

Russell Kelfer
A New
Heart for
Alex

195-A
Series: Fictional Stories:
An Easter Story

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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.

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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.”¹ 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.

“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

¹ I Corinthians 13:4 (NKJV)

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,

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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.”² 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

² Matthew 6:31 (NKJV)

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, 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.

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“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.”³ 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.⁴

³ Romans 3:23

⁴ Romas 5:8

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“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 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.

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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.

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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."

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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

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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'."

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

Is yours?

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