

Hope for All of Us

Eleven years ago, my daddy died. It was Sunday noon. We had just come in from church and the phone was ringing. It was my mother in Vero Beach, Fla.

“Daddy has just gone to be with the Lord.” As long as I can remember she had called him Daddy. The kids all called him Daddy. Only his old friends—and he had outlived most of them—called him Walter.

Jackie and I went back out the door for the 30-mile drive down the Florida coast toward the old home place. My mind was whirling. He was 87 years old. Although his mind had been as sharp as when he taught English literature at DePauw University back in 1915, we all had known the time was short.

Twenty-five years earlier, kneeling in his orange grove, his life goals had radically changed. From making money to giving it away. Now he was satisfied. He owned nothing. He was ready to go home. The week before, I had sat on the side of the bed, listening as he quoted from Longfellow:

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,

Life is but an empty dream!—

For the soul is dead that slumbers,

And things are not what they seem.

I knew, in his poetic way, he was telling me he was about to die. It didn't seem to bother him. He believed death was a beginning—not an end.

I believed that too. At least, I wanted to. But as I drove in silence, Job's question kept swirling through my mind, “If a man dies, will he live again?”

It's the question we all ask when death strikes. "Daddy has gone to be with the Lord," my mother had said. How did she know? How does anyone know where you go when you die? What's to prove you're not like ants stepped on by kids, or like leaves burned in the fireplace?

We pulled up in the carport and went inside. Mother met us in the kitchen. "He went peacefully, in his sleep. I've already had my cry. He's back there on the bed."

"I'll call the funeral director," Jackie said softly. "You go on back."

I entered the familiar room. Daddy's body was on the bed, the light tan blanket pulled up over his chest. His mouth was partially open, his arm hanging at an awkward angle off his bed.

Looking down at him I could almost hear Longfellow again, echoing in the empty room:

Life is real! Life is earnest!

And the grave is not its goal;

Dust thou art, to dust returnest,

Was not spoken of the soul.

I knelt beside his bed. His body was still warm, but his arm had already grown stiff. I bent it back under the covers, caressing his hand as I did so. For the first time, I cried.

Jackie came into the room, her hand on my shoulder as I wept. I finally stood, my arm around her waist, looking out the window at the Florida he loved so much.

"Eternal springtime," Daddy used to call it, reminding us of the harsh winters back in Indiana.

"He's still here, isn't he," Jackie said.

"I feel him, too. He hasn't left yet."

Then, in silent words, he spoke to me. I've examined that sacred moment many times since then. Was I imagining? Was I wanting to believe so desperately I just made it up? No, for when I talked to my wife later, she had sensed virtually the same thing.

"You think Florida is beautiful? What you see out the window, son, is nothing compared to what I see." There was more, but it was too personal to relate here. The important thing was this: my doubt was gone.

In its place was hope. Not the kind of hope that says, "I hope he's still alive." Rather it was the biblical kind: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Heb. 6:19, NIV).

All that came to mind last night as I was driving home. I passed a big blue dump truck with a picture on the door—an empty cross on a hill. Under it were these words: "He is risen!"

Hope. Even on the door of a dump truck. Hugo Gryn, a London rabbi, once wrote of an experience in a horrible Nazi concentration camp—grotesquely called Leiberose, "Lovely Rose"—in Silesia during the holocaust. It was published after World War II in the German magazine Der Alorgen.

"It was the cold winter of 1944 and although we had nothing like calendars, my father, who was a fellow prisoner there, took me and some of our friends to a corner of the barrack. He announced it was the eve of Hanukkah, produced a curious-shaped clay bowl, and began to light a wick immersed in his precious, but now melted, margarine ration.

Before he could recite the blessing, I protested at this waste of food. He looked at me, then at the lamp, and finally said: 'You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three

weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water. But you cannot live properly for three moments without hope!'"

Easter is God's message of hope to the people of this planet. "If a man dies, will he live again?" that early Jew asked. Another Jew answered with more than words—He answered with His life. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angel asked gently. That day, 11 years ago, as I held Daddy's cold hand, the angel whispered again. "He is not here. He is risen!" Hope—for all of us! {eoa}

From 1979 until his death, Jamie Buckingham (1932-1992) wrote the "Last Word" column for *Charisma* magazine, which originally published this article. He was the editor of *Ministry Today* magazine at his untimely death in February 1992—more than 20 years ago.