

Sometimes the healing of our hurts starts only when we find another song to sing. Take the story of Helen, for instance. She had her sights set on a law degree from Ohio Wesleyan College. But then the flu epidemic of 1918 hit, taking her father as a victim. Suddenly everything had changed. Helen could not go to college; she had to get a job to support her mother. For the next ten years, Helen worked at an electrical utility; a simple, repetitive cog in the company machine. Just when she thought she was destined to remain lonely and unmarried, young Franklin Rice stepped in. He was a dashing entrepreneur, an up- and-coming banker. When they married in 1928, Helen's future was bright with promise.

A year later, though, the stock market crashed, and Franklin's financial world fell apart. He could not take the pressure, so he committed suicide. The litany of Helen's life had become an unrelenting nightmare of overwhelming: a deceased father, a lost career, a vanished fortune, a dead husband, and a lonely existence.

Still, more people know Helen than we might think. You see, Helen eventually took a job with the Gibson Greeting Card company. As she began to write the verses for greeting cards and people began to realise how much she was able to articulate the thoughts of their hearts and the passions of their souls. It was during these creative days that Helen Steiner Rice became a folk poet who spoke the language of hundreds of thousands of Christians.

I think of Helen's story when I read this last chapter of John's gospel. The disciples had been displaced from their homes and careers. For a while, they experienced the exhilaration of sharing a life that was no less than bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth.

But then things were catastrophically upended. Jesus was ripped away from them, shamefully treated and torturously executed. So now they were cautious. They were tenuous — hoping, but fearing. Jesus came back to them, to be sure, but all was not the same. Jesus was not the same. And their daunting mission of revolution had less clarity than it did before. What kind of revolution? What kind of kingdom? And would Jesus even stick around long enough for them to find out?

“I'm going fishing,” Peter said. What else was there to do? So they all stumbled down to the sea, and numbly went through the motions they learned as lads. No fish that night. But that was really not the point of coming out there anyway. The men needed to do something routine and ordinary. They needed to live again.

Then, out of the darkness, shined Jesus. They wondered at first, nervous about the shimmering ghost on the shore. But his voice steadied them, and his command strengthened them. All at once they were wildly successful fishermen. The net could hardly hold their enormous draught. Yet it was not the fish that excited them. Nor did they conceive of themselves as successful lords of the sea. Instead, they were drawn to Jesus. They needed to be with Jesus.

In John 20, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into this new body of his that recreated the human race, like the divine creative story in Genesis 2. Yet these new living souls did not set out immediately on the campaign of resurrected life before that chapter closed. There was intent; Thomas' great testimony was a prelude to all the other testimonies of faith that would be given, but it did not lead naturally or directly into them. Here in John 21, the story of the church began to roll forward. The

disciples needed to make choices about their futures, Jesus restored Peter to his leadership role in the enterprise, and the Lord of life articulated a vision about the future that would lead them on.

The failures of Peter, so pronounced in the passion story, were rectified. Peter was resurrected by the resurrected Jesus and re-empowered to take initiative again. Yes, he was a good fisherman, and this was a noble calling in life. But he had been transformed by Jesus to a new career, one that involved tossing his nets into an even greater sea. The missionary character of John's gospel is re-invigorated by the story of this morning meal on the beach. The prologue to the gospel makes the whole story of Jesus a divine missionary enterprise: Jesus is the word, the light penetrating the blackness of our world, the radiance of almighty God. But that blaze of glory was veiled for a time as those around Jesus wrestled with his identity. Then the miracle of Easter happened, and, for a time, the disciples wrestled with the meaning of all those things. Now, finally, questions of Jesus' identity could be set aside. He is risen! He is Lord! He is all powerful! So it was time to get back to the mission. While Jesus was heaven's bright light, he was laser-focused and limited by his physical limitations.

Only when the disciples began to glow could the light be spread, and the mission recovered. John's gospel was all about "light" and "darkness." Here, after a night in the darkness of night that proved unprofitable and seemingly wasted, they were brought into the light of glowing campfire as dawn was breaking, and they were given a new purpose. They were able to start over. Jesus, who was and is the vision of heaven, became their vision here on earth. The church was born.

Centuries ago, the great theologian Cyprian said that a person who has God as his father, has the Church as his mother. Why? Because the Church was the means by which God strengthened, deepened, and restored our faith. We learn of God from the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of the Church. We see God in the testimonies of the saints. When we've lost our way, the Church directs us to the one who lives within her and draws us back to him. At the heart of the Church is Jesus, head of the body.

Like the disciples at the seashore, in the initial encounter, we all need to see Jesus. And when we see him, we can start life again - with purpose - with mission with passion. One such real life illustrative example is shown in the writings of A.J Cronin. A.J. Cronin was a Scottish doctor who worked in England in the 1920s, in his autobiography, *Adventures in Two Worlds* (1952), he described working in the hospital of a poor northern mining district early in his career. He is probably most famous for his novella *Country Doctor* which inspired the TV series *Dr Finlay's Casebook*. Cronin wrote the screenplays between 1962 and 1964.

In *Adventures in Two Worlds* Cronin relates how one evening a boy dying of diphtheria was brought to him. The hospital was dirty and poorly equipped, with no trained help. Still, Cronin had no alternative but to cut a hole in the boy's throat and insert a breathing tube in his windpipe. Only this emergency tracheotomy saved the fellow's life.

Exhausted, Dr. Cronin left the room. He called a young nurse to sit by the bed. She was only a wisp of a girl, and half starved, but she was a nurse, and she would have to do. "Make sure the tube stays clear, and don't take your eyes off of him," he told her. Then he lay down in a corner and slept.

Suddenly the young nurse was shaking him. She had fallen asleep too, and the tube had shifted. The boy had suffocated; he was dead. Dr. Cronin's eyes blazed in anger. He told her that he would report her, that she'd never work as a nurse again. Standing in front of him, frail, timid, and shaking like a

leaf, she mumbled something under her breath. “What’s that you’re saying?” he demanded. So she said it a little louder: “Please give me another chance!” But he was furious that she dared ask such a thing. “You’re finished,” he said. “There will be no more chances for you!” He stormed away and tried to sleep. But sleep wouldn’t come because her words echoed through his mind: “Give me another chance. Please, give me another chance!”

In the morning he tried to write the letter of discipline and dismissal, but the picture of her pleading face wouldn’t leave him. Finally, he tore the letter up. But that was not the end of the story. That poor, feeble creature, more child than woman, went on to become the matron of one of England’s greatest children’s hospitals. In her later years, she was known throughout the nation for her wisdom and devotion. You see, she never forgot what happened that night. She never forgot her failure; but neither did she forget the grace that had given her a second chance. She carved her future out of her past, based upon one slim vision of eternity. She saw a new future. God’s future. And she became part of it.

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