

# My Story of Faith-Filled Doubt



And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on;  
 And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on.  
 And when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be;  
 And through eternity, I'll sing on, I'll sing on;  
 And through eternity, I'll sing on.

Alexander Means, *What Wondrous Love Is This?*

I was born during the last six weeks of my father's courses at seminary. He, my mother, and my sister Paula had been living in the steeple of a church in Denver, where he worked as a custodian so they could make a living during his time in school. So my first home was in the steeple of a church. Is it any wonder that I went into the ministry?

Six weeks after I was born, we moved "home" to Kentucky, where my dad spent the first years of his career serving the small churches of the Deep South. I grew up surrounded by

## Touching Heaven

church people, revivals, sermons, and hymns. Most of my childhood memories happened in whatever church my father was serving at the time.

I remember a couple coming to our home in the middle of the night asking my dad if he would marry them before the man left for Vietnam the following morning. My father did, and I watched, wearing my pajamas, from the steps going up to my room.

The first Christmas my father served as an associate minister, the senior minister and his wife gave me a fake fur muff to wear around my neck and put my hands in when I got cold. It was beautiful, but even better was the small angel ornament on the ribbon of the package. She had a head made of glass, and her body was made of some kind of netting and wire that had been dipped in gold. I hung her on my Christmas tree and imagined what it would have been like for an angel to tell Mary she was going to give birth to the Son of God.

I loved being the child of a minister. It was difficult at times with all the moving around and changing schools, but I knew that my place was in the church and that the church was where God could be experienced and felt as nowhere else.

The only times I felt closer to God than in the church were when I accompanied my father on his calls to church members. My dad didn't like me going along, but he had no choice. As soon as he mentioned he was going to make calls, I went upstairs, put on a Sunday dress, and announced that I would be coming with him.

Most of the people we would visit were old. I loved these people! I loved how their houses smelled, that they always offered me something to eat, and that they always told me how pretty I was in my Sunday dress and fancy shoes. I loved the

stories they told and the perspective they had on life. Many of them laughed a lot and seemed to be much more honest than other adults I knew. They weren't, in my opinion, as full of themselves as others were. Many of them were ill, and they told me about God and not being afraid to die. I marveled at their courage and openness.

When these people died, I would accompany my dad to their funerals. I needed to be there to celebrate that these dear, brave people had crossed over into heaven. I met their families and always told them the things their loved ones had shared with me about not being afraid to die. I sat at their funerals and wondered why people were crying when death was simply going to be with God face-to-face.

My dad read Scriptures from his King James Bible, such as John 14:1–6:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.

Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

I imagined these people I loved so dearly lying in their beds, about to die, and having Jesus himself come and take them to heaven. I tried to imagine what their new home must look like. I had piercing theological questions, such as, “Will they share a room in heaven like I have to share a room with my sister?” and “Will they be expected to keep their room clean and make their bed each day?” Surely not! It would be

## Touching Heaven

a happy and wonderful place where people sang all day and praised God all the time.

My thoughts about heaven were interrupted as the congregation started to sing the hymn “What Wondrous Love Is This?” My dad had it sung at nearly every funeral he officiated. It was by far my favorite hymn and still is today. I remember how it began slowly and quietly, and as each verse continued, it would build, until the last verse, when I would be singing at the top of my lungs:

And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on;  
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on.  
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be;  
And through eternity, I'll sing on, I'll sing on;  
And through eternity, I'll sing on.

I would sing every word because I believed every word. Death was not an ending of our lives but the beginning of our time with God!

Funerals for me were not sad or distressing but times to think about God, heaven, and life after death, and I had no fear, no doubt, and no worries. For many children, this is the case. They are fascinated with death rather than fearful of it, because, as psychologists tell us, young children cannot really understand the permanence of death. However true this might be, I did understand death was forever. But during the time of forever, you were with God in that wonderful house with a room all to yourself and a bed you never had to make!

For preachers' kids, death is a huge part of life. There is no way to shelter them from funerals. We lived in a parsonage right next to the church. The funeral hearse came and went. My dad was called to get out of bed in the middle of the night and go to the hospital or home where a church member was

dying, and he wrote his eulogies at the kitchen table while my mom kept us busy and quiet in the other room. Death was simply a part of my everyday life.

The first time I realized death wasn't simply a happy time of celebration was when I was nine years old. I was in bed and woke up because the phone in the hall was ringing. My mother answered it, and all I remember is her scream, which scared me. It's still the saddest noise I've ever heard. The next thing I knew, she flipped on the light switch in our bedroom and told my sister and me to pack three play-clothes outfits and a Sunday dress and shoes. No one told me, but from the deep distress on my mother's face, I just knew my granny had died.

We drove the rest of the night back home to Kentucky, and when we got to Granny and Pa's house, no one greeted us at the car as they always had in the past. We went up the tall stairs to their front porch, and I was still about five steps from the top when I heard my pa crying. I started to cry too and realized that death was complex, sad, and not quite the joyful experience I had thought it to be.

The three days we spent in Kentucky were some of the saddest of my life. I approached the casket at the visitation and saw my granny. She was dressed in a pink nightgown and looked so pretty. Her hair was perfect and she was wearing lipstick, something she rarely wore. I knew that I was seeing only her body. Her soul was now with God in heaven. But I missed her body, her hugs, her laughter, and her kisses. I wanted her body to have its soul back. I wanted my granny to come home, not to the heavenly home but to her home on earth. It was a sad time, though I never doubted my granny had gone to heaven and lived with God.



## Touching Heaven

When I was in high school, I read *On Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The book described her work with dying people, many of whom were children. I was fascinated by each account in the book and by her work. I decided then and there that I would work with the dying the rest of my life. I thought I would become a child psychologist or nurse, but God had other plans, and I decided—or maybe God decided—that I should serve the dying as a minister.

I took that confidence with me to college, to be confronted for the first time in my life with people who didn't share my faith-filled background. I met wonderful people at college, including many professors, who were professed atheists. I took a class called "God and Society," thinking it would be a Bible study about where God is in our world. Instead, it was a class where we read the writings of famous atheists who challenged the very idea that God was even present in the world, because, as they believed, God did not exist. Their main reasons for doubting the existence of God were that death was cruel and unfair and that children died before they had the chance to grow up.

For the first time in my life, I doubted. I didn't leave God behind, stop praying, or stop going to church, but deep inside me was a little piece of doubt about the size of a corn kernel. It wasn't huge and it wasn't cause for me to give up my hopes of becoming a minister, but it didn't belong there, and it bothered me.

When I started seminary classes and began imagining myself as a minister or a chaplain, I was haunted by that kernel of doubt. Could I really preach sermons about God and have this doubt in my heart? Did that make me a fake? How could I sit at people's bedsides and promise them that they would be okay after death, that they had nothing to fear, if I had this doubt myself? Would I be a liar?

I will never forget the moment I almost left the seminary altogether. I was sitting in our mandatory weekly chapel service, and the hymn following the sermon was “What Wondrous Love Is This?” I was excited we would be singing my all-time favorite hymn and looked forward to it the entire service.

We began singing, and just as it had always been during my childhood, the song began slowly, and as each verse progressed, the organ began to swell, causing the people to sing louder. By the last verse, everyone was singing at the top of their lungs—except for me. I was crying. That kernel of doubt was lodged in my soul, and I could not sing those words. I no longer believed them with my whole heart. I was uncertain if I had any song to sing for God, whom I had believed in so deeply my entire life and now doubted. It wasn’t huge doubt, but it was there, and it made me sick, lonely, ashamed, and uncertain about my call to ministry.

I considered leaving the seminary that very day, but I was unsure how to tell my parents, who were so thrilled that I was choosing to follow in my father’s footsteps and to answer God’s call. I decided to stay one semester and see if my doubt might fade.

That same day, all the first-year students were invited to a series of interviews as we tried to find a field-ministry placement. We were given a list of churches and agencies that were willing to have interns. We had to select our top five choices and then were assigned interview times with each of them. I placed a check mark beside my top five choices but really wanted one only position—as a student chaplain to dying children at a children’s hospital. I was on pins and needles waiting to hear if I had been chosen. I cannot tell you how blessed I felt to be selected as one of three chaplains to work at the hospital.

## Touching Heaven

The night before I started, I prayed to God, admitting my sin of doubt and asking him with all my heart to give me more faith and to shatter my doubts. I was hoping for an experience much like Moses—I imagined a burning bush outside my window would shatter my fear. Or maybe a vision like Ezekiel was given would do the job. Or perhaps a moment when my heart would be strangely warmed, like John Wesley. Nothing happened that night, so I went to work, excited but disappointed my prayer had not been answered.

Little did I know that God would answer my prayer and my doubts would disappear as I spent time with the children at the hospital. They were not theologians or learned scholars or saints. They were simply children who were facing their own deaths and were open and honest about what they were experiencing.

I was a young woman who had just turned twenty-two and knew nothing about being a chaplain, and we didn't have a long training period before we were allowed to visit the kids. Luckily Toni, the sole chaplain for the hospital for years, was my supervisor. Her style was unique and trusting. She simply gave us a badge that read "Student Chaplain" and told us to go visit some kids and meet with her when we were done. We would meet in what we called the outer office, which was a small area where there were vending machines and two booths to sit in.

I worked at the hospital all three years while I was in seminary, and during those three years my prayer was answered. When I finally finished working at the hospital, I no longer doubted whether heaven was real, and I once again believed in God with the faith I'd had as a child.

My faith teachers were the children. Though I was a chaplain, I rarely had the words to make their deaths easier, nor



did I feel my expressions of comfort were all that compelling to them. All I really did was visit them, listen to them, and learn from them about God, heaven, and what dying is like. And these young people, from ages four to fifteen, taught me the realities of God.

It has been many years since I worked at that hospital, but I recall the faces and the conversations I had with these children like it was yesterday. They were some of the most spiritual and profound experiences of my life. I'm writing this book to share their stories with you so that you too can learn about eternity from the best teachers there are.

Jesus said, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:10 NIV). It is my experience that these children, who bravely faced their deaths and were willing to share about their experiences, had angels who saw God's face. They have much to teach us all about what death is really like.

Not only do I believe these children's angels saw the face of God, but I also believe that as they died, the children themselves saw the face of God. The word *angel* in Greek means "messenger," and for me, these children were messengers of God, sharing hope, love, and light in the face of death.

During my years as a student chaplain, I met hundreds of children. Most of them got better and went home. Some of them died and went home to God. I learned lessons from nearly all of the children I visited, but there were some whose journey from this life to life eternal healed my doubt and increased my faith beyond measure. These stories are the ones I want to share with you. I will be forever grateful to these tiny teachers and am eager for you to hear their stories and learn their lessons.