Russell Kelfer

The Story of Edith Easter

192-A

Series: Fictional Stories: An Easter Story



t 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 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 37th 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 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 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 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 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 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 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, 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, 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 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,

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 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, 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?



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