



For Easter Sunday last year, we did not physically gather in the same church building, as so much of the world was starting to face human mortality in a way it was never fully prepared for at all. But it was not just about the deaths related to a certain virus; it was about *all* the people we lost, regardless of the cause, because, more often than not, we could not physically be there for them. Then, we had to find out heartbreaking news through tears over phone calls, group email updates, Facebook notifications. We lost out on the vitally important personal connection to those who needed us most.

And yet, the Resurrection Gospel has a way of meeting people when they feel as if they are absolutely alone. Not only that, but the story of it all has a way of lifting up those who have been completely forgotten otherwise. The Easter story brings those who would often be pushed off to the side, like the two Mary's and Salome, to, instead, be front and center, as if their lives are just as worthy of hearing the greatest news for all humanity, as if their lives are more than worthy of an everlasting Savior.

One such person in recent times was a woman named Joanne, who died only a few months ago. She was not nearly as well-known as her husband, but she was incredibly talented, in her own right. Joanne was a concert pianist, playing with a duet partner at hundreds of events from universities to churches and more. Many musicians never receive the credit they deserve. They seem to only care about empowering others with a musical artistic expression that is meant to lift us to emotional and spiritual heights to impact even more others for the better: rather similar to what the Resurrection is meant to do for us, in fact, even from the utter silence of death. Thankfully, someone noticed that Joanne had something to offer in this pivotal ministry to the world.

It started in her own neighborhood, where she grew up, with a family across the street. There was a girl living there her same age whom she often played with, and in that family across the street was an older sister who took piano lessons. In between those learning sessions, many children would just treat the instrument as another toy, banging the keys as hard as they could. However, Joanne was different, pressing her fingers ever so gently to find the tune she had heard played before. Joanne may not have been recognized otherwise, but the Resurrection insists that the compassionate, the caring ones, like the two Mary's and Salome, be brought front-and-center, as if they have something to offer in bringing the most beautiful story to life. The sister across the street introduced Joanne to her teacher, and there began not just a competency in playing the piano, but a love of making people deeply feel the life-transforming compassion and care for one another, including through teaching children for decades to come, so that Joanne could be like that sister across the street, in making entire neighborhoods all the more beautiful with hope and new life.

But, again, most people never knew about Joanne's most significant contributions in making beautiful days in the neighborhood. That fame was for her husband, whom she helped with voiceover work with his first television show, "The Children's Corner" out of Pittsburgh. Soon enough, he would become a national favorite in public television with "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." Joanne and Fred Rogers were married for over half a century before his death from cancer nearly twenty years ago. Ever since then, Joanne still refused to put her own gifts and talents front-and-center, but to, instead, insist that her husband's story of kindness and respect continue to be told for generations to witness. Nevertheless, Fred said so himself, that if it was not for his beloved wife, there never would have been a beautiful neighborhood to share with a nation and beyond.

It is believed that when Fred was growing up, his mother told him that whenever he was scared, he should be on the lookout for the helpers. His mother had no idea that her son would find that wonderful helper in a young woman he met in college who would not only become his wife, but his empowering force to make as many beautiful days in the neighborhood for a nation to tune in for years to come.

Yes, we have lost many of those helpers this past year, including Joanne Rogers; many names that have been forgotten, many people who were pushed off to the side, not to be seen at all. And yet, the Resurrection has a way of bringing them front-and-center, to the holy personal site of life's eternal victory over death, to be smack dab in the middle of God's never-ending embrace, as if no one can ever be pushed away from our Risen Lord, our ultimate helper for all eternity. And the Gospel remains that no matter how scared we may be, no matter our doubts or worries, no matter our struggles, no matter how distant we may feel from the One who rose from the dead; the Gospel remains firmly intact with the most mind-boggling grace: that there is absolutely nothing that we can do that can ever push us away from God's most beautiful love brought to life out of an empty tomb. Better yet, it is not limited to certain neighborhoods, but for the whole world that God still thoroughly cherishes this day and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*Image: from the Biblical Archaeology Society*