

Letter from MaryEllen

A lingering sadness prevails in Southeast Tennessee, Western Carolina, North Georgia and North Alabama – the coverage area of News Channel 9 television out of Chattanooga. A popular and beloved news anchor for the station died on June 9 after a long battle with cancer. MaryEllen Locher had been associated with News Channel 9 for 20 years as a reporter and then anchor-reporter. She was 45 years old. She is survived by her husband, David, and a son, Alex.

Locher struggled with cancer for 16 years, and her personal experiences with the disease drove her to inaugurate a Hats from the Heart program, giving free hats to cancer patients onsite at cancer treatment centers. She also established Children of Breast Cancer Foundation, a non-profit organization providing endowment money to public colleges and universities for children who have lost a mother to breast cancer.

Locher gave her testimony at an outdoor Pentecost Service at Hixson United Methodist Church on Sunday, May 30, 2004. She made it in the form of a letter to her son, Alex, about how she has responded to her battle with cancer. Here is that letter, printed with the belief that her words will bring hope and encouragement to individuals and families dealing with cancer, as well as other adversities.

Dear Alex:

I was asked to give my testimony at church this weekend. As you know, we give testimony when we are witness to something and want to go on record with what we saw, know or learned. I am excited to tell what I have seen of God's work in my life these last few weeks since my most recent diagnosis of breast cancer. You know it has not been easy. But make a note: Life never is. Not for anyone. We all have our own special challenges in life. Mine just happens to have a recurring theme of cancer.

Sure, I was angry, disappointed, even stunned by what the doctors told me nearly four weeks ago, but have you noticed? I have not felt desperate? Fear at times, yes, but not that desperate fear you might expect to experience after finding out there is a potentially fatal disease in a major organ of your body. I think this lack of panic means I am growing spiritually.

Certainly, my relationship with God is on a different level than it was 4 years ago when I was first diagnosed with breast cancer, and way different than it was 16 years ago when I was diagnosed with Hodgkins. But, my dear son, it's life's challenges and adversities that draw us closer to God. I can testify to you and everyone else that what doesn't destroy us makes us more reliant on God.

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What do you make of all the friends who have shown up on our doorstep, bringing us gifts of food, encouragement, and expressions of love and support? I see God in every gesture. Can't you see Him lifting me up? Making me feel happy and joyful and very much loved in what could be some of the darkest days of my life? I feel like my Penn State Nittany Lion mascot on a sunny football Saturday at Beaver Stadium. Do you remember seeing the crowd of students with arms extended into the air, passing the Lion up through the stands, as he lay there letting them do all the work. Up, up, up he goes. To the very top of the stadium end zone, then back down again. Like he's floating. That's how I feel. Like I'm floating on the efforts of so many of God's people. I'm just lying there laughing. And up I go, knowing that God's grace is shown in the collective strength of my brothers and sisters in Christ. In my greatest weakness, God is at His strongest.

You know, your Dad and I and all our family and friends are asking God for His gift of healing for me, that He will heal my body of cancer. But the grace to get through the difficult days of chemo and its side effects is a gift, too. And it's the one that knocks my socks off when I think of all the ways God is allowing me to be lifted up, above the storm, riding the waves instead of drowning in them. There are times I feel like giving up, though God is right there beside me, giving me encouragement through scripture, through phone calls from family or friends, Sunday school classmates, and through cards and letters from people I don't even know who are praying for me, for our family, and who want me to know they, too, believe in God's many, many gifts.

But, Alex, my boy, you must know that of all God's gifts, the greatest, even greater than healing cancer on this earth, is the gift of the confidence of eternal life. I pray that in your life you physically know no greater pain than a bruised elbow or sprained ankle. But don't believe for one minute that if that's the case then it will mean your life is virtually pain free.

Clearly, there are worse pains than injury or disease in this world. Just look around you. Chances are the people beside you, though they appear whole, are broken in some way, in spirit. That is why God sent us His son, Jesus Christ, to save us from the pain. And that, Alex, is what makes us Christians, followers of Christ's teachings and believers of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, different from followers of any other religion in the world. No matter our denomination, Methodist, Baptist, Church of God, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Church of Christ – whatever, it doesn't matter about our man-interpreted differences in church doctrine. What does matter is that we believe in God's greatest gift of all. That Jesus Christ came to earth to save us from our sins, to be the ultimate sacrifice so that we could go to heaven for all eternity to be with God.

Let me tell you, there are not enough good deeds, enough covered dishes, enough candles to be lit that can open the gates of heaven for anyone. Yet while

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followers of every other religion in the world – and even some who call themselves Christians – hope they have it right, hope their life's work will be good enough, hope God will let them pass because of overall good intentions and a basic decent heart, their hope is a pipe dream. The truth is, they are filled with fear and desperation when the going gets tough. I know, I've been there. Today, I can see why my basic fear of death is gone, and in its place is peace in life ... life here and beyond ... that surpasses all understanding.

I can't humanly tell you why I feel at peace about such a dire diagnosis as breast cancer in my liver. But I can tell you in God's terms. It's because I know where I'm going when my life here is done. I am ensured eternal life, not because I am good, but because God is good. It's a gift of salvation I first accepted when I asked Christ into my heart as a young girl in Vacation Bible School. With the faith of a child, I accepted God's gift of forgiveness, and didn't question that He loved me enough to want to make certain of my eternal life with Him. And throughout my adult life, that faith in God's love has only grown.

The question I want to ask when I give my testimony at church is this: What if? What if you were diagnosed with cancer in a major organ? Would you be afraid? Would you be desperate? Or would you have the peace that surpasses all understanding? Don't let the gift pass you by, unopened.

God expects so little of us, my son. Only to believe. Only the faith of a mustard seed. It's so small compared to the love and the life He wants to share with us. My prayer for you is that you will look to His light, learn His teachings, follow His Word, and latch on to Him with both arms wrapped around His neck for the most beautiful ride of your life.

Love, Mom

Is it any wonder that a person of this enormous faith touched the lives of so many people she never personally met in such profound ways? Certainly, those of us in the Tennessee Valley miss MaryEllen, but we celebrate her life. And the witness she gave lives on.

--Beecher Hunter