

The Resurrection Identity Crisis

March 30, 2007/Pastor Joyce Anderson-Reed/La Paz, Mexico

(Open with story of **The Empty Tomb: Who Am I?** written by Joyce Anderson-Reed, January 2008)

Can you identify with the tomb in the Resurrection story? One day you know exactly who you are, where you're headed, you have a plan—and then, two days later, wham! The Resurrected power of Jesus Christ blasts you from the inside out. The miracle, the majesty, the marvelous wonder of God shines into every nook and cranny of your life, and you're transformed. You're standing naked in God's Holy presence. Nothing is the same anymore. Your identity is changed. And you wonder: Who am I? I don't know who I am anymore.

Oh sure, you still know your name, where you grew up, what your profession is . . . stuff like that. But that's all external. It's the internal stuff that's all mixed up now. The spiritual stuff. The stuff that matters. I call it the Resurrection Identity Crisis. Am I leaving a legacy that makes a difference? Do I know how to say I'm sorry to the people that matter most to me? Do I even attempt to love the people I can't stand? Do I pray for world peace? Do I stop and consciously realize that everything I do, think, act, pray about today, will have a direct impact on my life tomorrow? Do people look at me and see a relationship with Jesus?

Who am I?

Most of last year I was in an identity crisis. Oh, I knew I was Joyce, a daughter of God, washed in the blood of Jesus, forgiven by his grace, and promised eternal life. But where was that taking me next? I looked for answers in Scripture. I prayed a lot. I counseled with mature Christian friends. And you know what? It was like trying to build a puzzle without the picture on the box. Sometimes a piece or two went together, but I couldn't step back far enough to get the big picture. I seemed stuck in the specifics.

Now, I need to say that this was different from a crisis of faith. I didn't doubt God while this was happening. I could feel God's presence right beside me. It was a crisis of Who I Was in my faith. God wasn't saying a whole lot during this time. In fact, sometimes days, weeks, months would go by and not a word! Was I going in the right direction? I simply couldn't tell.

Then, late last year, I seemed to get this assurance, "Joyce, just wait until the end of the year. It will become clearer by the end of the year."

So December 2007 rolled around, and I wasn't sure what to expect. Would I meet an agent who would help to publish the book I've been writing? Would a door open to minister to Women & Children at Risk, especially in the area of Human Trafficking, which is a passion of mine? Would some distant relative die and will me a huge sum of money? The days ticked by, and none of these events unfolded.

December 26th, the day after Christmas, David goes out for a bike ride and experiences severe angina. He comes home and informs me that we better make a visit to the states so he can see a cardiologist. And I remember having a conversation with God about this. "Excuse me, but is

this what I was waiting for? Finding out that my husband has a heart condition? This is going to make my life clearer?”

Because nothing was clear. In fact, I felt more exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually than I ever had in my entire life thus far. And as I packed my suitcases, I thought, “Where is this all going? What is God doing?” Our lives were transforming. But into what?

Moments of transformation are not always what we expect them to be. They don’t always come in bright, shiny packages with beautiful bows on top. Sometimes they come with anxiety, sleepless nights, angry outbursts, and lots of tears. Sometimes there are lonely, confusing days filled with lots of blank stares. Sometimes you have heaps and heaps of words on the inside, but no tools to string them into coherent sentences for people on the outside. Who Am I?

Last week, when I was reflecting on the women who came to the tomb, I began to see some parallels between their transformation journey and my own of the last several months. Perhaps some of my insights will help you in your personal transformation journeys.

The women who came to the tomb, were followers of Jesus, their lives had taken a shape and form that was headed in a certain direction. They knew who they were. What they were doing. Their purpose seemed defined. And then came what we call Good Friday, and Jesus was crucified on the cross. As they returned to the tomb two days later, their eyes red from weeping, their hearts heavy with grief, their arms laden with spices for his body, they were on the verge of one of the most amazing transformational moments of not only their lives, but also for the Christian faith.. They were greeted by an empty tomb, by an angel who shouted: He is not here! He is risen!

Notice that when they ran back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples, Scripture tells us that they were filled with fear and great joy.

Fear and great joy. The day of David’s angiogram, when we discovered how serious his blockage was and that he would need double bypass surgery, I experienced fear and great joy. Fear that he still might die as he was facing a very serious surgery. And great joy that he hadn’t dropped dead from a heart attack 30 miles outside of La Paz on one of his bike rides. God had been protecting his life thus far, and I had to go forward in faith that He would continue to do so.

Transformation Moments cause fear and joy simultaneously.

After their experience at the tomb, the women ran back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. And when they shared this transformation moment with the others, they were not believed. The Bible says, “They did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” (Luke 24:11)

Has anyone ever considered your words to be nonsense? You’re trying to explain what’s going on in your life? The changes. The ups and downs. A moment when God has broken in and changed you from the inside out. The excitement. The fear. And people look at you like you’re crazy?

I have always been a writer. I started writing when I was six-years-old. A year ago I decided that I wanted to become serious about my intent to write a book. As I was going through this transformation moment with my writing, I began to share my excitement with a couple close friends. One, who lives back in the states, bubbled, “What kind of Christian novel are you writing?” And I gently responded, “It’s not a Christian novel. I’m a Christian writing a novel. My Christian world view will be reflected through what I write, but I’m not writing just for Christians.” And this person responded with “What? I don’t get it. Why wouldn’t you want to write Christian books? Isn’t that what the world needs?”

And her reaction made me stop for a few minutes and think, “Am I crazy? Am I misreading what God wants me to write about?” But then I asked myself: What about Christian Artists who don’t paint religious art? What about Christian musicians who don’t sing Christian songs? In fact, what about every Christian who is working in the secular world? And I realized in that moment that I did not need to doubt what God was doing in my life. I needed to trust that He would work out the details as long as I was faithful to the creative gifts He had given me.

Transformation Moments will often cause people who care about you to become uncomfortable.

Why? Because you’re morphing into something new. The glory of God is shining from the inside out, and at first, people around you don’t quite know what to make of it. The women who were at the tomb, the first to see the Resurrected Jesus and proclaim the Good News, experienced a new TRUTH face-to-face and didn’t back down from their story. I learned from their indomitable courage. If God is giving me a new TRUTH for my life, I must trust my gut and not back down from the doubters.

A final thing I was reminded about from the women who came to the tomb on Easter morning, was that God sometimes uses the most unlikely people to spread his message. Many of you might know that in the time of Jesus, women were never used as witnesses. They were considered unreliable. Their word was not credible. Their status in society was near the bottom. And yet, God chose women to be the first witnesses to the Resurrection. They were entrusted with the most amazing task of spreading the word: He is risen! He is not here, he is risen!

Transformation Moments take you outside your comfort zones.

When David was in the hospital recovering from surgery and I was spending the nights with him, we met two incredible nurses: Sue and JiJa. When they discovered that we were missionaries, they began to ask us all sorts of questions about our faith and ministry. I shared with Sue about the Crossroads website. One hour later, David and I were taking a midnight stroll around the nurses station, and I heard my voice echoing from a computer. Sue was listening to one of my sermons online! It was surreal! Then she began emailing the web site to all the other nurses’ computers. I’m not sure if they were grateful or annoyed! Jija, who is not a Christian, and who came to the U.S. from India, was touched by the closeness of our family and our constant hopefulness. After David’s discharge, Sue emailed us saying that room 318 didn’t seem the same after we left.

I did not expect to be a witness to David's nurses while he was in the hospital. Not that I planned on being mean and nasty, but I didn't consciously think about how God might use me in that situation. Unlike my husband who actually prayed that God would use him (he's much holier than me!) But God took my messy, tired, complicated self and used me in the puzzle of someone else's life. And in doing so, another puzzle piece in my life seemed to lock into place.

I don't really understand all the reasons David had open heart surgery at the age of 47, and why we had to go and live back in the U.S. for the last two months. I still don't really know if my life is any clearer. But what I do know is that God is transforming me through this experience. Jesus is walking through the rooms of my heart. The power of his Resurrection is changing me from the inside out. Every nook and cranny is exposed to His glorious light. And even when I don't know who I am, He knows who I am.

Some of your stories I know. Some I don't. But I do know that God promises to transform each and every one of us if we allow the power of the Resurrected Christ to be unleashed in our lives, to change us from the inside out. We will become like the women on Easter Morning who experienced both fear and great joy, had the courage to speak of their transformation, and became credible witnesses of the Risen Lord.

Let's pray . . .

Precious God, thank you for the story of the empty tomb. Thank you for the witness of the women who came that early Resurrection morning. Thank you for the Transformation Moments you place in each of our individual lives. We invite your Holy Spirit to teach us, to guide us, to love us closer to the truth of Your Presence in our Lives. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.