

Is He Safe

By Bob Rockford

Robert Patrick Muldoon fancied himself a great photographer and a good Irish Catholic. One day he decides to travel to the United States of America to take photographs of all the great Cathedrals. He saves up his money and flies to New York City. His first stop is the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Paterson New Jersey. He gets permission to take pictures inside and outside of the great Cathedral. While he's in the huge sanctuary he sees a golden wall telephone. So he takes a picture of the telephone and goes to inquire of the Arch Bishop about the phone. The Arch Bishop explains to him that the phone is used by the parishioners to talk to God. Muldoon, thinking that he might like to talk to the All Mighty, asks the Arch Bishop how much it costs. "Only \$10,000 per minute," says the Arch Bishop. Knowing he is on a tight budget and still has many cities and Cathedrals to visit, Muldoon thanks the Arch Bishop and travels on to the next Cathedral. He goes to the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in New Ulm Minnesota, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Saint Cecilia's Cathedral in Omaha, the Holy Family Cathedral in Tulsa, Cathedral of the

Sacred Heart in San Angelo, and finally ends up at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. In every one of the Cathedrals Muldoon sees a golden wall telephone somewhere in the sanctuary and again is told that the phone is used to talk to God and costs \$10,000 for each minute.” Muldoon finally uses all his film and flies back to Ireland. After three days back home in Tulleymore, Muldoon visits his Parish Priest, shows him the pictures of the Cathedrals and then the pictures of the golden wall telephones in each Cathedral. He asks Father O’Sullivan “Is there such a telephone in our small church?” “Oh yes, we have such a phone over behind the pulpit by the door that leads to my study,” says the Father. He took Muldoon over to the phone and there it was, as Father O’Sullivan had said. But it was not on the wall. It sat on a small table. It was not golden and had no fancy buttons to push for calling God. “How much does it cost to call the All Mighty,” asks Muldoon. “It doesn’t cost a thing,” said Father O’Sullivan. Muldoon looked at his Priest and said, “But in all the Cathedrals I visited it cost \$10,000 a minute to talk to God.” Father O’Sullivan looked at Muldoon and said, “Well from here it is only a local call.”

In her book *Every Earthly Blessing* Esther de Waal says, “The sense of the presence of God informs daily life and transforms it, so that any moment, any object, any...work can become the time and place for an encounter with God.”

Ancient Celtic Christians felt that certain places were points of connection that separated this world from the spiritual world. These were called “thin places.” It was a place where they could be touched by God as well as angels, or saints, or even those who have died. Pagan Celts worshipped their gods in natural settings, by the water, trees, or in the hills. Ireland is surrounded by the sea and the land abounds with lakes, rivers, wells, and springs. All of these places, the water, the forests, oak trees, hills and mountain tops were considered “thin places.”

Newgrange, a passage tomb, was built over 4500 years ago which predates Stonehenge and the pyramids. A passage tomb is a large circular structure built with rocks and covered with dirt. At Newgrange there is a passageway, approximately 60 feet long, that leads into the tomb chamber. The chamber measures 17 feet by 20 feet with a ceiling height over 20 feet. At a certain time every day from

December 19th to the 23rd, the light of the winter solstice sun enters a small opening above the entrance and illuminates the passageway and center room of the burial tomb for 17 minutes. The appearance of light in the chamber during the winter months would reaffirm to the Ancient Celts that summer would again come, just as there would be life after death. Today, there is a 10-year waiting list to be at Newgrange on December 21 to witness the light of the winter solstice.

Christianity developed in Ireland around many of these pagan sites and their customs. Saint Brigid built her monastery at Kildare near a druid shrine of the goddess of fire. She put the flame to good use as a symbol of the light of the gospel. Women in her community attended this flame for generations. Those who come near to the flame are considered to be in a “thin place.” Legend says that Saint Patrick took the image of the sun, which was worshipped by the druids, and placed it on the Christian cross creating the Celtic cross. Some of these “High Crosses,” which were built in the ninth and tenth centuries, stood over 12 feet tall. The “High Crosses” were “thin places” that people would come to, to be close to God.

Other places that were once thought of as “thin,” because of their spiritual history, are still recognized as “sacred places.” The monastic islands of Iona, Aran, Skellig Michael, and Lindisfarne are still referred to as the “holy islands.” Monastic ruins that are associated with a holy person, such as a saint’s cell or a burial site of a saint, are considered sacred. Any place that is associated with Ireland’s three major saints, Patrick, Brigid, or Columba, is believed to be a “thin place” where pilgrims still come and pray. The Celts have a strong sense of life beyond death. Burial sites and places where people have died are included among “thin places.”

Inland hilltops were also favored as sacred places. Croagh Patrick, in western Ireland, is one of those “thin places.” Recent archaeology exploration of the area has found remains of pre-Christian dwellings. Rising 2,510 feet above sea level, Croagh Patrick is conspicuously visible for miles around but is relatively inaccessible because of the hard climb to the top. Ancient Pagan Celts believed it was a sacred site and held ceremonies at the top. Saint Patrick is said to have climbed the mountain to fast and pray during Lent in 441. He prayed that God would continue to be faithful to the people and the land of Ireland. Pilgrims by the

thousands still climb to the summit each year on the last Sunday in July, sometimes in their bare feet. This Sunday is known as “Reek Sunday.”

There are places, and moments in time, that cause us to pause in wonder at what we see and hear. The setting of the sun over the ocean, the sound of waves crashing on the shore, the sight of snow on the tops of mountains in Colorado or Wyoming, storm clouds in the distance, a certain piece of music, or maybe the laughter of a child. Each of us has our own unique place where the holy has met us at least once and where an encounter may happen again. There may also be undiscovered places that you have not yet recognized as “thin.” God’s presence is subtle and deep in these “thin places,” and we have to see through the veil and search with the eyes of faith.

Do you remember the movie, “Hook,” with Robin Williams? He plays a grown up Peter Pan who goes back to “Never-Never Land” searching for his own lost children. The Lost Boys of “Never-Never Land” don’t recognize him when he returns until one of the smaller boys looks deeply into the grown up face of Peter Pan and he takes his hands and starts moving Peter’s face around. Finally the boy smiles

and says, “Oh, there you are Peter.” That’s what we have to do in our “thin places.” We need to move the veil and look deeply into the other side to see the holy. Then we can enter and be in the presence of the All Mighty.

The story of the cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple is found in all four gospels. The story occurs late in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and is the turning point in the life of Jesus that leads to his crucifixion. In the Gospel of John, the cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple is a prophetic introduction to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus chases everyone out of the temple. John 2:18-20 says, “*The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jewish leaders then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’*” The Jewish leaders were dumb as doorknobs; they thought Jesus was talking about a building. But Jesus was talking about his body as the temple. In verse 22, “*After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*” For the disciples, in the light of the resurrection, this remembering was an active reflection on the past that led them to a deeper

faith and a deeper understanding of who Jesus was and his connection to the Father. At the time they didn't understand what was happening; they had to see the risen Christ, then all the unexplained parts were put together and it made sense.

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead in John 11. He tells the people to take the stone away from the tomb. Martha says to Jesus, "*Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.*" In the King James Bible this verse reads, "*Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.*" Only in seminary this can you learn stuff like this. After Martha's protest Jesus tells her, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" Martha doesn't believe. She knows her brother's been dead four days, "*he stinketh.*" Jesus asks her to believe first and then she will see, but Martha wanted to see her brother raised from the dead and then she would believe in the power of God.

In John 20 the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the Lord. Thomas looks at them and says, yeah right! In verse 25 he tells them, "*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my*

hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas says, “Seeing is believing.” A week later Thomas and the other disciples are in a room with the doors shut when Jesus all of sudden appears. In verse 27 Jesus says to Thomas, “*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*” This disciple has always been called “Doubting Thomas,” but this title misses the point of the story. It isn’t about Thomas’ doubt and skepticism, but about the abundant grace of Jesus who meets Thomas’ demand point for point, in order to move him to faith. When Thomas sees the wounds in his hands and his side he recognizes Jesus and says, “*My Lord and my God.*” This is the most powerful confession of Jesus’ identity in the Gospel of John. Jesus asks, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*” This message of the risen Christ is for us today. We are blessed. We were not there to walk with Jesus and to see his wondrous deeds, and yet we believe. This message of the risen Christ is a “thin place.”

I’m in my second semester of studying the New Testament at the seminary. When we finished our study of the Gospel of John a couple of weeks back I began to realize that reading, studying, and learning the secrets of the Gospel

of John had become a sacred time for me. Tuesday mornings I would sit with Jack and talk about what I had learned the night before. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is not called “John the Baptist,” but just John. The story of Jesus covers three separate Passover celebrations. We talked about the seven wondrous deeds of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospel of John. And how Jesus didn’t die, he gave up his spirit. All of this was exciting to me. And having Jack there to share the excitement with I realized that this study of the John had become a “thin place.”

As I was re-reading parts of the Gospel John I came across this story about Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael. Jesus goes to Galilee, finds Philip and he says to him, “*Follow me.*” Philip finds Nathanael and tells him about Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth. All Nathanael can say is, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” But he travels with Philip to see the man from Nazareth. When Jesus sees Nathanael he says, “*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*” This floors Nathanael, and he asks, “How do you know me?” Jesus tells Nathanael that he saw him sitting by a fig tree before Philip came to him. Nathanael recognizes that Jesus is the one that the prophets wrote about, the one who fulfills the promises of Scripture

and yells out, *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel.”* Then Jesus asks, *“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”* And he said to him, *“Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”* Jesus becomes the place where earth and heaven meet. Jesus is that “thin place.”

Debbie and I and the Youth group are reading the “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” by C.S. Lewis. Some of you may have read the book or may have seen the movie. Lewis says the Narnian Chronicles are not a Biblical allegory. He differentiates allegory from something he calls “supposal,” and explained the difference in a letter to a young girl named Sophia Storr in December 1955. *“I don’t say, ‘Let us represent Christ as Aslan.’ I say, ‘Supposing there was a world like Narnia, and supposing, like ours, it needed redemption, let us imagine what sort of Incarnation and Passion and Resurrection Christ would have there.”* In the book, “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” the children are in Mr. and Mrs. Beaver’s home having dinner. They haven’t met Aslan yet, but they ask questions about him, *“Is—is he a man?”* Asked Lucy. *“Aslan a man!”* said Mr.

Beaver sternly. 'Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.' 'Ooh!' Said Susan, 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.' 'That you will, dearie, and no mistake,' said Mrs. Beaver, 'if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly.' 'Then he isn't safe?' said Lucy. 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver. 'Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good.'”

Later in the story Aslan gives up his life for Edmund. Edmund is one of the children in the book and he crosses over to the dark side, the side of the White Witch. Aslan gives up his life to the White Witch in exchange for the life of Edmund. Unlike Jesus who died for everyone, Aslan gives up his life only for Edmund. Susan and Lucy, hidden from the Witch, watch as she murders Aslan. As the children leave the place where Aslan dies they hear the stone table crack and turn to see a risen Aslan. At first Susan thinks Aslan might be a ghost but after he licks her forehead and she feels the warmth of his breath and smells the richness of his mane she knows he is alive.

Lewis writes, *“‘Oh, children,’ said the Lion, ‘I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh, children, catch me if you can!’ He stood for a second, his eyes very bright, his limbs quivering, lashing himself with his tail. Then he made a leap high over their heads and landed on the other side of the Table. Laughing, though she didn’t know why, Lucy scrambled over it to reach him. Aslan leaped again. A mad chase began. Round and round the hill-top he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. And the funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty.”* It wasn’t something I was looking for as I read *“The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,”* but C.S. Lewis gave me an opportunity to find another *“thin place.”*

These are some of my “thin places;” studying the Gospels and sharing my discoveries, to remember that I am blessed by the Risen Christ, to read more C.S. Lewis and his Narian Chronicles, practice the presence of God with others, to listen. All of life is holy, the ordinary events, the daily routines, the familiar faces. Life offers us the opportunity to have an intimate contact with God in these “thin places.” How do you find these places? Keep your eyes opened, look for new opportunities and new possibilities, be with others, and remember God wants to be close to us. Keep a list of your “thin places” and go back to them often. Don’t get discouraged when nothing happens. Jesus tells us “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

And remember, as Father O’Sullivan says—(*touch heart*)—from here it’s a local call.

Amen.