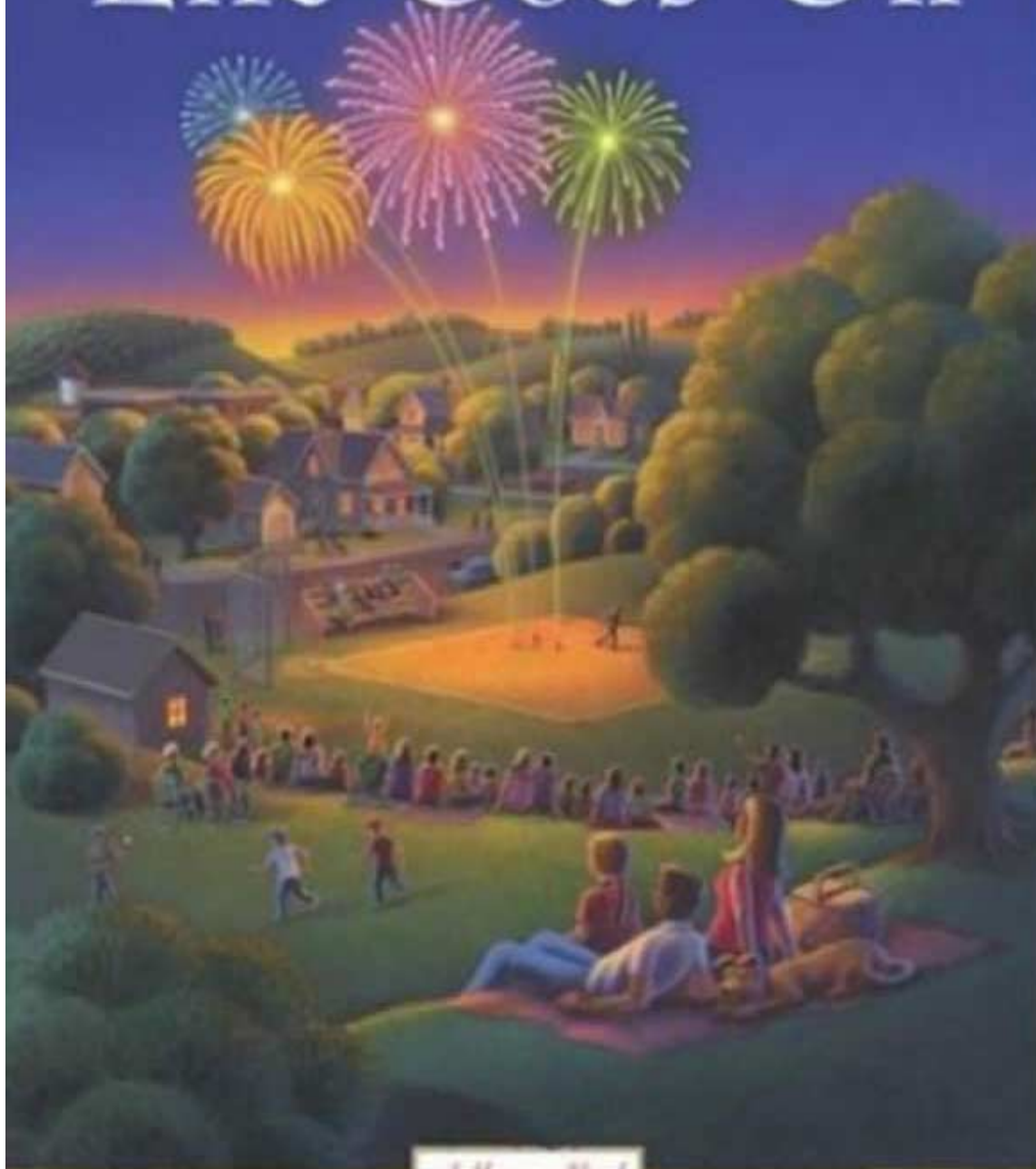


Life Goes On



A Harmony Street

PHILIP GULLEY

Bestselling Author of *Just Shy of Harmony*

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By Philip Gulley

My earliest memory of Easter was when I was five years old and looking for Easter eggs in my grandparents' backyard. I'm not sure if what I'm remembering is the event itself or the photograph of it my father took — my brother, Roger, and me, dressed in our Sunday suits, pausing just long enough from our egg gathering to record the moment for posterity.

My grandmother kept the picture on the top of her bureau, a black-and-white photo with scalloped edges. In the background was my grandfather's shed, where he had a cot for naps on summer afternoons amidst the pleasant aroma of gasoline, turpentine, and sawdust.

I would visit them on Saturday afternoons and sit in the backyard swing with my grandma while Grandpa push-mowed the yard in neat stripes, the blades snicking against the roller. Every now and then he'd happen upon a long-forgotten Easter egg. A rainbow of egg shell would arc up from the mower while a pungent, sulfuric odor filled the air, the delayed resurrection of a half-buried Easter egg.

Alice Stout was my Sunday school teacher when I was growing up at Harmony Friends Meeting. When she would ask me why we celebrated Easter, I knew I was supposed to say something about Jesus rising from the tomb. But that struck me as a fanciful yarn the adults concocted to liven up the religion. For me, Easter was about sitting at the kitchen table with my mother and brother the night before, dipping eggs in teacups of dye, then laying them out to dry on that week's copy of the Harmony Herald.

Now Alice Stout is in the nursing home at Cartersburg, four eggs short of a dozen. When I went to visit her the week before Easter and read to her from the Scriptures about the Resurrection, she cackled like a madwoman. “Bullfeathers,” she said. It is troublesome to struggle all your life believing something, only to have your Sunday school teacher dismiss it as bullfeathers, even if she is out of her gourd.

One of the ironies of life is that we often return gladly to what we once fled. I returned to my hometown and became the pastor of my childhood church. Now it’s my job to rally the troops and urge them to believe things they might otherwise doubt, at least according to Dale Hinshaw, our self-appointed guardian of doctrinal purity, who’s been vigilant about keeping me orthodox, lest I stray into the wilds of rationalism.

On my fourth Easter as pastor, I suggested we hold special services during Holy Week. I’m not sure now what possessed me to do that, probably my naive habit of thinking the church is always one program away from vitality. I envisioned a little Scripture reading, some singing, then a spirited theological discussion on certain aspects of the Resurrection.

When I presented my idea to the elders, they waded in with their concerns. Asa Peacock wanted to know if we could have cookies. Dale Hinshaw made me promise we’d read from the King James Version of the Bible. Harvey Muldock suggested holding a raffle each night to draw more people, and Fern Hampton declared, rather emphatically, that if the kitchen were used, the Friendly Women’s Circle was not going to be stuck cleaning it.

Even though I grew up in this church and am accustomed to its eccentricities, I continue to marvel at how the simplest idea can soon rival the complexity of a Middle

East peace treaty. What began as a modest suggestion to read the Bible, pray, and reflect on the meaning of Easter soon involved three committees, a church-wide vote on cookie preference, and an agreement to collect a special offering for the Friendly Women's Circle Cabinet Fund.

Fern Hampton was placed in charge of the cookie vote. Miriam Hodge suggested she might not want to make a big deal about it, just take an informal poll among the ladies of the church.

“What about the men?” Harvey Muldock asked. “How come we don't get any say?”

“I'm sorry, Harvey,” Miriam said. “I didn't mean to exclude you. What kind of cookies would you like?”

“I thought it was my job to ask people what kind of cookies they wanted,” Fern complained.

“By all means,” Miriam said. “I just thought I'd help.”

Fern turned to Harvey. “What kind of cookies would you like, Harvey?”

Harvey thought for a moment. “How about those little chocolate cookies with oatmeal that you mix up and put in the refrigerator?”

“One vote for chocolate drop cookies,” Fern said, rooting through her purse for paper and a pencil. “Dale, what kind of cookies would you like?”

“Fern, perhaps we could do this a bit later,” Miriam suggested. “I'm sure Sam has more pressing business for us to discuss just now.”

“Don't I get to say what kind of cookies I like?” Dale asked.

“You go right ahead, Dale,” Fern said. “I'm sure Sam won't mind.”

“Well, I was over in Cartersburg last week at the Bible bookstore and they had these Scripture cookies. Kind of like fortune cookies, except they got the Word in ’em instead. I think we oughta get us some of them.”

I used to believe the world would be saved by church committees, though sixteen years of ministry have cured me of such optimism. Now I prize those rare and selfless saints, those unwavering levers, who move the world while the committees are deciding on carpet colors.

After Fern’s cookie survey, we moved on to the pressing matter of the special collection for the kitchen cabinets.

“Sam, what are your thoughts on the ushering?” Dale asked. “You want a box at the back of the meetinghouse for folks to put their donations in, or were you wantin’ the guys to pass the baskets?”

“Well, if you ask me,” Fern interrupted, “I think we should pass the baskets. That way people can’t sneak out the side door without giving.”

The elders sat quietly, pondering this vital concern.

“How about a box at the back,” I said. “It feels less pushy.”

“Sam, if it was up to you, we wouldn’t ever get new kitchen cabinets,” Fern grumbled. “Why can’t you get behind the mission of the church a little more?”

And so the rest of the evening went. Miriam Hodge struggled valiantly to sail our church through choppy waters, while Dale and Fern seemed bent on running us aground.

Despite my misgivings, the Monday night service went off without a hitch. Harvey Muldock read the Scripture, pronouncing the names like a New Testament scholar. Dale had placed a small, tasteful box at the back of the meeting room for

donations and didn't even stand to point it out. Bea Majors refrained from playing the organ during the quiet time. And Fern Hampton's favorite show was on television, so she stayed home.

Tuesday morning Dale stopped by my office to tell me we had collected forty-three cents and a button. "Hester Gladden put the button in there," he informed me. "She's always doing that."

I pointed out that it was only the first night and not to worry.

"I thought I'd maybe stand and make an announcement tonight," he said. "Maybe just show folks where the box is."

"Gee, Dale, I don't know. Why don't you and I just pray about it and trust the Lord to take care of things."

Personally, I didn't think the Lord gave a hoot whether we raised enough money for new kitchen cabinets, but it beat Dale putting the squeeze on people during a worship service.

So we prayed, Dale and I, that people would be open to God's leading and not leave by the side door, but would instead walk past the collection box and drop in nothing smaller than a twenty.

Tuesday night's service was a joy to behold. Miriam Hodge led a lively discussion; then her daughter Amanda played the flute. No one coughed or blew his nose while the Scripture was being read. And Fern Hampton stayed down in the kitchen the whole time, making punch to go with the cookies.

The next morning my office phone rang. It was Dale.

"We've got problems, Sam. Big problems."

“What’s wrong?”

“You know that forty-three cents we collected Monday night?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I left it in the box to kinda give people a hint, and somebody took it. We’re down to one button.”

“Let’s not despair, Dale. This might be the Lord testing us.”

Wednesday night, a crack in the dam appeared. Bea Majors left her sheet music at home, so she played the only song she knew from memory—“Surrey with the Fringe on Top” from Oklahoma! Asa Peacock lost his place in the Scripture reading and began reading from the Song of Solomon. And Fern stood and complained that someone had dropped a cookie on the kitchen floor the night before and hadn’t bothered to pick it up. “We don’t have a maid service here, folks. You gotta clean up your messes.”

Dale came by on Thursday morning to tell me Hester Gladden had asked for her button back.

That night, in the tradition of our Quaker ancestors, we had silent worship for an hour. Not many people came, and those who did spent the hour glancing at their watches. I put a twenty-dollar bill in the collection box to buoy up Dale’s spirits.

The evening of Good Friday, the meetinghouse was full. Dale nailed me as soon as I came through the door. “We got a big crowd here, Sam. Why not let’s take up an offering?”

Fern was right behind him. “I say we don’t let ’em leave until they’ve coughed up enough money for the cabinets.”

Harvey Muldock lumbered over, grasped my arm, and pulled me close. “Bea Majors just called,” he whispered. “She’s sick. But don’t worry, Asa’s gone home to get his harmonica.”

Perhaps the day will come when I no longer repress the memory of that dreadful evening, an evening in which the crucifixion of Jesus seemed a comparative highlight.

Saturday morning I woke up with a scratchy throat and a cough, having spent the week shaking hands with people at the back of the meetinghouse, some of whom had just sneezed into their hands. By mid-afternoon, I was losing my voice and arose on Easter morning unable to speak above a whisper.

Barbara, my wife, phoned the elders, told them of my plight, and asked them to meet me at the meetinghouse as soon as possible. When I arrived, the elders were clustered in my office. I mouthed a “hello.”

Fern Hampton was the first to speak. “Sam Gardner, this is the most inconsiderate thing you’ve ever done. Losing your voice on Easter Sunday. What were you thinking?”

Dale brightened. “One time on the Reverend Rod Duvall’s television ministry he cast demons out of a deaf-mute and had him talkin’ in a minute flat. Maybe Sam’s got demons.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” Fern said.

Before I could object, Dale raised his right hand, placed it on my head, and began praying. “Lord, we just ask You to cast this demon out of Sam that’s trying to keep him from preaching your Word. We just ask You to nip Satan’s follies in the bud.” He slid his hand down the back of my head, squeezed my neck, and commanded various foul spirits to depart from me.

“Say something, Sam,” Fern demanded.

“It’s no good,” I whispered.

“Chop him one in the throat,” she advised Dale. “That’ll send those rascals packin’.”

“Why don’t we just have silent worship?” Miriam Hodge asked.

Harvey Muldock paled at the prospect of having to sit quietly for an hour. “How about you preaching, Dale?” he asked.

Miriam Hodge spoke quickly, before Dale could respond. “Let’s not ask Dale to do that, Harvey. It wouldn’t be kind. He hasn’t had any time to prepare.”

“Can you do it, Dale?” Fern asked.

Dale squared his shoulders. “Don’t ever let it be said that Dale Hinshaw wasn’t ready, willing, and able to preach the Word. I’ll do it.”

And that was how Dale Hinshaw came to preach on the biggest Sunday of the year.

It could have been worse. Poisonous snakes numbering in the thousands could have slithered from the heat ducts and crawled up our legs. Tarantulas could have dropped from the ceiling onto our heads. We could have been dipped in honey and staked out over a hill of African fire ants. It was bad, but it could have been worse.

He began with the Crucifixion, a topic I thought we had covered sufficiently on Good Friday. I kept hoping he would mention the Resurrection, a not unreasonable expectation on Easter Sunday. Unfortunately, he had the scent of blood in his nostrils and couldn’t be diverted. He began to weep, thanking God for having His son killed so we

could come to church and have committee meetings and raise money for new kitchen cabinets.

He spoke for forty-five minutes. He would have gone on longer, but Bea Majors has played the offertory every Sunday morning at precisely eleven-twenty for forty-one years, and she wasn't about to let a little thing like an unfinished sermon keep her from her sacred duty.

Dale launched into a closing prayer, thanking the Lord for letting us live in a free nation, where we were free to worship as we pleased and believe what we wanted, provided, of course, that what we believed could be supported by the King James Bible. Then he invited the congregation to join him in the Pledge of Allegiance. Then, mercifully, it was over.

I took the next day off to clean the basement. My mother came over to help. When my grandmother had died, we'd stored the leftovers of her life in boxes, spending a day every now and then sorting through them. In the second box we looked in we found the picture of Roger and me, dressed in our Sunday suits, standing in front of my grandfather's shed, Easter baskets clutched in our hands.

We had two stacks going—the “keep” stack and the “Goodwill” stack. I put the picture in the “keep” stack. As we worked our way through the boxes, keeping and giving away, I thought about how much of life involved holding on and letting go. The trick is in knowing what goes where. Sometimes we cling to what should be surrendered and shed what ought to be kept.

“How about this?” my mother asked, breaking the spell of my thought. She held up a bowling trophy my grandmother had won in 1956.

“Probably time to let it go,” I said.

“You sure you don’t want it?”

“Not me. How about you?”

“I don’t know what I’d do with it,” she admitted.

“Then it’s probably time to let it go.”

“How about we give it to Roger?” she asked.

“Good thinking.”

So we started a third stack—one for the things we once treasured, but now, finding them no longer useful, are content to let go.