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Digital Edition 10/11/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Easter Gift

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the April 11, 1982 Sunday School Beacon

The floral shop was crowded. People, people; everywhere people. The cash register rang to the music of sale after sale as Ruth Ann Harbey waited on the customers who stood in long lines holding their selections of flowers in their hands.

Impatience registered on some faces and Ruth Ann, scanning the long line of customers yet to be waited on, sped up her work, being careful not to linger long with idle chit chat. Some, no doubt, had appointments and commitments to keep, the young woman realized, and this added to her speed at the cash register. If there was one thing which annoyed people, she knew, it was having to wait long in a line.

A tall man brushed past the long line and set his lily on the counter. "Ring this up for me," he ordered. "I'm in a hurry and I can't wait."

Ruth Ann looked helplessly at the waiting customers. "Do you want my money or don't you?" the man asked, shoving the plant closer to the cash register. "Because if you don't ring this up now, I'll never be back."

Again Ruth Ann cast an imploring look at the many who were waiting. Some motioned for her to grant the request and others shook their head in utter disgust. Taking the beautiful lily, Ruth Ann quickly rang the price up on the cash register then continued on with the many other customers. Things like this could be so frustrating, she thought,



smiling in spite of the interruption. It all happened so quickly that it brought little annoyance and even less confusion, and for this the young woman was truly grateful.

How many people would enter the churches again until Christmas--or next Easter even? she wondered, hearing several women remark about their "yearly offering of half a dozen Easter lilies to grace the front of the church."

The thought filled Ruth Ann's heart with great concern. It was as though God was only a once or twice yearly remembered Personality and being. The rest of the time He was totally ignored and forgotten. It was a disturbing thought.

"Have a happy Easter," one of the customers called to Ruth Ann before leaving the shop.

"May yours be Christ-centered," Ruth Ann replied as she continued ringing up the sales.

During a lull in business, she hurried down the aisle in search of a "just-right" lily--one that would be perfect and beautiful in every way. Her gift to the peculiar and exceedingly-crotchety old Mrs. Spangler must be only the very finest and best, she decided, finding what she was looking for and taking it up to the cash register where she rang up the sale and deposited the receipt inside her billfold.

Mr. Hobblestone came up to her, his hands wearing humus and his scowl almost as black as the dirt itself. "Why'd you let that man bully you?" he bellowed. "I saw it all. You should have made him take his turn in line, same as the others. It's not fair. I don't want it happening again, do you understand?"

"I . . . I'm sorry, Sir, but I had no alternative. And many of your customers motioned for me to accommodate him, which I did, of course. It was the only way to handle him; otherwise there would have been trouble."

"And how I wish I could have thrown him out!" the owner ranted angrily. "He stirs up trouble everywhere he goes. He's noted for being a troublemaker."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I did the only thing I knew to do."

"Next time you let me handle him!" With that the man walked briskly away.

Ruth Ann sighed and breathed a prayer for grace and knowledge and wisdom. Mr. Hobblestone could be so very exacting and hard at times. She was thankful for the part-time job, to be sure, but there were times when she wished she had work with a more pleasant employer.

A verse of Scripture came to her then: "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thess. 5:18).

Lifting her eyes heavenward, she said a hearty "Thank you, Lord, for my job here. It's Thy will concerning me. Thank you."

The bell on the door tinkled musically, heralding another influx of customers and once more, like on so many other occasions, Ruth Ann saw the long line form far down the aisle.

There was something rewarding about working in and with flowers and green growing things, she mused silently, smelling the good earthy odor of the many growing plants in their humus-filled pots and containers.

"I suppose you'll be in church Sunday," a friendly looking woman commented as Ruth Ann rang up her sales.

"Oh, I never miss church!" the dark-haired girl exclaimed brightly. "I go every Sunday and each Wednesday night. And to anything else that may come up on other nights--like revival meetings and district gatherings and the Old Folks' Home services."

"Isn't that a bit boring for one so young as you?"

"Oh, no; I love it. Serving the Lord is never a duty; it's a delight."

Tears shimmered in the woman's eyes. "I'm sorry I said what I did. About it being boring, I mean. I remember when I used to enjoy attending church, too. But so many voices called me and gradually I was lured away. And, truthfully, I'm not happy now like I was back there living for the Lord and working for Him. Stick with it. It's not easy, trying to make a come-back when you stray so far."

"Oh, but you can come back!" Ruth Ann exclaimed brightly. "The Lord says, 'Return unto me, and I will return unto you.' Try it; it will work."

"Thanks," came the quickly reply as the woman hurried away.

Ringling up the last customer in the once-long line, Ruth Ann looked at the clock above the door. Almost closing time, she thought, glancing outside. Where was Mrs. Spangler? she wondered. The woman usually came inside the shop about mid-afternoon, and today she hadn't seen so much as a wisp of her unruly looking hair. Could she be ill? Something had detained her, Ruth Ann was sure, for she never missed a single day of coming inside and doing a quick "looking around" then turning and hurrying away. It was rather humorous, the girl thought, but a bit strange, too. She never bought anything, just stood and looked around then turned on her heel and left.

In the midst of her thinking, the bell tinkled and in stepped Mrs. Spangler. Her gray hair looked in more disarray than ever and a frown creased her forehead and turned the corners of her lips in a surly look.

"Good afternoon," Ruth Ann greeted her pleasantly and brightly. "I missed you today. You're later than usual. I hope you're not ill."

"Nothing wrong with me," the woman snapped, pausing long enough to look around, then turning and heading for the door.

"Here," Ruth Ann called softly, lifting her special lily out of its hiding place and handing it to the startled woman. "I want you to have this," she added, "to remind you that Jesus died for your sins, and that He and I love you. I want to see you happy, Mrs. Spangler. Take it as my gift of love to you."

The woman reached for the lily like a starving dog grabs for food. Then, without a single note of thanks, she fled from the shop.

Ruth Ann watched till she disappeared behind a clump of bushes. Then she began setting things in order before leaving for the night. Tomorrow would be the busiest day of the week, she knew . . . the day before Easter... and she wanted everything in tip top shape so that she could spend all her time waiting on customers. Mr. Hobblestone possessed the reputation of having the greatest number of satisfied customers in the entire city. She must be diligent and swift so his great following of life-long friends would keep coming back consistently, just as they had ever done.

She left feeling tired but happy and looking forward eagerly to the following day's work. People were so very interesting, she thought as she walked home in the gathering twilight.

Saturday dawned beautiful and clear and sunny. All of nature seemed to be alive. Ruth Ann's heart lifted in praise and thanks to God as she hurried toward the floral shop. Willows, in their long, slender weeping withs, were clothed softly in a beautiful green, and tulip trees, laden with blossoms and blooms, laid satin-smooth petal carpets beneath their beautiful branches. Birds were singing and building nests, and children, up with the dawn, were happily jumping rope and playing hop-scotch on the sidewalk. It was such a very beautiful day and beautiful world, the girl thought as she entered the shop and prepared herself for the day's duties.

Mr. Hobblestone met her with a frown when she entered the door. It reminded Ruth Ann of a dark cloud when it obliterates and hides the brightness of the sun. Something was wrong; she sensed the man's foul mood.

"Good morning, Mr. Hobblestone," she said cheerily and pleasantly. "Isn't the day beautiful! Truly, God made everything beautiful."

The man's frown turned to a contemptuous smile. "How dare you be so . . . so religiously brazen!" he exclaimed angrily.

Ruth Ann was shocked; tears stung her eyes. "I... I'm sorry, Mr. Hobblestone; I'm afraid I don't understand what you're talking about. The last thing I'd want to be is a 'brazen' Christian..."

"What else would you call someone who steals plants and gives them away as gifts? In the case to which I have reference, it was a lily; a choice lily at that!" Ruth Ann gasped.

"Don't look so shocked and . . . and innocent. I have the proof right here. Agnes," he called, "bring the lily and come here."

To Ruth Ann's surprise, Mrs. Spangler stepped out from around the corner holding the "proof" of thievery before her.

"You didn't think I'd squeal on you, did you?" she said. "But I did! For all we've had against each other all these years, I'm still quite loyal to my brother. Well, one good thing came out of it," she said, chuckling victoriously. "At least, we're talking and communicating now . . . something we haven't done for years. But I've always loved Hal, mind you!"

"What do you have to say?" Hal Hobblestone wanted to know. "I always trusted you, Ruth Ann."

"And I want you to continue trusting me, Mr. Hobblestone. Here," she said, pulling out her purchase slip and handing it to her employer. "I bought the lily for Mrs. Spangler. I did it because I love her and have been praying for her salvation. I wouldn't steal a penny from you, Sir. I am a Christian."

Mr. Hobblestone studied the sales slip, admitting finally that everything tallied out perfectly with the cash register receipts. "I owe you an apology," he said with deep sincerity. "And Agnes, I believe you owe Ruth Ann one, too," he added, turning to his sister.

"Why did you do it?" Mrs. Spangler asked, searching the honest eyes before her.

"Because I love you and have been much concerned over your soul."

"I... I'm sorry that I thought you stole the lily," the woman said softly. "Forgive me. And . . . and thank you for the plant. It's the loveliest thing I've ever had given to me. Would you... I mean, do you suppose you could come over and talk to me about spiritual

things some day? As you can well see, I'm a most unhappy woman. I need help and only God can do for me what needs done . . ." Her voice trailed sadly.

Flinging her arms around the sad-looking woman, Ruth Ann said, "I'll be delighted to come by and see you and to have prayer with you. Remember what I told you yesterday when I gave you the lily? Jesus died for you--for Mrs. Spangler--and He loves you! SO do I."

"I want to be as sure of that as you are," the woman said. "Waving a friendly hand in her brother's direction, Mrs. Spangler called, "I'll see you later, Hal."

"Come anytime, Agnes. We're long overdue for one of our old-time chats, you and Roscoe and Maide and I."

For the first time ever, Ruth Ann saw Mrs. Spangler smile. It was a miracle. And, God helping her, she meant to continue praying for the woman and her employer until the miracle of the new birth became a reality in their lives. Just as the earth was experiencing its miracle of rebirth, just so surely would the brother and sister be experiencing the wonderful miracle of salvation, she felt.

Humming softly, she began working. Mr. Hobblestone, standing some distance away observing her, shook his head in amazement. "She's genuine!" he exclaimed softly to the lilies and the other plants. "And someday Maide and I'll be the same way. Yes, by the help of God, we will!"

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