



A Life-Changing Sunrise

SEEING EASTER IN THE EYES OF A DYING CHILD

Ministry is filled with programs these days. It seems like we start things, good things, but we don't know how to stop them when they are no longer effective. I suspect that many of our programs keep chugging along just fine long after the Spirit has left the building.

Lately, I've been looking at the gospels and instead of asking, "What *would* Jesus do?" I've begun to ask, "What *did* Jesus do?"

There aren't many programs in the gospels. Instead, Jesus runs into people and spends time with them along the way. Each of those encounters, each of those "God moments," results in radically changed lives.

I had one of those moments last year at our Easter sunrise service when I saw the kingdom of God through the eyes of a boy named Mario. On that morning we met before dark at our usual place, a beautiful beach on the shore of south Florida. The weather was perfect, and we prepared to worship the risen Christ as the sun rose over the blue horizon.

Lots of people gathered as we began to sing; many just happened to be at the beach and were drawn to join us. Remembering that Jesus rarely preached in the synagogue, speaking instead where people naturally gathered, I thought, "Why don't we do this more often?" Then I whispered a prayer that God would do something that only he could do during this service.

In the middle of the message, a group of seven people made their way up to the front of our gathering led by a small thin boy. There was a world-

weary sadness in his eyes.

At the close of the service, I invited any that would want to be baptized to come forward. It's our custom to hold baptisms here—and usually someone from our church has told me in advance that they would like to be baptized at the sunrise service. But no one had done that this year.

The young boy stood and walked up to me, followed by his extended family. His name was Mario, and he introduced me to the rest of the family: his mother and father, his grandmother, a sister, and two uncles. They had heard about our service and had come to be baptized.

I asked them to confess their faith in Jesus, then we all walked into the ocean. Mario's family wore swimsuits and had brought towels with them. I was in my street clothes.

When we came up out of the water, Mario's eyes were beaming. Then he suddenly seemed tired and went limp. I picked him up and carried him back to the beach as the reflection of the sun made a cross on the shimmering water.

After the service, Mario's mother told me that he had a rare bone marrow disorder. Mario had just undergone a rough course of chemotherapy treatment and his prognosis was not promising. His eight-year-old body had been ravaged by the disease. It had taken all of his strength to make this trip to the beach.

Mario had urged his whole family to come to the service that morning to be baptized. He knew that he did not have very long to live and wanted his family to be in heaven with him and with Jesus when he died. As we talked, I looked at

Mario. Now with his mission accomplished, his tired eyes sparkled with a joy that opened a window to heaven.

The following Thursday, Mario's mother called me. With desperation in her voice, she told me that Mario was in the hospital. When I got there, he had already slipped into a coma. I prayed with his family, not knowing the right words to say in the face of their grief and fear. Mario's suffering ended the next day when he went to be in the kingdom with Jesus.

It was an honor to be included in the memorial service for Mario. His family came to our church for a few weeks afterward. We embraced them with Christ's love as best we could. But the memories became too painful for them, and they stopped coming.

I still keep in touch when I can. On Sundays I sometimes stop for coffee on my way to church at the bakery where Mario's grandmother works. And I continue to pray for them.

It was a blessing to be touched by Mario's faith. I remember how he brought his entire family into the presence of Jesus that morning. I pray that those moments will change their lives.

I know that my life is not the same since that service. These days I'm focusing less on starting programs and keeping them running. Instead, I'm trying to remember the reality of the kingdom that I saw so clearly in Mario's eyes on that Easter morning. I want to live in that kingdom. I want to see with eyes like that and to hear the words of the prophet Isaiah: "and a little child shall lead them" (11:6). □

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