



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Yea, through life, death, through sorrow and through sinning,
Christ shall suffice me, for he hath sufficed;
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.*

F. W. H. Myers

It was the eve of the crucifixion, the last night of Jesus' earthly life. As he sat at the table with his disciples, he tried to reassure them that they would be together again.



Journey's End

"In my Father's house are many rooms." He was going on ahead to make ready so that one day they could inhabit this house with him. "I will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going" John 14:2-4 RSV).

Thomas, a man with no patience for mysteries, objected. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

And Jesus answered, "I am the way ... "

As John and I were retracing the ancient road to Santiago de Compostela, we'd encountered what we took to be a medieval stone carver's mistake. In the Spanish city of Estella, founded in 1090 to care for footsore pilgrims passing that way, I spotted some writing over the entrance to a church. In the weathered stone I could just make out the faint raised shapes of the *Alpha-and-Omega*, first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and a common symbol of Jesus. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," he declares in the Book of Revelation, "the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

"Look," I said to John, "they've got them in the wrong order!"

The mason had turned them around, *Omega-and-Alpha*

We chuckled at the error, though it was perfectly understandable; most people back then were illiterate even in their own language, let alone Greek.

Then in Santiago de Compostela ten days later, outside the splendid cathedral that marks the end of the long pilgrimage, I stood staring up at another door. Above the cathedral's ornate south portal the oddly ordered letters were unmistakable. *Omega-and-Alpha*. A mistake would never have been allowed to go uncorrected here!

The reverse order must be deliberate. Why?

Land's End

At Compostela, the pilgrim had not only reached the end of his journey, he'd reached the end of the then-known world. A few miles beyond the town, a rocky promontory called *Finisterre*, "the end of the earth," juts into the gray Atlantic. John and I bought picnic makings from a stall near the cathedral and took them to some rocks overlooking the sea.

Vast, immeasurable, an ocean of unknowns. For most of human history, no one could say what, if anything, lay beyond that horizon. Was *Omega-and-Alpha* a message about reaching the end? The limits of our knowledge? The end of a life? Did it say that the end of one journey means the start of another?

"I say that the tomb which closes on the dead, opens to them the sky," wrote Victor Hugo a year to the day after the drowning death of his nineteen-year-old daughter. Crushed by his loss, for twelve months he'd written nothing at all, ending his silence on that anniversary day with his triumphant statement of faith: "What down here we take to be the end, is only the beginning."

The German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer agreed. "This is the end," he said on April 8, 1945, the night before he was taken from his prison cell and hanged for his opposition to the Nazis. "And for me it is the beginning."

Omega-and-Alpha. Jesus not only "the first and the last," but "the last and the first." Jesus the end of our earthly pilgrimage. But Jesus also the starting point of a larger journey.

Like the medieval pilgrim staring out across an uncharted sea, none of us can see beyond that horizon. But we can hear him say to us, as he said to Thomas, "You know the way."

The Good-bye

Remember all who have died in the peace of Christ, and those whose faith is known to you alone; bring them into the place of

eternal joy and light.

Book of Common Prayer

I stood on the shore of that uncharted sea as the end neared for my earliest friend, Mea Ivimey.

By then, Mea had been in the county home for the aged more than three years, unable to speak, increasingly unresponsive. Sitting by her bed on my visits, I would wonder about her faith. What did she feel, life ending as it began, in a public institution? Did she think about the orphanage in England? Did she still dream of a *pied a terre* -- even, perhaps, of heaven as the place where it had been waiting for her all along?

Mea had resisted all my attempts to talk about the Way that I had found. It seemed unfair, now when she could not protest, to force my viewpoint on her. Still, sitting at her bedside, caressing a blue-veined hand, I would struggle for a way to put the truth so she could hear it. I told her that God wanted to be the father and mother she had lost, a husband who would not desert her. Whether she understood, whether she even heard, I could never tell.

In the fall of 1978, John and I headed overseas again. Suspecting that Mea would not be alive when we returned, John came with me two days before we left, for what did, indeed, turn out to be the last visit.

Mea was asleep, as usual, a little bit of lunch drying around her mouth. It was awhile before she opened her eyes, still longer before they focused on us. A year earlier, to prevent the spread of gangrene, her left leg had been amputated. She looked so small, lying there in the pink nightie I'd given her for her birthday, her single leg a too-narrow ridge beneath the sheet. At eighty-eight she still had that ivory-smooth complexion. One of the nurses had put a little rouge on her cheeks.

As always in the three years since she'd lost the power of speech, it was an awkward, unsatisfying time, John and I making all the conversation. We'd brought a vase of greenery from our backyard. Years earlier Mea had given me a cutting of "proper English ivy," which I'd planted outdoors, where it had swiftly taken over the flagstones of the patio, the legs of the picnic table, and the side of the house.

I fussed with the ivy; John told her about our writing assignment in France. Finally it was time to go. "Before we leave, Mea," John said, "will you let us pray with you?"

The Circle

Poor lady, she couldn't say no. Standing on either side of her bed, we each took a limp unprotesting hand and reached across her to hold each other's free hand. We couldn't say what we'd really been praying since the removal of her leg -- that she be allowed to die without further pain -- so since John was silent, I mumbled something about Jesus being a friend who never had to say good-bye.

I finished, and still John said nothing. He told me later that when he'd opened his mouth to pray he'd started to sob deep inside himself, his throat so constricted that no sound came out.

An image formed in my mind as the three of us made our silent circle of hands. I saw Mea comforted on Jesus' lap, as she'd so often cradled lost and lonely cats.

Suddenly, breaking into this picture, came a wail from the bed. Mea was sobbing wildly, noisily, explosively, face crinkled like a child's. After the years of silence the sudden eruption of sound was stunning. On and on went the wordless cries.

Just as suddenly they stopped, and her eyes opened. And over her face, which had been so expressionless, spread a glorious smile. Then, abruptly, more frantic, heartbroken sobs. Another ecstatic smile. Three times this same sequence.

Amazingly, no hospital staff appeared during any of this, though Mea's cries must have been heard the length of the corridor. Afterward her eyes closed, and for a few minutes she seemed to be asleep. Then they opened, brilliant blue, placid, looking straight at me, but whether with recognition I couldn't tell. At last we bent down, kissed her, and said good-bye.

At the doorway we turned once more and waved. Mea's left hand stirred, and I thought it lifted a fraction of an inch. And I heard her voice, as clearly as I'd ever heard it.

"Good-bye until the morning."

Over and over, in the more than twenty years since that moment, I've gone back in my mind to that room. What was taking place as John and I looked on uncomprehending? A heavenly dialogue we could not hear? Jesus, unseen by us, coming to claim one of his own? Certainly if John had not been with me that afternoon, I would have doubted my ears. Would have convinced myself, by now, that I hadn't heard what I did. That it was imagination, a wish.

Neither he nor I had spoken a word that day until we reached the parking lot. Then I'd turned to him. "What did you hear?" I asked.

And he said, "I heard, 'Good-bye until the morning.'"

When our reunion will be, in that morning light, in what kind of landscape, joined by what other friends and family, I can only guess.

Good-bye. God-be-with-you.

God watch over us all until that dawn!