

Ordinary People
(The Letter to the Frumpy Bride)

Revelation 3:7-13

March 18, 2001

Peter Hiatt

The following was recorded by Sister Mary Rose McGeady:

“I’m waiting for my dad. Have . . . have any of you seen my dad?”

The tall and skinny scarecrow-kid shifted before us on the streetcorner, fear racing across his face, dirt smeared all over his body.

His speech was slowed and slurred. His eyes dull and empty. At first I thought “drugs,” but then I realized it was something else . . . the boy was mentally disabled.

He was . . . a little boy . . . in a 16-year-old’s body.

“I’m sorry, son, but I don’t know your dad . . . What’s your name?”

“Eric”

“Hi, Eric. What do you mean you’re waiting for your dad?”

“He’s coming back. I hope. . . .”

Eric clinched his hands tightly into a fist, and began to rock back and forth

“Maybe we can help you. Where do you live, Eric?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you live in New York City?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you live in a city, with lots of streets and buildings?”

“Yeah. Lots of cars.”

“When did your dad say he would be back?”

“He just took me for a walk, and then said, ‘Wait here, I’ll be right back.’ That was right after he gave me breakfast. But he must be coming back . . . right?”

“How long have you been here, Eric?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve been here for awhile.”

“Have you slept here?”

“Yeah. I sleep in my pipe. I wish I had my blanket, though, ‘cause . . . it gets really cold.”

“Your pipe? Where is that, Eric?”

Eric pointed to the bridge that runs along the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, and then led us to his “home.” Sure enough, hidden in the dirt and squalor of a dark corner sat a large, old pipe.

“Is this where you sleep, Eric?” He nodded “Eric, how many times have you slept in the pipe? One time? Two times? Or more?”

“Yeah. I sleep here a lot.”

“Eric, what’s your last name?”

“Eric.”

“No, your other name. Do you have another name? Like, I’m Mary Rose, but my last name is McGeady. Do you have another name?”

“Just Eric.”

His name was “Just Eric.” You wonder, don’t you, how many “Just Erics” there are in the world.

. . . People who are cut off and feel as if they have little power, and everywhere they turn in their world they find a closed door . . .

. . . People who feel shut out while the world passes them by, yet . . .

. . . People who have a confused but belligerent hope that “he’s coming back. Somebody is coming back for me, because I belong somewhere else.”

Whether we like it or not, to other street kids and to most of the people in the world, Eric is . . . ordinary.

In Africa there are hundreds of millions suffering from AIDS, and millions upon millions of orphans. Hundreds of millions of people will go to bed tonight hungry. Hundreds of millions will be thankful for a good cement pipe like Eric’s. Hundreds of millions . . . and their struggle is *not* extraordinary.

American POW’s, families of victims of the Oklahoma bombing, Columbine High School . . . now *that* is extraordinary: Huge publicity and incredible stories of courage . . . like the recent story of the Andrea Gail, in the movie “The Perfect Storm.” *Tragic*, but what an incredibly glorious picture! Man pitted against the raging sea!

In Scripture the sea is the abode of demons and the Dragon, as well as an instrument of God’s judgment. So the Andrea Gail’s heroic struggle against the raging sea is glorious.

But what about all those simply lost at sea? Like “Just Eric”? We never know their story.

Maybe you feel like “Just Eric” in a metaphorical kind of way. You feel like you have little power. Doors have been shutting in your face one after another. And you feel cut off from the world as it passes you by.

You are a Christian and you profess, “Jesus is coming back,” but in your honest moments you have your doubts. So you serve on a church committee. You go down to Christ’s Body Ministries after church on Sundays. You help out at a mission once in a while, but you wonder,

Do I really matter? I feel like I have such little power. On the other hand, it’s not like I am a picture of heroic suffering either.

Just one more day after another, treading water. Entirely ordinary . . . maybe *less* than ordinary. Maybe not Eric, but to some degree don’t we all feel at times like we are “Just Eric”?

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: [and last week I preached that my strong suspicion is that that angel is the Holy Spirit in communion with His church, communicating *to* His church and living out the call of Christ *within* the church.]

“These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

“I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. . . .”

“I am coming soon; hold on.”

A great storm is coming upon the whole earth to test those who live upon the face of the earth. Many, many people think that is referring to a seven-year storm some time after the year 2001—the Great Tribulation.

So what Jesus is really saying to the little church in Philadelphia is,

Guys, cheer up! You’re not going to even be around for the seven-year Tribulation! There’s a big storm coming after 2001, and . . . I’m coming soon. Actually, some time after the year 2008 . . . I know you’ll be dead, but if you were alive, I’d rapture you right out of there!

Is *that* what He is saying? I don’t think so. I think He is saying, “Persecution will intensify in your lifetime, and I will keep you.”

In John 17 Jesus prays this to His Father:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that you should take them out of the world but that you should keep them from the evil one.

Maybe storms will intensify right before Jesus comes back. But if we would step out of our rich, powerful, secure, American mindset for a little while and take a good look at this world, I think we would see that for *most* Christians in *most* of the world, things are pretty stormy and have been stormy for quite some time.

I think that we might also see something else:

Jesus still walks in storms on the raging sea;
Behold, he is still coming soon.

Philadelphia lay twenty-three miles southeast of Sardis. It was an area plagued with earthquakes. Philadelphia was a relatively new city founded by the Greeks as an outpost of Hellenism at the edge of the Greek Empire.

It was a frontier town, kind of like Denver. Jesus says, “Philadelphia, I know you have little strength . . . power . . . the Greek word is “Dunamis” . . . where we get our word “dynamite.” Not a lot of fire works in Philadelphia.

Ordinary or less than ordinary, but Jesus says, “You are faithful, so I will keep you from the storm.”

Over in Smyrna they are also faithful. He says, “They are going to throw you in prison; be faithful unto death.” That’s where we read about the heroic suffering and struggle of Polycarp and his beautiful martyrdom . . . just incredible!

But in Philadelphia?—Keep treading water.

Suffering used to make me doubt God’s love for me. Having now spent a good chunk of time in Scripture and preaching, it’s more like my lack of suffering that at times makes me doubt God’s love for me. I don’t want to say that too loudly, but I think it’s kind of true . . .

What I mean is, I wonder things like: “God, could you be pleased with an ordinary guy who just goes through *ordinary* kinds of suffering and still feels he’s barely hanging on at times?”

In Philadelphia it appears they were going through more ordinary kinds of suffering. Folks from the synagogue (to which many undoubtedly belonged) were ridiculing them saying, “God doesn’t love you. You’re no longer part of the people of God!” Excluding them . . . reviling them . . . old family and friends. Through them the Evil One must have been whispering, “Unloved . . . rejected . . . anathema.”

Ordinary church;
Ordinary bride;
I imagine she was feeling kind of frumpy.

You know “frumpy.” Sitting around in the housecoat wearing the slippers . . . “One more day of doing the laundry. Does it matter?! Do *I* matter?” And Jesus says, “Yes. I know. I see. And I have placed before you, my dear, an open door.”

He also told them he had the key of David. In Isaiah 22:22 we read about the key of the *house* of David, and the one who wields it open, and that what he opens none can shut and what he shuts no one can open. You see, it’s the *key* that the steward has to the kingdom!

But in Revelation 3 it’s not just to the *house* of David, it’s the *key of* David. I think that’s

interesting, for David . . . had little power. He was ordinary. He was a shepherd boy smaller than all his brothers, yet God called *him*.

As a *weak* boy David had incredible *power*.

- It was *David* as a *boy* who conquered Goliath, the Philistine champion, and spread the kingdom of Israel;
- It was *David* as a *boy* who chased *demons* from King Saul with his worship music;
- He eventually became king himself.

No longer small, but immense . . . Israel's *greatest* king. Ironically, it was then that he seemed most weak . . . when he saw himself as king. It was then he sank.

Adultery, murder, betrayal by his own children.

But when he was *weak*, everywhere he turned there were open doors.

Jesus says, "I place before you, Philadelphia, an open door." People debate what that open door is. Many say it's the door of evangelism. In both Corinthian letters Paul refers to open doors of spreading the gospel. It was Paul who wrote, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God."

That is, "Philadelphia, it's your very weakness that allows you to show forth the kingdom of God." That makes some sense, especially to rich Americans like us living in a commercial society where everybody is trying to sell us something. We have become highly suspicious of commercials. Why? They almost always lie.

Powerful people can afford to live their lives like commercials . . .

always striking a pose,
wearing the right clothes,
saying the right things,
every word carefully scripted,
(like a sermon).

So we have learned it is what comes out in the unguarded moments of life that is most convincing. It's there we find truth.

There was a little boy watching a minister work in his yard one day. The little boy was very intent on everything the minister did, and the minister, working up there on his trestle in his garden, was feeling pretty pleased with himself and pleased that this little boy was taking such an interest.

He turned to the boy and said, "Son, are you looking for some pointers in carpentry?" The little boy said, "No. I'm waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer." That was a smart kid.

Jesus was a carpenter for thirty years in a little, no name, frontier town called Nazareth. He never wrote a book, never held an office, never earned any credentials, and never traveled more than 200 miles from his place of birth.

Sure, there were miracles, but he *hid* them from people. No dynamite unless they had faith first.

So to the world his life would have looked rather ordinary. But he said to some folks, “Come walk with me a while. Spend some time with me.” They watched him do ordinary things in an extraordinary way . . .

hold little kids . . .
talk to a woman by a well . . .
sleep on a boat in a storm.

He died between two ordinary thieves, crucified like hundreds of thousands of others in Rome, yet in the words of Phillips Brooks:

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.

His ordinary life exposed extraordinary faith, hope, and love, in a way that our powerful, scripted, and together lives do not.

He chose weakness to expose
The glory of God,
And on the cross He exposes
The heart of God.

It’s there He “draws all men to himself,” John 12:32.

I think if we look honestly, by far and away most if not all people come to Christ because they *saw* Him in some *ordinary* person at some *unscripted* moment. Sure — they may come forward at the Billy Graham Crusade, but it was because they saw faith, hope, and love in people like you—their neighbor.

Live your ordinary life in faith,
and you wield supreme power.

I have a friend who was raised in a coven. Her story is the most extraordinary I’ve ever heard. And the power of God *in* her and *for* her is the most extraordinary that these two eyes have ever seen.

Because of her and the power of Jesus in her and around her and through her, and the things that I’ve seen there, it is not hard for me to believe . . .

that there is an Ancient Dragon
 who rises out of the sea;
that there is a harlot drunk
 with the blood of saints and riding a beast.

More than anything else,

 that there is a lamb that was slain, and
 He is conquering them all.

Absolutely extraordinary.

But she came to Christ because Christ came to *her* in just an ordinary friend. At work one day an ordinary gal said, “Would you like to come with me tonight to my church?” And she went. Why? Because this gal was just *nice*.

This ordinary friend still has no idea of the incredible power she unleashed . . . no idea that she walked on water in the heart of a raging storm.

Maybe *that’s* the power of it . . . not knowing . . . unscripted, uncalculated faith.

Faith . . .
 shining through the cracks
 in an ordinary clay pot.

At the Judgment the sheep say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty? Or naked or in prison? Jesus, I’m sorry, but I don’t remember.”

“You were *there*, Jesus? That was a regular kind of day. I don’t know why . . . I just thought that I would go down to the city after church . . . but *that* was *You*?”

When Peter walked on the water in that raging storm, I don’t think he knew what he was doing. In other words, he wasn’t sitting in the boat psyching himself up for great and mighty works!

Hallelujah! I’m comin’, Jesus! I’m gonna do it! I’m gonna do it! I’m feeling spiritual now! I’m going to walk on water!

No. He just saw Jesus, and he *loved* Jesus. And Jesus said, “Come on.” And he started walking. When did he sink? When he noticed — “My goodness this is extraordinary! *I* must be extraordinary!” Then he sunk.

Maybe you don’t know when you’re walking on water. Maybe it’s good that way. Because the moment you notice, it becomes about *you*, and you sink. The people watching you then sink, because *they* think it’s about you too.

“Philadelphia, you have little power.
But before you I have placed an open door.”

Maybe the open door is the door of people’s hearts won to Christ. In the next paragraph He says this: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. He who opens I will come in and sup with him and he with me.” *Maybe* it’s the door to other people’s hearts that are opened up — the door of evangelism.

But *maybe* it’s a door way, way, way bigger than that.

Next chapter, verse 1: “After this I looked, and WOW! [that’s the Greek] A door was opened in Heaven.” It must be a big door.

Little David had power over demons and power over giants, and little David had a key to the kingdom of Israel, but he also had a key to something much bigger than that. He had a key to the heart of *God*. Remember? That’s why God *chose* him. He looks upon the heart.

Faith, hope, and love
In such weakness;
He was a man
After God’s own heart.

This is hard for us Americans to believe, but maybe God isn’t in short supply of power. Maybe God isn’t hurting for power and miracles and wonders and great projects and all the things we Americans think are so important, like gold and financing.

Maybe God isn’t short on power,
but He died for a little faith, hope,
and love from his kids.

In late October 1991 two weather fronts over New England converged with the remains of a hurricane coming up the eastern seaboard. Together they formed what we’ve called The Perfect Storm.

To the north the Andrea Gail battled with all her
expertise, power, and might;
To the south a six-year-old little girl practiced
her backstroke.

Gary told us about her a couple years ago. Her story captured my heart, and Gary said I could share it again.

John was a guy in Gary’s congregation in Wayne, Pennsylvania, a thirty-five-year-old, young father. In late October of 1991 he decided to take his six-year-old daughter Mary for a special date sailing on the Atlantic. He had not checked the weather report.

They were six miles off the coast of New Jersey when he was surprised at how quickly the waves rose up and how strong the wind had become. Before he knew it, they were riding in twenty– and thirty-foot swells, and then the boat capsized.

John was in the water holding Mary; their life vests were still fastened to the boat as it was being blown out to sea.

Holding Mary he began to swim the six miles back to shore. But as he swam he realized there was no way they could make it. He would have to swim alone.

John said to Mary, “Mary, you can float on your back as long as you want.” They had practiced the back float in their ordinary, little pool in their ordinary neighborhood. “Mary, you can float on your back as long as you want. You *can*. I’m going to go get help, and Mary, I will be back.”

Three hours later, far from shore, the Coast Guard found John. They pulled him on board, and together they looked for an hour and a half for Mary until it was getting dark and they were using spotlights in those twenty– and thirty-foot swells in that raging storm. She had been in the water for five hours.

Miraculously, they found her, floating on her back. The guardsmen pulled her up onto the deck of the boat and asked, “Mary, how did you *do* that?” She said, “Well, my daddy told me I could back float as long as I wanted to, and he told me he would come back. My daddy *always* does what he says.”

- The Andrea Gail fought with courage and power, and she sank. There is glory in that.
- Mary practiced her back float. She didn’t even know she beat the storm of the century. She just believed what her daddy said. “He said I could back float as long as I wanted to, and he is coming back.”

You could say faith in her daddy kept her from the great storm which came down on the whole eastern seaboard.

“I know you’re small and weak, Philadelphia, but keep on keeping my word. Hold on, Philadelphia, and I will be back. I’ll keep you from the hour of trial. I’m coming soon.”

And Jesus said to his struggling disciples, “Where I am going you cannot follow.” Where was He going? He was swimming into the heart of the perfect storm, Hell itself, to bear the wrath of God. But He said to them, “I will be back, and my Spirit will keep you. Patiently endure in faith.”

Maybe, just maybe,
 you have been walking on water
 and you don’t even know it.
 You think,

“I’m just hanging on . . .
nothing special . . .
hanging on one more day.”

And the angels watch from the deck of the boat. They say, “Look! She’s floating in the storm of the century!”

Maybe you *are* walking on water.

That’s not my main point; I don’t want you to think about it too long; that could mess you up, just like Peter. My point is this:

- Faith like Mary’s—faith in weakness—ravishes the Father’s heart.
- Mary had the key to her father’s heart, so she also had the key to the United States Coast Guard.

What father could not resist faith, hope, and love like Mary’s? Certainly not *God* the Father, so . . .

- It is *Mary* who has a key to the Father’s heart.
- It is *David* who has the key to God’s heart.
- It is *Jesus the Christ*, the perfect child, from the root of David, who holds the key—the key to the Creator’s heart. Why? Because from the pit of Hell He died in faith and bore it for us. He holds that key, and now He declares to the Church what is His.

Now what is Christ’s is declared to Philadelphia. He gives them the key. I believe that’s what Scripture is telling us. The Spirit says, “Philadelphia, now look! — A door.”

In chapter four verse one we begin to look through that door, and what do we see? I believe we see the heart of God, a throne. Seated on the throne is somebody we know — A Lamb!

Weak and powerless,
Bleeding for who? —
Us, the Church.

John tells us Jesus is from the bosom of the Father—the heart of God. And we see in the vision that He is worthy to open the scroll and receive . . .

power and
wealth and
wisdom and
might and

honor and
glory forever and ever.

For He, the root of David, has conquered! He has even conquered our *dead hearts* with His own blood.

He has the key to our hearts;
It's Him who opens the scroll.
He is worthy.

And when He opens the scroll, do you know what happens? History happens.

- four riders and storms,
- conquest,
- warfare,
- famine,
- death,
- martyrs,
- signs and wonders,
- the consummation of this creation.

But right before He opens the scroll . . . a scent rises from the throne. Incense. It's the prayers of His saints, like the voice of little Mary riding out the storm saying, "He said he would come back. He said he would come back."

Prayers of the saints,
Rising as incense.

Not building projects,
Crusades and mighty works,
Wonderful mission programs,
Or sermons, but *prayers!*

Rising from prisons
And hospital beds,
In lonely apartments
And boring church services;

And frumpy wives
In old housecoats,
And scared little kids
Sitting on their beds

In the middle of the night,
And a boy named Eric
In a cement pipe

In the middle of the Bronx.
Prayers like *that*.

You see, there is an open door between the boring, little, frontier town of Philadelphia and the heart of God Almighty. So there is nothing more powerful in *all* created reality, including

 storms,
 dragons,
 ancient harlots on beasts,
 famines,
 earthquakes!

Nothing more powerful . . . than the frumpy little church in Philadelphia. They are given the key to the Creator's heart as they do their back float in the midst of the raging storm.

What father could resist faith, hope, and love like that?

 Like David's,
 Like Mary's,
Like Eric's, the kid in the Bronx?

When I told you about Eric at the start of this sermon, at least for a moment you stopped thinking about yourself, didn't you? You thought, "Oh, if I could just *hold* that kid!" What happened? He opened your heart.

That is the power of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, who hangs in weakness on a cross for the love of you.

- In Jesus, God opened the door to your heart;
- Jesus *in* you has opened the door to *God's* heart;
- Jesus *through* you opens the door to other people's hearts.

Faith, hope, and love, displayed in weakness, and *Jesus* does it! To Him be all glory, honor, and praise for evermore! Amen.

I must tell you one other thing. Eric's father didn't come back. I don't know why. Maybe he was an evil father. Maybe some of you have evil fathers. But listen closely, children of God.

 Your Father in Heaven is not an evil Father,
 and He always keeps His word.

I believe He even came for Eric in the form of Sister Mary Rose McGeady. And He is the one who created in Eric that incredible thing called "faith, hope, love"—that longing in a mentally disabled boy. *He* created it, and I believe *He* will claim it.

And I imagine Eric is not “Just Eric,” but that his surname is something like “God” . . . “Son of God” . . . or something like that.

Not only that, but Eric has *another* name that he shares with Jesus. One day Jesus is going to write his name *all over*. And his home is *not* the Bronx; his home is the New Jerusalem. I believe God will move *all creation* for Just Eric.

And He will engineer a storm for Just Mary.
And the meek *will* inherit the earth.

Because, Bride of Christ, no matter how frumpy and ordinary and dull you may feel, your faith exists in a great storm of a fallen world. Your faith is the power which ravishes the heart of God Almighty. Could there *be* a power greater than this?

Keep going.

Verse 11: *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.*

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.

Picture Mary out on the sea with no boats around. It’s getting dark; she’s doing the back float. And she’s singing [singing], “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so . . .”

My friend, that’s you. And the angels in glory look down in awe and say, “That’s the new song! That’s the song of faith being sung from the depths of the dark planet.” It’s the song that ravishes the heart of the Father.

I picture my son Coleman out on that sea, and I think, “Oh, I would have to *die* for him . . . I couldn’t *stand* it.” That’s it. Those are the nails that held the Son of God against that wooden cross.

They aren’t made of iron;
they are made of His love for you.

My wife Susan heard a story about an earthquake somewhere in a big city. A little girl was buried in the rubble. They searched and searched for her, possibly for days. They used high-powered, sensitive, listening devices until they heard this sound: [singing]

“Jesus loves me this I know,
For the Bible tells me so . . .”

When they pulled her out they asked her, “How did you do it?” She said, “My mommy told me that whenever I was afraid to sing that song and God will hear.”

Of course. What father could resist a little girl like that?

I know what some of you are thinking. “A lot of little girls *die* in apartment buildings and are lost at sea. They are *never* found.”

That’s right. *They* don’t find them, but *God* does. We have a Father who hovers over the face of the water, listening for that song and claiming His children for glory.

In the name of Jesus, Lookout Mountain Community Church, if that is you this morning, feeling like you are just keeping on keeping on treading water, sometimes the Lord wants to say, “*Great*. Keep going. That’s exactly where I want you.”

Keep singing that song. It is the incense which rises up to the throne of God and ravishes the bleeding heart of the Creator.

Lookout Mountain Community Church, in Jesus’ name, *keep singing*. He says, “I am coming soon.”

Amen.

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