



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, But believe that thou mayest understand.
Augustine

For us, as for Jacob, fuller experience followed, an ever-growing awareness of God's presence. Much of this growth -- for me especially - *has* involved effort. Always happiest as a student, having sighted this wondrous realm, I seized on it as a subject for study. A rationale for attending lectures and filling scores of notebooks.

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The Decision

In the years since Marc Hall, John and I stepped into that chapel, I've sat at the feet of great Bible teachers, read hundreds of Christian books, gone on long retreats, followed a daily prayer discipline, visited the great pilgrimage sites of the faith. Mine was not a leap of faith like John's, but more of a crawl.

For me the chief point of resistance was the Apostles' Creed, that recital of ancient dogma in the face of logic, science, and common sense. Listening to the preposterous words at St. Mark's week after week, I could hear the voices of my family rising in protest. Mother's voice, perplexed. Aunt Helen's, indignant. My brother's and sister's, "You're not serious!"

To assent to the Creed, to recite it myself, would be to turn away from a heritage I treasured. I would alienate old friends, too, I knew, if I became an actual believer in these strange claims. Confessing the Creed would not mean, to me, lack of respect for other beliefs. But in choosing for myself a Christian worldview, I would open an unbridgeable gulf between me and many I cared most about.

Like Mea Ivimey ... Of all Mea's disappointments in me -- my conventional suburban life, Little League, and the PTA in place of poetic isolation -- nothing had distressed her so much as my growing interest in Christianity. When I'd first started attending St. Mark's, she'd put it down to our active household. "With the demands of the children," she'd say, "I can see why you'd enjoy a quiet hour."

But to begin to *believe* the same thing all the others did! Her chief objection to Christianity seemed to be its popularity. How could her soul mate share a set of beliefs with millions of ordinary people? Each

time I raised the subject, it was met with such a despairing shake of the head that I eventually stopped trying.

Despite objections without and qualms within, however, three years after the experience in the chapel, I made the forty-five-mile trip to New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine for the formal sacrament of confirmation. In the echoing vastness of the world's largest Gothic church, I spoke the Creed aloud for the first time. *I believe in God... and in Jesus Christ... born of the Virgin Mary ... crucified, dead, and buried ... rose from the dead ... ascended into heaven ...* For me it had been a faltering journey over my own prejudice, fears, and intellectual pride.

As I repeated the ancient formula, I understood John's comment on making his own decision that morning in the car three years earlier. It felt like dying.

New Birth

And with that "death" came the birth of something new. In the years since that trip to the cathedral, a blessing pronounced each week by the minister has held special meaning for me:

"Almighty God ... by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life."

The prayer is not that God will give us eternal life. It's that he will *keep* us in a life already begun, already being lived here on earth. And this life begins with the death of some little piece of self-will.

In these love stories, no two of which are alike, the holdout against the divine Suitor takes many forms. For me, reciting the Creed, for John, confessing that Jesus is God, for someone else, kneeling or praying aloud or something else. But when this clamoring, protesting little egotist is allowed to die, there's room where it was for the birth of something new. The Light that John saw in the hospital has never returned, he says, in visible form. But the relationship begun there has persisted. John told me several years later that, while he was happy to be granted more years of earthly life, he'd been aware ever since that night in the ICU of another life unfolding alongside this one. One independent of daily ups and downs. When his mind doubted and his spirit sagged, the new life pursued its unshakable course.

I knew what he meant. I too catch glimpses of this parallel existence. The life that isn't dependent on me at all, the life I'm already living in heaven.

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