Easter is God's message of hope

By Jamie Buckingham
For FLORIDA TODAY

My daddy died eight years ago. We had just come in from church for our noon meal when the phone rang. It was my mother in Vero Beach. "Daddy has just gone to be with the Lord."

Jackie and I left our food on the table, got into the car and started the drive down U.S. 1 toward our old home place in Vero Beach. My mind was whirling. He was 87 years old. Although his mind was as sharp as when he taught English literature at DePauw University before World War I, his body had been failing.

The week before I had sat on the side of his bed and listened as he quoted from Longfellow:

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

I knew, in his poetic way, he was telling me he was about to die. Yet, as a Christian, he had a strong assurance that death was not an end. It was a beginning.

I'm a Christian too, but as I drove in silence Job's question kept swirling through my mind. "If a man dies, will he live again?"

It's the question we all ask when death is present.

"Daddy has gone to be with the Lord," my mother had said. How did she know? How does anyone know where you go when you die? What's to prove you're not like ants stepped on by kids, leaves burned in the fireplace?

We pulled up in the carport and went inside. Mother met us in the kitchen. "He went peacefully, in his sleep. I've already had my cry and I'm all right. He's back there on

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the bed." "Have you called the funeral director?"

"I'll do that while you go back to the bedroom," Jackie said softly.

I entered the familiar room. Daddy's body was on the bed, the covers pulled up over his chest. His mouth was partially open, his arm hanging at an uncomfortable angle off the bed. Looking down at him I could almost hear Longfellow echoing in the empty room:

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

I knelt beside his bed. His body was still warm, but his arm had already grown stiff. I bent it back under the covers, caressing his hand as I did so. For the first time, I cried.

Jackie came into the room, her hand on my shoulder as I wept.

I finally was able to stand, my arm around her waist, looking out the window at the Florida he loved so much. "Eternal springtime," daddy used to call it, reminding us of the harsh winters back in Indiana.

"He's still here, isn't he," Jackie said.

"I feel him, too. He hasn't left yet."

Then, in silent words, he spoke to me. I've examined that sacred moment many times since then. Was I imagining? Was I wanting to believe so desperately I just made it up? No, for when I later talked to my wife, she had "heard" virtually the same thing.

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"You think Florida is beautiful? What you see out the window, son, is nothing compared to what I see where I am."

There was more, but it's too personal to relate here. The important thing was this: My doubt was gone. In its place was hope. Not the kind of hope that says, "I hope he's still alive." Rather it was the Biblical kind: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

All that came to mind this week as I was driving down Babcock Street in Palm Bay. I passed a big, blue dump truck with a painting on the door — an empty cross on a hill. Under it were these words: "He is risen!"

Hope. Even on the door of a dump truck.

Hugo Gryn, a London rabbi, once wrote of an experience in a horrible Nazi concentration camp during the holocaust in World War II.

"It was the cold winter of 1944 and although we had nothing like calendars, my father, who was a fellow prisoner there, took me and some of our friends to a corner of the barracks. He announced it was the eve of Hanukka, produced a curious-shaped clay bowl, and began to light a wick immersed in his precious, but now melted, margarine ration. Before he could recite the blessing, I protested at this waste of food. He looked at me, then at the lamp, and finally said: 'You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water. But you cannot live properly for three minutes without hope!"

Easter is God's message of hope to the people of this planet.

"If a man dies, will he live again?" the ancient Jewish sage asked.

Jesus, another Jew, answered that question.

He answered it by saying to his friends, who were grieving over the death of their brother, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

But he answered with more than words. He answered with his life. "He is not here," the angel told the mourners who came to his tomb. "He has risen!"

That's God's good news. Those who die in Christ live on. Forever.

Easter! A marvelous day of hope.

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