

Russell Kelfer

The Least Likely Angel of All

199-A

**Series: Fictional Stories:
An Easter Story**

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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) 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

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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 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.

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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 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

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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 riff-raff,” 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). “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

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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

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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."

"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 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

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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, 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 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

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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—pen 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 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

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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 25:42-45, 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. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

(Matthew 18:3-6,10 NIV)

“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.”

(Hebrews 13:1,2 NIV)

“We just might be angels,” Essie went on. “We just might be

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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 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.

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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 Pharasaic 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

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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.

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?

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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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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
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