

Miracles of South Carolina
True Stories of Grace in the Palmetto State

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Remarkable Moments at a Soup Kitchen Church

A Place Where God Shows Up

Whenever hurting people desperate for God and a free meal gather at an old brick church in downtown Greenville, the supernatural breaks out. It just does. The spiritual climate seems right—energized with belief and thick with deep need.

Amazing events erupt without warning. This happens among the homeless, the working poor, the addicted, the just-evicted, the day laborers, ex-cons, transients, people just laid off, and those of us blended across denominations and racial borders from forty-five churches who work with them. Sure enough, we too could be in their shoes. Ask anybody at the Triune Mercy Center, where for almost two decades sheer human kindness and the whispered possibility of “a miracle” has kept thousands alive with hope. First-time volunteers sometimes leave in tears.

Yes, the Divine really seems to show up at ministries like this—nitty-gritty meeting grounds where hunched people rub out their cigarettes with muddy boots before trudging inside for a dinner of ham, green beans, rolls, and potato salad handed out by a local church. Hopeless folks, sure, but also expectant. After all, who can say what God might do? When He might really, truly arrive with a personal word? A job? A drug-free room to sleep in? A tangible display of compassion or strength or deliverance? Who can say He won't? After all, most of them

lived through the night without getting stabbed or shot, without freezing to death, didn't they? And that was a miracle, wasn't it?

Other than "work" or "shelter," the most popular prayer request on record at the Triune Mercy Center: "Thank you, Lord, for letting me see another day."

A Stranger Wanders Back "Home"

Consider the case of one needy African-American lady who drifted into the ministry in the spring of 2006. She hung around, waiting for whatever "helps" might be available: a bag lunch, a blanket, a hygiene pack, or maybe even some shoes. She was alone and sadly dressed, yet chatty and sweet. She flashed a personable smile from some deep repository of joy not yet drained dry. Shaky from any number of possible addictions, she hitched up with a volunteer quite naturally. I was sweeping through the center as always on Wednesdays, looking for people to pray for the City of Greenville in Triune's adjoining chapel. We have committed this hour, noon to 1 p.m., since April 2004.

"What's your name? Want a Bible? We've got them for free," I prodded as we rounded the sidewalk corner of Stone and Rutherford and took our time edging toward the sanctuary steps. "Angel," she said, establishing that we were already on miracle ground.

Was "Angel" a street name? Her real name? An imagining? What she greatly desired to be? Or what she in fact was?

Then came, "Yes, I want a Bible. I want a new start, I want to start over."

She was tired of being on drugs, too.

So, once the street dweller passed the threshold of the quiet, old sanctuary, a peaceful Angel appeared instead. She cast her eyes far, far up along the arched wooden beams and stained glass windows flanking us on every side. Awed, she remained silent as we walked the center aisle. We swept past long rows of pews toward an imposing but darkened stained glass win-

dow behind the pulpit. It required backlit illumination, so I flipped a switch. Instantly, light bathed Jesus in Gethsemane with painterly blues, reds, and gold.

Angel was home, truly at home in church.

“Come on in here. This is where the Bibles are kept,” I urged. We headed back together into a dark, musty hall where hung robes, stoles, and a funny jumble of old, artificial flowers and Christmas decorations. “Here’s a bunch of Bibles people gave us. I’ll get you one.”

She said nothing as I examined the first. Too tattered, I judged. The letters unbelievably small, hard to read, the whole thing falling apart. I sensed we could do much better. This lady deserved it. I reached for the next Bible, in better shape, but not much, easily twenty years old. Oh well, donations were low. Bibles came in from everywhere and we would have to put the word out again for more. I opened the front cover as she looked on. We stopped and saw it together.

Scrawled in large, penciled, capital letters across the front two empty pages were the words “Welcome Home, Angel.”

Stunned, she said nothing. I didn’t either. Then, “Clearly, Angel, this one’s for you. God sure knows you and knows you are here. This is amazing. Take it.”

Overcome with feeling, Angel hugged her precious cargo—truly marked as a God-autographed Bible—her head down, and headed back into the sanctuary. She dropped to her knees and sobbed muffled prayers and personal confessions before the altar for half an hour as I hurriedly shared the story with a delighted group of seven or so regular intercessors, now seated near the front. We had come together, as always, to pray for the city, state, nation, and world. And so we did.

Meanwhile, Angel had settled into her chosen spot. Feeling unworthy even to kneel on the altar cushions, she prayed on the floor the whole time, rising only to lift up the city’s poor, and then to ask if she could sing Psalm 121, which she knew by heart. The tune was created right there on the spot. Surely she led the prayer service. It was a hymn of thanksgiving to a God

who, years ago, had used someone somewhere to pen His personal message of homecoming to her—and in His very own book, too.

I don't recall ever seeing this lovely lady before that day or after. Thousands come and go at Triune and around the city. People move in; people move out. Someone mentioned perhaps seeing her sheltered under a bridge at one point. Who knows? In fact, the name Angel applies to all those we may entertain unaware.

But I remember how that particular Angel's voice rang out strong and singular, no word misplaced. She clutched her Bible fiercely throughout a sacrifice of praise. After years of pain, she had irrefutable evidence that God really meant it when He said, "Welcome Home."

Mysterious Hero Rescues Girls from Dam's Edge

If a mysterious stranger had not stepped in to save them, the two girls in a canoe would have crashed over a spillway and fallen thirty feet to their deaths on the jagged rocks below. Laura Cross of Aiken remembers her daughter Lindsey's peril and rescue as if it were last week. It happened in the early 1990s, just before the Cross family moved from Colorado to South Carolina. "I believe it was an angel," Laura declares, a supernatural being sent by God to save her daughter and young friend from careening over the dam to the savage boulders and swirling water below.

Lindsey, now grown, married, and living in Ohio with children of her own at the time of the interview, was thinking back to that lake outing. "It was a beautiful day in the mountains of Colorado. The sky was clear and bright and blue."

After church they went canoeing at Lake Evergreen. Laura and her husband, Ben, often invited friends for outdoor activities on Sunday afternoons, and this time they brought an adult single friend. Eleven-year-old Lindsey asked a Sunday school girlfriend, age ten or eleven, to come along.

"The lake was very calm that day, just a gorgeous day," recalls Laura.

The parents felt confident that the girls could handle their own boat, since they had taken canoeing lessons at camp. The three adults set out in one canoe, while the girls took another, all in the same part of the lake.

“We convinced my parents to [let us] get in a canoe by ourselves. We started out staying really close together,” says Lindsey, reconstructing the scene in her mind.

The Colorado mountains are ravishingly gorgeous, but they are also known for unpredictable weather. Without warning, dark storm clouds assaulted the snow-tipped peaks, then marched across the lake, showing no mercy for those in their path. “Storms [came] up in a moment,” says Laura. “The water started getting real choppy.”

The ominous wind swept both canoes in its path, especially the lighter one paddled by the girls. The adults’ canoe was naturally heavier than the girls’ boat, which began to blow rapidly away toward danger. In weather like this, the surly waves and wind were capable of pushing a light canoe right over the spillway, onto the rocks and rapids below.

“Our two canoes started to separate and the wind began to carry my friend and me toward a dam at the opposite end of the lake,” says Lindsey. “The dam wall, we had noted on our way in, was probably about thirty feet down with lots of sharp rocks at the bottom. The wall came only one foot over the water, and when the wind picked up, the water had no trouble going over it.”

The situation was treacherous. The girls struggled against the forces of nature. Their paddles made little difference. All the while, the adults were hollering directions and warnings.

“My friend and I tried frantically to row away from the dam,” says Lindsey. Her mom Laura adds, “We were trying to catch up with them.”

This was the worst moment of Laura’s life, and possibly the most deadly predicament that the two girls would ever face.

“I was just getting frantic,” says Laura, “I was literally screaming out to God, ‘Don’t let them go over the dam!’”

Then, strangely enough, two men appeared precisely at this point, one after the other.

Lindsey notes, “We were about fifteen feet away from going over and a man ran by us on the lakeside walkway.” He was

rather nondescript, a white man, not memorable except for one thing—he was angry. Instead of helping the girls, he cursed them. Laura remembers the same thing, recalling in astonishment, “He yelled, ‘What are you trying to do, kill your [expletive, expletive] selves?’”

He yelled repeatedly, but did nothing to assist.

The girls glided by. Things were happening fast. They were now a mere ten feet from the spillway. Then Lindsey saw a second man appear. She remembers that he was a black man.

“When we were about ten or less feet from going over, a man came to the edge of the lake and calmly told us to try really hard to get to the side and he would hold us until my parents were able to make it over. . . . We made it to the edge and the man did as he said he would. My parents finally got there and one got in with me, the other with my friend.

“The strange thing was, when we looked up to thank the man, he was nowhere in sight. Here’s the thing—it was impossible for him to disappear. There was nowhere for him to hide! I remember that story vividly to this day.”

Lindsey recollects the mysterious stranger’s face, his voice, “his kindness.”

Her mother, Laura, never saw the man at all. She never saw anybody there to help. But her husband and daughter did, and she believes them.

Ben did not see the man’s face, but tells this: “I remember seeing the man leaning over and holding the canoe till we got there. I stepped into the canoe with the girls and I remember the man stepping back one step and then he was gone.”

Ben had turned to thank the hero, but he was not there. There was no hand to shake, no name to remember, no eyes to look into. “I never saw his face or saw where he went. There was really nowhere he could walk off to, out of sight quickly. Of course, my focus was on the safety of the girls, but I clearly remember how astonished I was that someone had quickly gotten to them to hold the canoe.”

Ben continues, “I definitely thought we had no chance of getting to the girls before they got to the dam, but somehow this individual got them and held their canoe just feet from the dam.”

Laura says, “I just felt like God heard our cries. He just took over and sent an angel. I wouldn’t be convinced otherwise. It literally took me years before I could retell the story without reliving it, the terror of that day. It took years getting over that terror. They would have been dashed on those rocks. They got over it a lot quicker than I did.”

Since then, Lindsey senses that God has had His hand on her life for some special purpose and has shielded her repeatedly. Her mother agrees, saying, “Maybe He has something for her to do, or maybe God has some special purpose for her children. There have been times when I felt like we have been watched over by angels. God sends people and we just don’t realize it. God is so good. If we could see the many times He has protected us, we would be amazed. I believe when we get to heaven we will get to see.”

Lindsey concurs: “I am a firm believer in miracles and angels. I have had many other [amazing] accounts that I can share if you like.”

Author’s note: Ben Cross, Ph.D., is a mechanical engineer, and Laura, a homemaker, holds a degree in business administration with an emphasis in accounting. Lindsey and her family have since moved to Aiken.