responded, “Get him for me, will you?”

A moment passed, and the next sound Marianne Richland heard was a loud shriek from Brent. “Mom, come quick. I think Dad’s...” His voice trailed off and she couldn’t hear the end of the sentence. Marianne dropped the lid to the stew pot she was holding and ran as fast as she could to the bedroom.

Brent was shaking so hard he couldn’t talk. “I think Dad’s...” This time she heard the final word. It was “dead.” “Spunky” Richland lay across the bed, still in his suit and tie. His face was an ashen gray. His mouth was open. His eyes were open, but there was no visible sign that he saw or heard anything that was going on. For a brief moment, both Mother and son were paralyzed with fright, and neither did anything. Then, suddenly Marianne bolted from her trance, ran to the phone, dialed “9-1-1” and calmly told the operator, “Please send an ambulance to 314 Starlight Drive immediately. I think my husband is dying.”

She put the phone on the hook and raced towards the bed to try to resuscitate her husband of twenty-nine years. It seemed to take forever, but it was only eight minutes before EMS arrived. Oxygen was applied, and the attendant, a young lad the Richland’s had known for years, assured Marianne that Spunky was alive, but barely.

The ride to the hospital seemed to take an eternity. It was only nine miles, but it seemed like nine hundred. “Pray, Brent, pray!” Marianne kept whispering as her youngest son tried to maneuver through the traffic to the hospital. By now, no doubt, the ambulance had arrived, and she wanted to be by her husband’s side.

She was no doctor, but she knew the prognosis was not good. She also knew the problem was one of the heart, and the damage could well be irreversible. Alex had never had a heart problem. Oh, he had complained about being short of breath a time or two, and once or twice had been seen clutching his chest like it hurt, but he’d always answer, “Just

ate too many french fries,” and changed the subject.

French fries were not the problem this time. It only took a brief minute in the emergency room for her worst fears to become reality. The doctor, so young he looked like a teenager to Marianne, came hurrying out to meet her as she walked through the door. He sang in the choir at Marianne’s church and knew who she was.

“Mrs. Richland,” the lad began, unsure of how to say it, “Your husband is alive, but his heart has given out.”

“His heart has what?” Marianne replied, somewhat in disbelief.

“His heart just tried to quit,” the young physician repeated. “I won’t bother you with the technical terms, but he has to go into surgery in the next hour, and the chances are only 50-50 that he’ll survive.”

Marianne started to fall apart. She had reason to. Suddenly, a verse of Scripture came to her mind; a verse she had taught in Vacation Bible School the year before. It was from the 23rd Psalm.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.*

She began to repeat that verse over and over to herself. She looked at Brent. He was almost as pale as his father. He hadn’t studied this in seminary. He knew the Greek verb tenses well and had studied the Hebrew customs that evolved from the law, but nobody had taught him what to do when his father was dying. He stood there almost petrified, in a state of shock, as though this were a dream. He thought in a moment Dad would awake, and they could talk about his grade on the Romans dissertation.

Apart from a miracle, Dad was not going to wake up—ever. The reality of that was sinking in ever so quickly. Marianne wanted to be diplomatic, but didn’t know just how. “You... you... you’re not going to do the surgery, are you?” she asked, almost embarrassed, but desperate that this lad who looked young enough to be in a high school play about doctors and hospitals wasn’t going to cut open her beloved husband and work on his faltering heart.

“No, Ma’am,” the clean-cut young doctor replied, “I’ve

called Dr. Sorenson from Med Central. He's the best vascular surgeon in this part of the state. He's already on his way. It's a miracle that he was there. It's past office hours. He usually doesn't respond to emergencies, but he's headed this way and said he'll take care of everything."

The phrase, "it's a miracle," calmed Marianne Richland tremendously, partly because it relieved her fears that this youngster was not going to be doing the surgery, and partly because it reconfirmed her Scriptural promise that she need not fear.

The next few minutes were like an eternity, but nothing compared to the speed (or should I say lack of speed) with which the clock would move the next few days. Finally, about thirty minutes later, Dr. Sorenson arrived. He was a somewhat disheveled looking older man with a gray beard, bushy eyebrows, and clothes that looked like they had been purchased at a fire sale at the Salvation Army.

But one look in his eyes and you knew that he knew his business. He studied the electrocardiograms, the X-rays, and the monitors carefully. The more he looked, the more the muscles in his jaw seemed to tighten. Not a good sign, thought Marianne Richland; not a good sign indeed. The good doctor looked at Marianne, Brent, and Amy (who had been called from her office by now) and then looked away.

Finally, he called them into a waiting room nearby and gave them his assessment of the situation. "We're going to do by-pass surgery in about an hour. He may not live through it. Even if he does, what we are doing is temporary. This man needs a new heart!"

"A what?" Amy Richland gasped at the top of her voice. "What do you mean a new heart?"

"A transplant," Doc Sorenson quietly responded. "A heart transplant. But the chance of finding one in time is not good. Not good indeed."

It was as though the final death knoll had been sounded for Spunky Richland. A new heart? The chances were slim to none of finding one and less than that of it working. Marianne began to turn pale. Suddenly, her knees went out from under her. Before you could say, "Don't fall," she did. Fortunately,

the plush sofa on the east wall of the waiting room broke her fall, and she wasn't hurt. That's all they needed for Marianne, to end up in a hospital bed.

In a few minutes, she regained her composure; and before long, she, Amy, Brent, and Gerald and his family began their long vigil in the waiting room. Brent would leave the room periodically to pray, but he'd usually give some other excuse so his not-so-spiritually-inclined siblings wouldn't think he was on some "holier-than-thou" mission to get God to intervene in the natural affairs of life.

About halfway through the surgery the hospital chaplain entered the room and asked if he could pray with them. Marianne immediately concluded that the surgery was not going well, a conclusion that had no basis in fact. Amy and Gerald, meanwhile, remembered phone calls they needed to make and left the room as if an evacuation siren had sounded. The rest stayed, and the chaplain's prayer seemed harmless but lacking in depth. It was at least a little encouragement to Marianne that God might still be involved in the whole process.

Seven hours passed before Dr. Sorenson, looking much more disheveled than before, entered the waiting room. Everyone froze. No one dared even ask the question. They didn't need to. He answered it for them. "Mrs. Richland, your husband came through the surgery. He is alive, and his vital signs are good. He is responding and should be able to slowly recover; but unless he gets a new heart, he'll never leave this hospital."

There it was—one of those "good news-bad news" kinds of report. But taking it one statement at a time, they had a lot to be thankful for. "Spunky" was alive, if not well, and there was at least some chance that he might recover. But that "new heart" business was more than Marianne could handle. First of all, she couldn't imagine someone putting someone else's heart in her husband's body. Secondly, she couldn't deal with the odds of finding the right heart in time.

Nonetheless, she consoled herself with the immediate news that her husband was alive and told herself to focus on that fact for now. Another Bible verse came to her mind and gave her comfort: "Do not worry about tomorrow..." it said,

“Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”<sup>2</sup> There was nothing more that could be done today. Tomorrow would have to be God’s problem. Although she was a dedicated Christian, this concept of “resting in God’s arms and letting Him take care of tomorrow” was not something she found natural, and it certainly would take some getting used to. But what other choice did she have? She was later to conclude that only in those circumstances (when she had no choice), would she have learned to trust her God as she began to do that day.

The next few days were filled with pain and grief. Though it was a joy to see Alex alive, the sight of this strapping, self-sufficient man in a hospital bed with what seemed like a thousand wires attached to his body, little TV screens blinking and beeping, blood transfusions and various other plastic bags and bottles hanging everywhere was not a pretty sight. And it got worse. Alex could no longer talk. His eyes would move, and his hands would motion, but no words came out. Nor could he feed himself. But his heart was beating, and that meant he had hope. He had hope indeed. The first thing he was able to write was “Marianne, I love you.” The second was, “Get me a new heart.”

Alex was like that. One day he had wanted a purple gabardine jacket to wear to an army reunion. “But, Dear, I’ve never seen a purple gabardine jacket”. Marianne had exclaimed. “Get me one, anyway,” was Alex’s calm reply. Thirty-two stores and six catalogs later, she found one. But when Alex wanted something, he saw only that somebody could get it if they really tried. No small wonder, then, that the second words he scrawled on the tablet of paper were “get me a new heart”.

Marianne’s eyes filled with tears, but she wrote down on the pad, “I’ll try, Dear, I’ll try.” And try she did. Faxes were sent out that day to all the heart agencies in the country, phone calls were made to old friends who might have contacts in medical schools around the country. Everything man could do, they did. But there was no heart for Alex.

“How long will he last if we don’t find one?” Marianne asked Dr. Sorenson after the second week had passed. “How long?” She could see that he was weakening day by day. He had lost 20 pounds, and his strength, instead of returning,

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:34 (NKJV)

seemed to be waning daily. Along with his physical strength, his desire to live seemed to be waning as well. Spunky was losing his spunk. “Don’t want to go on like this,” he wrote ever so slowly one night on his little yellow pad. “Too hard.” Those words had never come from Spunky Richland before. “Too hard.”

Lots of prayers were being said for Alex. Lots of prayers. Most were praying for him to be healed. Some were praying for him to be out of pain. Rev. Carter, the preacher over at the church Marianne attended, seemed to be praying the strangest prayer. He stopped by the hospital room one day while making his rounds, and he took Spunky’s hand and said, “We’re praying for you. We’re asking God to give you a new heart, but not necessarily one that ticks.”

That’s all he said. “Not necessarily one that ticks.” Alex Richland’s eyes popped open wider than they had in weeks. He motioned for his pencil and his little yellow pad. It seemed to take forever but he wrote, “What do you mean?”

Pastor Carter, a kindly old man in his seventies, smiled, sat down next to Alex’s bed, and ever so quietly began to talk. To say it was a “life and death” conversation would be to put it mildly. You see, everyone had been so busy praying for a new ticker for Spunky no one had stopped to talk to him about eternity.

“I’ve got a friend in the heart business”, Fred Carter began. “He’s got one that’s a perfect match for yours.” Alex could tell by the twinkle in his eye that he wasn’t kidding, but he was also alert enough to know that he wasn’t talking about the same kind of heart Doc Sorenson was looking for.

“What kind of deal can he make me? I don’t have much to offer,” Alex wrote ever so slowly. “It’s free!” said Pastor Carter carefully. “Somebody else paid for the operation.” Alex looked away. He knew what was coming next. Somehow, for the first time in his life, he wanted to hear it. “His name is Jesus,” explained Fred Carter, ever so deliberately, “He gave His life so you could have a brand new heart.”

Something incredibly complicated was going on in Alex Richland’s battered heart—something that was the result of twenty-nine years of praying and living by his loving wife. It was something that was the result of an emptiness inside of



himself he had never owned up to for fear of being counted weak—something that resulted from being, for the first time in his life, totally dependent, totally helpless, and totally without hope.

As long as he could manage by himself, he didn't want to hear about God. Now, for the first time in his 67 years, unless someone infinitely more powerful than he did something, it was all over. Suddenly the businesses he had built, the golf scores he had shot, and the committees he had served on didn't mean a thing. He was facing death, and he did not have the confidence or the comfort or the peace his wife seemed to have. He was no longer strong enough or quick enough to bluff his way through as though he did.

Fortunately, Pastor Carter didn't know Alex very well. It's a good thing. Otherwise, he wouldn't have had the courage to face this self-sufficient bear of a man and tell him he needed to be totally changed.

But, believe it or not, that's just what he did. He quietly but forcefully declared, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."<sup>3</sup> Alex turned away. He wrote nothing. Wisely, Pastor Fred did nothing, either. He just waited. It seemed like an afternoon passed, but it was only about five minutes.

Then, believe it or not, a tear began to roll down the cheeks of blustery, self-sufficient old Alex. Tears were not acceptable in men according to Alex Richland. Before long, he was weeping uncontrollably. Still, Pastor Fred said nothing. Then he wrote down some words on Alex's pad and handed them to him. They said,

*But God commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>4</sup>*

"Your old heart is all black and worn out," the kind old Pastor went on. "You don't need a transfusion. You need a transplant. But God loved you so much He gave you His Son's heart in exchange for the black and weary one inside of you. Ask Him for it, and He'll give it to you."

Alex took the pencil in hand once again and scribbled these words, "I waited too long." Patiently, the pastor took out

3 Romans 3:23

4 Romans 5:8

his Bible and read the story of the thief on the cross to Alex. He understood. Somehow, God made him understand.

“You didn’t know you needed a new heart till now,” Pastor Fred added, “now you do. You’re not afraid to ask these doctors for one are you?” Alex shook his head. “Then why not ask God who made you in the first place. He may not give you a new physical heart, but even if he did, it would eventually stop ticking. Wouldn’t you rather have a heart that will beat forever?”

The word “forever” was the word Alex had been waiting to hear. Something inside of him seemed to melt like butter on a sunny day. He managed a smile—the first smile anyone had seen since the operation. He asked for the tattered yellow pad and wrote, “I’m ready for God to give me a new heart. I don’t care about the other one. I want God’s heart inside of me.”

No one can explain it—no one but God. But God, in eternity past, had known how much heat it would take to melt Alex’s self-sufficient heart. The more Marianne prayed, the more necessary it became for Alex’s physical heart to fail. Only then, in total helpless desperation, would he realize he was not the captain of his own fate. Alex was created by a loving God who died to set him free.

Suddenly that hospital room became a delivery room, and a new babe in Christ came into the world. Oh, the monitors were still beeping, and the medicine was still dripping, and the lights were still flashing; but to Alex “Spunky” Richland, it was as quiet as the dead of night. You could all but hear his old heart evaporate and a brand new one take wings inside him. The tension in his face disappeared. The signs of panic were replaced by rays of hope. The load of guilt was gone. The fear of the future was no longer present.

Alex Richland asked Jesus Christ to give him a new heart. It was February 14th, and God had given him the most beautiful Valentine present known to man—a brand new heart. Not everyone knows they need one, but Alex did.

It was as if the curtains that blocked the sunlight from that dreary hospital room were lifted and replaced with open windows that let the light of life shine in. He opened his mouth, and something incredible happened. He could speak. God gave him a heart and a voice all at the same time. The

words were barely discernible, but the kindly old preacher understood every syllable. He said, “He did it. He gave me a brand new heart.”

About that time, Marianne Richland entered the room. She looked at the pastor, then looked at Alex, then back at the pastor. She wanted to say, “Is this happy man my dying husband?” Instead, she just smiled, and said, “Good morning, isn’t God wonderful?” Nothing she could have said would have been more perfect.

Suddenly from that frail, dying body in that hospital bed, a body in bondage to speechlessness until now, came the most incredible words, “Dear, I’ve become a Christian. God gave me a real heart—the kind that never stops beating.”

Marianne Richland fell on the floor. She didn’t faint. She prayed. She prayed, “Thank you, Lord, for giving my husband Yourself. Thank you for letting him speak to share it. Oh, I love you, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

Talk about celebrations. Marianne went out and bought a bouquet of balloons and made a sign, “Come meet my new husband,” and put it on the door to the room. That one made people curious. She had three people from the church choir come, including that young doctor she’d been afraid would operate who, incidentally, had been operating in the realm of prayer ever since. And they sang, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, oh, what a foretaste of glory divine.”

Then they sang, “Love Lifted Me” and “He Lives.” Alex could barely speak, but he moved his lips with the group as though he had just joined the choir, a move that would have probably sent the somewhat particular choir director into the hospital with a heart attack of his own.

About that time Doc Sorenson entered the room. Talk about a confused physician. He looked as though he had entered the morgue and a corpse had just stood up and waved. According to the doctor, this man had nothing to celebrate. In fact, what he had come into the room to tell the family was that there still was no hope for a new heart.

Soon after, the three Richland children arrived. Brent began to weep tears of joy. Amy was in shock. Gerald stuttered and stammered and remembered an appointment back at the

bank. Not everyone knew how to take this sudden change in the course of events. That's not unusual. It didn't dampen Spunky's spirits though. He suddenly had a new source for his spunk. God was now working in him, both to will and to do of His good pleasure.

The next few weeks were weeks of incredible transformation. It seemed that Alex Richland had entered the courts of Heaven with the same intensity with which he did everything else. He couldn't learn fast enough. He couldn't pray enough. He couldn't read enough. He couldn't praise God enough. He seemed to grow more spiritually in that hospital bed as his vital signs gradually diminished than most Christians do in a lifetime. He seemed to feel he had less time to do it in, so he didn't take the time for granted. I wonder if we can't learn from him.

It was Good Friday when Doctor Sorenson, totally in awe by now at the change in perspective of this dying man, rushed into his room with incredible news. "I think we've found a heart." Spunky surprised him. He didn't show much elation. He just replied. "That's nice. May God's will be done."

This irritated the good doctor who had "moved heaven and earth" to find a heart to keep this man alive. Nonetheless, undaunted, he went on. "The heart will probably be here tomorrow. By Easter, you ought to be a new man."

"I already am," the old man whispered, but it seemed to go unnoticed by anyone but God.

The church was packed that Easter Sunday morning, packed with women and children sporting new dresses and bonnets, men with bright new ties their wives had obviously picked out, and a choir that had practiced for weeks on its "Resurrection" extravaganza. It was the day Christians celebrate life, and this was a church that exploded with life.

After the choir had finished its rousing chorus of praise, Pastor Carter stood up in the pulpit and looked lovingly at his congregation, some of whom he had not seen in about a year. "As you can see in the bulletin, I listed my topic for today as "the Resurrection and the Life". The topic won't change, but I have invited a guest speaker to share his Easter message. Our speaker for today will be Alexander Richland."

That got their attention. Everyone knew Alex had been in the operating room for nearly 12 hours the day before, so if he appeared this morning it would have to be in his resurrection body. “Oh, Alex isn’t here,” Pastor Carter went on. “Oh, maybe he is...” For a minute, the flock thought their shepherd had missed too many hours of sleep. He didn’t seem to be making sense.

Then he reached down and opened an envelope and began to read. It was a letter Alex Richland had written the day before his surgery. It wasn’t long. But oh, was it powerful.

Here’s what it said:

***Dear friends:***

***Happy Easter. What a glorious day. What a shame I’ve missed celebrating the last 67 Easters. What a waste. God forgive me. But I want to be with you this one Easter, anyway, and tell you that God gave me a new heart. And the moment He did, it was Easter in me. Life sprang forth where death once was. Joy came forth where sadness reigned. Peace descended where once self-sufficiency had masked a fearful heart.***

***All my life I lived as though I was responsible for my life, and if I just worked hard enough and lived clean enough, life would somehow go on and on, and I’d get happier and happier. What a fool I was. God had to let my physical heart go bad in order to get my attention, so I would ask Him for a heart that would beat forever.***

***I did. And He gave me a new heart. He gave me Himself. He gave me His joy. He gave me His life. Things that used to matter don’t anymore. Things that consumed me before are not even important. I’m on the doorstep of death, and nothing matters, but Jesus Christ and His love. You’ll be there someday, and you may not be as fortunate as I was. God gave me enough***

***time to do spiritual surgery before they found a real heart and tried to do physical surgery.***

***I don't know if I'll be alive when you read this. Doesn't matter. Oh, I wish I had ten thousand years to serve my Lord, but He's God, and whatever He wants is best.***

***But, oh, it's Easter. Please don't sing about it, and pray about it, and celebrate it if you haven't experienced it. God's a cardiologist and He's just waiting to trade you your old heart for His. Please, ask Him into your heart today. Then, and only then, you will really be celebrating Easter.***

***Your friend in Christ,  
Alex Richland***

There were no dry eyes in Metropolitan Church that Easter morning. Man after man and woman after woman came down to the front to ask Pastor Fred how they could get a new heart, too. Oh, I wish Alex could have been there.

Or was he? I don't know. The service ended with an unusual benediction. The Pastor went back up to the pulpit and announced, "I have an announcement to make". There was total silence.

"Alex has just joined the choir."

More silence.

Then he explained. "We just received word that Alexander Richland's physical body has rejected his physical heart and he has rushed into the arms of His Jesus. He's gathered at the throne right now singing, 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!' His voice is strong and vibrant again, and he can carry a tune now, something he couldn't do before.

He'll never again have a tube in his body, or a monitoring device telling how good his heart is. He doesn't need one. His heart is fine, just fine. I think I can hear him singing now. Let's sing it with him. And as the church dismissed, they exited the church singing, 'Hallelujah, Alex, Hallelujah, Amen'."

A New Heart for Alex

It was Easter. And Alex's new heart was working just fine,  
thank you. It was working just fine.

Is yours?





# The Least Likely Angel of All



# The Least Likely Angel of All

## *The Easter Experience*

To say that Elsa felt uncomfortable might have been one of life's great understatements. As she entered those awesome looking double doors and proceeded down the long hallway to the sanctuary, it was as though she were being led to her execution. Being in the foyer of the church that day reminded her of the time she and her Uncle Edward got caught in the corral at his ranch; the time her brother opened the gate and let all the cattle in. At least then she had permission to cut and run. This time she had orders not to even think about it.

It was Easter Sunday at Lakeview Memorial Church, the biggest protestant cathedral west of the Mississippi. To say that it was crowded would be like saying that a few people came out for a Michael Jackson concert. From her vantage point, which was several feet below "see" level, all Elsa saw were the waists of people who had spent more money on clothes in the last week than she and her ma had spent in her lifetime. Her spending spree this Easter had consisted of buying a \$4 purse at K-Mart to go with the dress they had found at the Goodwill store for \$2.50. And she was mighty proud of it, too. She was, that is, until she got to church. Now suddenly, she felt like a stranger from another planet.

Almost nobody looked at her, and those who did turned their heads with a start as if to say, "How did she get in here?" And as if that weren't bad enough, just as she started up the stairs to the balcony (balcony number one, I think the sign said), the heel on her right shoe, the painted blue ones her oldest sister had willed to her from four Easters ago, came off as did the shoe itself, and she unexpectedly went tumbling backwards down the stairs right into the waiting arms of Deacon Tillwell's wife, Tillie.

Now, Tillie had spent the last two weeks of her life at Lord and Taylor's (she thought the name sounded spiritual)

## The Least Likely Angel of All

getting ready to make an impression on the flock this Easter. What she had spent on her festive new apparel would have outfitted the whole East View Mission with clothes, but to her it was a “necessary part of her testimony”.

Why, she hardly went to sleep last night; what with trying on, pressing, and getting ready for the day of days. Now it had arrived. The yellow and blue size 18 outfit topped off with that new scarf that was color-coordinated by the owner at the local boutique had not a wrinkle anywhere — until now. For the force of poor little Elsa’s fall took Tillie, too, and of course, made a sizable dent in the press job on her outfit of many colors. More than that, the sound of r-i-p she heard as she fell backwards was perhaps even more of a shock than the bruise on her hip that occurred as she made her not-so-graceful contact with the banister.

“You clumsy waif,” the shocked woman screamed as she fell, “what are you doing here, anyhow? Can’t you stay with your own?” It all came out so fast. She knew before the last word left her lips that she had uttered a Christian “boo-boo,” especially for a deacon’s wife. Somehow, at least at the moment, the effect of her words on the petrified little girl was not foremost in her thinking. The \$375.00 she had spent to cover her body was her main concern.

Elsa, already overwhelmed by her surroundings, decided that it was time to cut and run no matter what her ma had said. But as she turned to do so, she only compounded her problems. As she went tearing down the stairs, her older sister hot on her trail, the fact that she was running with only one shoe seemed to inhibit her otherwise world class speed. This, of course, caused her to lunge helplessly into the arms of Pastor Needham’s wife, Agnes, and unfortunately the clip on her \$4 purse caught the sleeve of Mrs. Needham’s new outfit. She, too, heard an unmistakable tearing noise that almost had to have come from her new silk suit which had been made for her by her personal tailor just for this Easter at Lakeview.

By now Elsa was crying so hard she couldn’t see, and the stares she was receiving from the obviously offended parishioners didn’t help. Six people rushed to see if Agnes Needham was okay as she scrambled to find where the tearing

## The Least Likely Angel of All

noise had originated from, but not a soul rushed to see if little Elsa was hurt. Speaking of hurt, she knew that a part of her anatomy was scheduled for the provision of possible pain at the hand of her ma; she expected it.

A thousand pardons and a few hundred tears later, Elsa, Vickie, Bess, and their embarrassed, humiliated mom, Essie, were safely seated in their pew. They were, of course, late in sitting down and had to step on a few pairs of shiny new shoes to make their way to the middle where Ascot, the bothersome brother of the clan, had made a fool of himself trying to save five seats on Easter Sunday. Even though he had on his bright green coat and the purple tie his grandpa wouldn't wear from Christmas, somehow he didn't seem to blend into the surroundings either. (Maybe the fact that he had dyed his hair orange didn't help.) Hence the looks he received were less than looks of acceptance, and by the time the frazzled, embarrassed entourage of family squashed and squeezed their way into the pew, the choir was already on anthem number two of their Easter extravaganza, "The Essence of Love".

They hadn't been seated more than a few minutes when Elsa, her eyes red from crying, blurted out much to her mother's dismay, "Ma, look at that fat lady up there. She's got on a hat that looks like a UFO." Said lady, Mrs. Upchurch, happened to hear, along with everyone else in the balcony, and since her husband, a real estate millionaire, was the church's biggest contributor, she somehow thought herself above such crude and common remarks. The look she gave Elsa finished off the child's concept of Christian love. If she wanted love, she was clearly in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the day wasn't over. But before ma could so much as cover little Elsa's mouth, the lady in the row in front of her, an obvious friend of the Upchurches, turned and said, "Hush little girl, who let you in here?"

Elsa muttered beneath her breath, "Still the best imitation of a UFO I ever saw," then retreated into the pew to endure the rest of the service — an experience that lasted just under an eternity for the Bostick family.

It was just under an eternity for the rest of the congregation, as well, because Pastor Needham, unaware that his wife

## The Least Likely Angel of All

had had an altercation that required an alteration on her hand-made original, not to mention the damage to Tillie's technicolor dream-coat, decided that Easter was the perfect time to lay into those once a year visitors who thought they were making brownie points with God by giving Him a yearly command performance.

His intentions were good, but by the time the choir sang for an hour, his 50 minute lecture entitled "A God Who Demands 52 weeks a Year" seemed to be just too much. Nonetheless, he got a few quiet "amens" from the faithful few who diligently appeared on the scene all year long and were a bit miffed at being upstaged by visitors on Easter Sunday.

### **The Aftermath**

The walk home that day was not a pleasant experience. The Bostick family had only recently moved into the low-rent housing development nearby, and this was the only church within walking distance. The project itself was a source of contention which the church leadership had joined in fighting. "It'll bring nothin' but riffraff", Paul Tourney, the church business administrator, bellowed at the community meeting. "In the name of Lakeview Memorial Church, I hereby oppose this intrusion on the status of our neighborhood." A few pious "amens" from the crowd in the Community Hall that day made it plain that certain church members had come along to voice their disapproval. But the development proposal had indeed passed, and Elsa Bostick stood as "Exhibit A" in many a mind this Easter Sunday that you just can't let "those" people in where they don't belong.

Unfortunately, "those" people felt less comfortable at Lakewood than the parishioners felt with them. While the magnificence of the auditorium and the majesty of the music did indeed impress them, they felt somewhat as though they were uninvited guests to the inauguration of the Queen. The icy stares coupled with the whispers, some of which were overheard, were enough to make anyone know they weren't particularly welcome.

It isn't that the people of Lakewood weren't interested in poor people. They were. Why, only last week they had sent a mission offering of \$500.00 to help that little church on the East Side, (the one that meets in that one room shack).

## The Least Likely Angel of All

“God’s commandment to help the poor demands that we do that,” Pastor Needham explained. It was tucked in the budget just under the line marked “redecorate rest rooms in main building: \$5,000.00.”

Strangely enough, no one seemed to find a problem with that. The rest rooms were essential, they surmised, if the visitors who came to worship there were to sense the atmosphere of a church where people believed “God deserved the best.” At any rate, most of the folks who worshiped there that Sunday would have felt more comfortable if the Bostick clan had gone to the Mission for Easter. Some of them even assumed that the reason why they gave money was to help those poor folks, so they’d have a place of their own to go to church. To say they missed the point of it all would be perhaps so understated it wouldn’t even merit a reply.

Easter dinner in the little three room apartment where the Bosticks now lived was a bit somber that day. Somehow Elsa got the idea that when Uncle Charley and his two kids left, there was going to be a grand reunion between the back side of Ma’s right hand and the back side of Elsa, followed by a lecture on how to act when you’re in the “big church”. In fact, so sure was she, that she kept encouraging Charley to stay as late as he could. “We get to see you so seldom,” she reasoned.

“We were here last Thursday,” Charley replied, “but it’s good to know you like seein’ us so much” he mused, well aware of the situation, having been briefed on what was already tabbed “the Lakewood fiasco” by Elsa’s tattle-tale sisters.

### **The Visit**

It was the following Tuesday night when the Baker family arrived unannounced and totally unexpected at the front door of the “New Lake Project”. Tuesday was “visitation” night at Lakewood Church, and the Bakers, having picked up a stack of visitor’s cards from the Sunday before, were all primed for their evening of “ministering”. What they hadn’t counted on was that this card was from the “Project”. For one thing, they didn’t feel all that safe going there. As their shiny new Buick pulled up in front of the complex about 7:30 pm, the couple could be seen sitting in the car deliberating for nearly half an

hour. Elsa was playing by the curb and could hear some of the conversation, partly because they had the window down, and partly because she had a Master's Degree in eavesdropping.

"We can't go in there," the woman was saying. "We might get mugged." Elsa's supersonic eardrums went into high gear at that point. The man responded, "God will protect us; this is like a mission field. Besides, this would be the first Tuesday in three months we wouldn't be able to check off that we visited all our prospects." The woman wasn't impressed. She had seen too many television programs where helpless, well-meaning people were brutally murdered trying to help the underprivileged. "The pastor ought to make these calls," she whined, "that's what we pay him for." Suddenly, little Elsa Bostick began to put two and two together and came up with an amazing five. A plan for revenge began to well up within her, and she began to concoct a plan to repay the friendly folks at Lakeview for all their kindnesses to the Bostick clan on Easter Sunday.

The wheels in little Elsa's head began to turn at breakneck speed. Her grades in school were only average, but when it came to retaliatory ingenuity, her IQ seemed to move off the charts. Right now she was thinking at the genius level. The hurts she had experienced last Sunday were deep ones, not even counting the ones that finally took place after Uncle Charley left, and Ma took to inflicting pain at the end opposite the brain. Now it was her turn, and as she saw it, and if the Good Lord had a sense of humor, He surely would cooperate. After all, they had inflicted her hurts in the Name of His Son. That didn't make any sense to her at all.

Elsa had two distinct personalities that she could turn off or on, depending on the circumstances. It was obviously time for her "Miss Goody-Two Shoes" routine. Shuffling her feet as though she were bashful and afraid, she moved towards the glistening Buick with determination in her heart, but shyness in her steps. As she approached the still arguing pair of reluctant visitors, she spoke up, rolling her big green eyes almost out of their sockets as she did. "Oh, hi there," she sort of drawled, "aren't you some of the nice people from the wonderful big church up the street? I think I saw you there last Sunday, when we got to worship the Lord with you."



## The Least Likely Angel of All

“Why, if this isn’t a miracle of God,” Ray Baker whispered loudly to his wife, thinking somehow that poor people didn’t hear well.

“I guess we’re stuck,” Jennie Baker muttered back under her breath.

Little Elsa didn’t miss either comment; but she didn’t miss a beat, either. “We’ve just been singing those wonderful Easter songs all week,” Elsa said as she got ever so close to the car. “I’ll never forget that one about “Love is Easter all year long,” she went on. I think it went something like... and with that she turned loose with a few bars of the chorus of the choir’s last number. She remembered that one, because the program had said it would be the finale. What the program hadn’t said was that the pastor was going to give a 30 minute appeal at the end that meant the chocolate Easter eggs in her purse had time to melt completely into oblivion before she got out on the street where she could reach into her purse, come up with chocolate soup, and wipe it on her new dress, further endearing her to dear old mom.

“What brings you to ‘the project’ ma’am?” she inquired, focusing her attention on the woman in the car. She recognized that face. It had glared at her from the balcony just after her fateful “UFO” remark. “Why, we’re, uh, looking for the uh — (she scrambled for her visitor’s card) the uh — Bostick family,” she concluded.

“Oh, Praise the Lord,” little Elsa screamed convincingly. “What a coincidence. That’s me and my ma and my sisters and my ignorant brother.” (That one just slipped out; it didn’t really fit with the role she was playing, but to refer to Ascot with less than contempt violated virtually every shred of integrity she possessed.) At any rate, the nervous Mrs. Baker flustered out of her mind didn’t even hear the words of unbrotherly love.

“Praise the Lord, indeed,” brother Baker blurted out. “Praise the Lord!” He was already preparing a testimony in his mind for the after visitation fellowship about how God works in mysterious ways. Elsa was hoping to add a little spice to his testimony, but as yet, he was unaware of just how mysterious God’s ways really were.

“Would ya like to come up to the apartment?” Elsa asked,

## The Least Likely Angel of All

innocence oozing out of every pore, “My ma would sure be honored to meet you. You made our Easter unforgettable,” she went on, pouring it on just a bit thicker than was necessary.

“Why, yes indeed,” Mr. Baker responded. “Yes indeed,” totally ignoring the jabs in his ribs that his wife was imparting in protestation. “We’d just love to meet your family. Come, Dear, let’s go meet the uh—Barstows.”

“Bosticks,” Elsa corrected him. “Come meet the Bosticks.” And at last the reluctant woman crawled out of the protective environment General Motors had created for her into the real world.

Elsa waited until they were at the top of the steps, and there was no turning back before she began to unpack her bag of tricks. Finally, she could take it no longer. “Ma’am,” she said to the obviously reluctant Mrs. Baker, “is this what Jesus would do if He were still on earth?” Mrs. Baker didn’t understand the question.

“Praise the Lord,” Mr. Baker blurted out. He wasn’t being spiritual; he was hard of hearing, and whenever he didn’t quite understand the question, he always answered “Praise the Lord.” It was a tactic that had served him well, but this time it didn’t quite fly.

“What do you mean, Dear?” Mrs. Baker asked Elsa, somewhat uneasily.

“I mean, would Jesus go to where the poor folks live, even if He didn’t want ‘em in His church?”

Mrs. Baker pretended she didn’t hear what little Elsa had said. “Of course we want you in our church, dear,” the woman hurriedly replied, “now what is your dear mother’s name?”

“Essie,” the child responded, and without so much as taking a breath, she added, “I’m sure glad you came the day after we treated for lice again.” The woman was almost to the top of the stairs, and she began to reel backwards as though she were going to fall back down rather than face what might be inside. “Took care of more than one mouse, too,” Elsa went on with a straight face, “Now we can eat our supper without having to brush them out of the butter.”

The dear woman turned the color of chalk and began gasping as though the height was too much for her. Elsa

## The Least Likely Angel of All

pretended that all was well and continued her little description of life in the ghettos, (which of course did not apply to them, but the poor woman who was now virtually crawling up the steps didn't know that). "Anyway," she blurted out, "since we got the twelve cats, the mice have sure had to fight for their rights. It's just healthier that way, you know, with Uncle Charley havin' Aids and all."

Mrs. Baker clutched her heart as though it were about to tick its last, while her poor old hubby remained oblivious to it all. He heard the comment about the mouse, but thought Elsa meant she had a computer.

"Praise the Lord," he blurted out, as though he was on automatic pilot, "Praise the Lord."

Before the odd couple had a chance to head back to the relative safety of their Buick, Elsa opened the door to the apartment and yelled, "Ma, we got visitors from that church where they treated us so good." And with that, she grabbed Jennie Baker's arm and literally dragged her inside. Mrs. Baker couldn't even open her eyes. She was expecting to step on a rat and hear a squishing sound, or step in seven day old cat food that had been left to rot on the floor.

Finally, she did—open her eyes, I mean. What she saw was a very tiny, very clean, very lovely apartment. Colorful drapes from the Salvation Army store covered the windows. On the floor was a woven rug Essie's grandma had made 50 years ago. It was one of the most beautiful Jennie had ever seen. The pictures on the wall were obviously from the five and dime, but the scenes of the Colorado Mountains blended beautifully with the colors in the curtains.

The woman looked down for the cats and the mice, but for the moment at least, they were non-existent. "Praise the Lord," old man Baker responded, "Praise the Lord." Then he stuck his hand out for Essie to shake and began his little visitation speech. "On behalf of Lakeview Memorial Church we'd like to thank you for being our guests last Sunday, and we want to invite you to be a permane..." suddenly he trailed off into almost indistinguishable tones.

Essie Bostick, dear old saint that she was, just couldn't let this charade go on. With a glint in her eye, but lots of love in her heart, she turned to the Bakers and said, "Why don't

## The Least Likely Angel of All

you have a seat. I'd like to tell you about Easter and Lakeview and us."

"Your visit here tonight is very kind, but we don't belong at your church. We're not your kind of people. The stares, the whispers, the put-downs, the avoidance of eye contact — I know we aren't welcome in your church. And you know what? Neither is Jesus."

Jennie Baker jerked her head nearly out of its socket and shrieked, "How dare you!"

"Praise the Lord," chimed Ray.

"Oh, shut up," responded Jennie. "How dare you. What do you mean 'neither is Jesus'? Why we're the fastest growing church in the state."

Essie Bostick turned to Ray Baker and said, "May I borrow your Bible, please?"

"Praise the Lord," was his expected response, and with that he somewhat reluctantly handed over his \$70 leather Bible not knowing what was going on. Essie opened it rather quickly, as though she were quite familiar with how to use it, turned to Matthew 25, and began reading that familiar story about the king coming and rebuking those who met him, saying,

"I was hungry, but you didn't feed me; thirsty, but you gave me nothing to drink; a stranger, but you didn't invite me to stay." And then, when the bewildered flock asked "how could that be?" He answered, "when you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me."

Then she turned to Matthew 18 and began to read again:

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble or sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones.

## The Least Likely Angel of All

For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

“Mrs. Baker, my kids have guardian angels; agents of God to protect them,” Essie went on, “and when they went into your church Easter Sunday, I told them they were goin’ to see a taste of God’s love. Their angels went with ‘em. And their angels went back to Jesus and said, ‘Lord, they don’t like you at that Lakeview place. They like your music; they like your story; but when these little ones came in your name, they treated ‘em like dirt. They were outcasts ‘cause they were different.’”

It was starting to get very quiet. Little Elsa wanted to say “Praise the Lord,” but fortunately, something stopped her. Essie Bostick wasn’t quite through. She turned to Hebrews 13, and began to read.

“Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

“We just might be angels,” Essie went on. “We just might be angels. And you put us down.” She turned to Elsa. “Now, my little girl there just might have been an angel, a troublesome angel, mind you, but she just might have been an angel God sent to see if you folks had as much love as you do money. She may be the least likely angel you ever saw, but she might be an angel. Can’t you just hear her givin’ her report to Jesus? ‘Yes, Lord, I went where you told me to go — that great big church that everyone talks about. Yes, Lord, I sorta messed up a little, and I didn’t dress up a lot. I wanted to see if they would love me like I am, the way you do. Lord, they acted like I was an intrusion on their little community. Like I didn’t belong ‘cause my outfit was cheap, and I came from a different world. Lord, they preached a sermon on love, but I couldn’t hear the sermon for the noise their lives were making. Lord, I may be the least likely angel of all, but I’ll bet had you been there, I’m the kind you would’ve put your arms around, and drawn to yourself, and said, ‘Hey, you’re my kind of angel. You’re real.’”

Essie quietly concluded, “Go back to your church and tell ‘em for us that you went a visitin’ tonight and came upon a house of angels—angels who felt terribly uncomfortable, even

## The Least Likely Angel of All

on Easter, at Lakeview Church.”

“Now, would you like a cup of coffee? The cups are clean.”

Tears began streaming down the Baker’s cheeks. You see, it all started for them some 35 years before. They had just been married, had almost no money, no car, and no job. The pastor of Lakeview Church, a Reverend Thomas, walked all the way to their house to tell them about Jesus. Rev. Tom, they called him, was a house painter during the week and a preacher on weekends. Lakeview just had 50 members, but they were in love with Jesus. At any rate, they remembered that summer night when Preacher Tom, still in his paintin’ overalls had sat on the floor of their little house (they didn’t have much furniture) and told them how much God loved them; and how the people of Lakeview cared about their needs. They brought them food, took them to the doctor’s and invited them to a Bible study that met in the kitchen at the rear of the little church building. It was as though God had sent a band of angels to minister to them. Soon their spiritual lives began to grow, and they prospered, and the church began to grow, and it prospered. Somehow as it, and they, moved “uptown”, so to speak, they had forgotten how God looks when He entertains angels.

They could never forget that night when they asked Pastor Tom, “Why do you care so much?” He answered, “You just might be angels, you know — angels unawares.” Jennie Baker had responded, “I’m no angel, pastor. I’m the least likely angel of all.”

Now thirty-five years later, here they were, looking down condescendingly at a band of angels no less likely than they had been. Jennie reached down and put her arms around little Elsa Bostick and began to cry. How soon they had forgotten that God had taken them just as they were and simply loved them into the kingdom.

“Will you forgive me, Elsa?” Mrs. Baker asked through her tears, “I let a real live angel slip right through my fingers.” With that she pulled the little girl close to her and gave her a big hug.

“Don’t squash my wings, Mrs. Baker” little Elsa giggled, “I gotta be able to move fast to chase all those mice.” Her mother looked a bit confused. Jennie didn’t. She understood.

### **The Results**

The after-visitation fellowship at Lakeview Memorial Church was a little different that night. The Bakers insisted that the Bosticks come back with them to the church. Reluctantly, they did. As Jennie Baker shared what had happened Easter Sunday, and what had happened that night, an entire room full of people began, one by one, to bow their heads in shame and ask God to forgive them. Then they all joined hands, with the whole Bostick family in the middle, and began to sing “Blessed Be the Tie that Binds our Hearts in Christian Love.” For the first time in a long time, the walls came tumbling down at Lakeview. Not the beautifully wallpapered walls with the expensive chandeliers overhead: the walls that man in his Pharisaic contempt for real Christianity had built in the Name of Jesus.

Before long, God began to do a work at Lakeview Church. Not everybody liked it. But God did. They began sending buses to the “Project” and offered free school tuition to the children there. They set up a furniture house so that people could donate their things to help people get started. They offered free baby-sitting at the church so single mothers in the “Project” could keep their jobs and still keep their kids.

No, not everybody liked the change. Some folks up and left. But, as Pastor Needham put it so well, “There are at least two people here who like it better than they did before.” Folks would always ask him “What two people?”

“Well,” he’d respond, “Jesus, for one. He’s ‘bout decided this is His kinda church again.”

“Amen,” some of the folks would respond, “and whose the second one?” With that, he’d point to little Elsa Bostick, still clad in her bright blue painted shoes, and proud of ‘em. “I mean that little angel over there,” Pastor would respond. Everybody knew Elsa by now. She wore a little pin on her shoulder every Sunday. All it said was “TLLAA”. Of course, everybody had to ask what “TLLAA” stood for. And she’d never tell.

But if you know the whole story, you know it stands for the “The Least Likely Angel of All” — the angel who felt so uncomfortable in God’s own church on Easter that she had to up and turn it upside down.

The Least Likely Angel of All

Angels are like that, you know.

**The Question**

By the way, it's Easter Sunday, isn't it?

And if we're not careful, we could get so wrapped up in the music, and the message, and the pretty Easter clothes that we just might forget that on Easter God just loves to sprinkle a few angels in the congregation, just to see if they'll feel at home.

They may be dressed a little funny. Angels aren't always up on the latest fashions. They may talk a little different, but you know, angels have a dialect all their own. They may not look like they belong. That's okay; when you get to their church in Heaven, they'll be more at home than you are.

But look for them. And if you see them, stop and make them feel at home. Don't look the other way. Don't whisper about how strange they are. Don't rebuke them for not knowing all the customs and manners of Easter in the big church. They've come to our church just to see if we'll love them, like God loves us . . . unconditionally.

When we do, Easter begins to make sense. He is risen! He's alive! And He's coming back! Praise God! Happy Easter!

Ah, but could it be that He's already come back . . . but just for a visit?

Could it be that He's walking the halls of our fellowship waiting to be loved right now — all dressed up — as the least likely angel of all?

Could be. We'd best look carefully, hadn't we?

We'd best look carefully, indeed.

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