

A Thrill of Hope (yes, really.)

Written by Margaret Evans



On Thanksgiving morning, I decided to take a preemptive, pre pig-out jog around my neighborhood (Pigeon Point), and in an uncharacteristic burst of energy, ended up crossing Boundary Street and heading downtown.

If you'll remember, it was a storybook kind of morning – bright and dazzling and just cold enough. Smiling people in sweaters were out walking dogs, and delicious smells wafted from cozy clapboard cottages. A girl could run forever on a morning like this, but I had places to go and people to see – namely, Charleston and my sister's family – so I started to think about hoofing it home. But first, there was something I wanted to do. Needed to do. Inspired by the Rockwellian splendor of my surroundings – on Thanksgiving morning, no less! – I was seized by an urge to pop into a church for a quick prayer. Downtown Beaufort is full of churches, as you know, and I just happened to be on Church Street... right in front of my church.

Ha! How convenient. I charged up the stairs of the sanctuary, high on the serendipity of it all, only to find the heavy wooden doors were locked. No problem, I thought. I'd just skip on over to the church across the street. Same thing. Locked. Not to be deterred, I ran a couple of blocks to church # 3. It, too, was locked up tight. After striking out at my fourth church, I gave up and starting walking home, the proverbial spring having left my step.

Now, I'm not naïve. On an intellectual level, I think I knew all along the churches of downtown Beaufort would be closed on Thanksgiving morning. But on some *other* level, I guess I'd been holding out hope. For what? I'm not sure, exactly. Is "miracle" too grandiose a word? As I ran from church to church that morning, the word cycled through my mind like a magic incantation, and my little jog took on the urgency of a quest. No, I wasn't in need of comfort... or counsel... or even a warm, safe place to rest my head. But what if I had been? (Plenty of people are!) What if I'd needed a Thanksgiving Miracle, and all I'd found was a series of locked sanctuaries? No matter how okay you are – no matter how "together" – a locked sanctuary is a rude awakening.

I don't mean to disparage my church or any other. I understand all too well why administrators and congregants feel they must lock up their buildings after hours in this day and age. Too much theft. Too much vandalism. Too little respect for property. Too many folks ready to take advantage. "Give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile," right? "You can't trust anybody these days..."

This has been a banner year for broken trust, hasn't it? Our "family values" politicians have proven themselves anything but. Our "financial experts" have revealed themselves to be

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bumblers at best and cheaters at worst. We've even learned, recently (thanks to some never-to-be-trusted computer hackers), that the scientific community – that great, impregnable bastion of rectitude and forthrightness – can be just as deceptive, manipulative, and agenda-driven as anybody else.

And it seems no good deed goes unpunished, either. A series of well-meaning military officials, in a bow to tolerance and diversity, pass a disturbed medical student through the ranks, despite some red flags... and we end up with the Fort Hood massacre. An Arkansas governor takes a big-hearted risk on a criminal sentenced to life at age 16, and ten years later that same criminal, out on parole, murders four cops in cold blood.

I guess what I was looking for that Thanksgiving morning, as I ran like a mad woman from church to church, was a big fat "So What?" to all of the above. A brazen statement of trust in a world that doesn't earn it. A radical show of faith.

That's right. Faith. Because despite everything, I've still got it. And I'd like to see more of it on display.

Those of you who believe in a "higher order," or a reality beyond the material – whether you call yourselves "religious" or "spiritual" or some other word – will probably follow my line of thought, here. The rest of you may excuse yourselves to another page... or read on just for kicks. As the year draws to a close, I look at all the aforementioned examples of "wretched humanity" – not to mention my own flawed face in the mirror – and instead of feeling disillusioned or depressed, I merely think – with apologies to the Talking Heads – "Same as it ever was."

Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." It's a beautiful sentiment, and I agree with it to an extent. But I guess I see the "bending arc" more like a squiggly line. While many believe humanity is on a steady march toward ultimate perfection, I see our progress more in terms of "one step forward and two steps back." Or maybe it's "two steps forward and one step back"? Either way, all you have to do is watch the news to see that, while we've certainly progressed in many areas, in others we've actually regressed. We can't even seem to agree on the definition of "justice" anymore. History suggests that civilizations rise only to fall. The most sophisticated cultures have always held the seeds of their own destruction. I look around, and I don't see much evidence that ours is any different.

So why don't I despair?

Because for me, faith isn't a discouraging uphill trudge toward some earthly perfection that never seems to materialize. Instead, it's an exercise in watchfulness, in catching glimpses of the perfection that *is* – that always has been and ever shall be – and living each day with gratitude, humility and love, in the knowledge of that eternal perfection. The more you practice – the more aware you become – the easier it is to catch those life-shaping glimpses. In the sleek shimmer of a dolphin's back... in the wonder-filled eyes of a child... in the delicate petals of a rose, or the breathtaking design of a DNA molecule, or the splendid symmetry of a Bach concerto...

In the quiet act of generosity that goes unacknowledged.

I believe these fleeting glimpses of the Big Picture – pieces of the puzzle, threads in the tapestry – are all around us. Some of us just haven't learned to see them... or how to connect the dots. I'm still learning, myself, and I have a long way to go. But sometimes, I think my faith is strongest when I *don't* see what I'm looking for... when I'm not given that hoped-for "sign" that good will overcome evil. When the trusted politician lets me down, or the banker betrays me, or something bad happens to someone I love... or I encounter a locked sanctuary.

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Because that's when the longing kicks in. And the longing is everything. That bone-deep, undeniable sense that there's something better – something perfect – floating just outside my peripheral vision... just out of earshot... just beyond my grasp. That longing is as real to me as the most intense hunger or thirst. More real, perhaps, because, despite those glimpses, it's never fully satisfied. I don't expect it will be. Not in the here and now. But still, there it is, that wonderful, terrible craving. That longing, I think, is just another name for faith. It's the force that keeps so many of us pursuing the great mystery.

"If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning," wrote C.S. Lewis.

Likewise, if the universe had no meaning, we'd have no concept of good and evil, "wretched humanity" would be just an empty phrase, no one would give a hoot about "justice," and a locked sanctuary wouldn't faze me a bit. But the universe *does* have meaning, and I believe its manifestation is not the locked sanctuary, but the unlocked heart.

So, once again, it's Christmas. And in spite of everything, the weary world rejoices. Fall on your knees.

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