



Dear Friends,

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, I want to thank you for your faithful partnership with Abundant Living Ministries. Although marked with several health challenges, it has been another truly-blessed year. We are grateful for the Lord's kindness and for the ways He has worked through your prayers and support.

Because of your generosity, individuals and families have received hope, healing, and encouragement through our counseling ministry. May the peace of Christ fill your hearts and homes this Christmas, and may the New Year bring renewed strength and joy in Him.

*With gratitude in Christ,
John Charles (for Sharon and the rest of us)*



The Inside Story on Christmas

Save. Ditch. Give Away. Ditch. Ditch. Give Away. The stacks grew as my Dad and I sorted through my mother's belongings. Making the task more difficult was my seven-year-old little brother, Jamie, who was constantly handling items and rearranging our piles.

It had been a hard year. Watching my mother, the full-of-life heart of our home, grow weaker and weaker had been agonizing. Then the grim reality of her death had forced me to assume responsibilities that, as an 18-year-old, I never expected to carry. But here I was... just a few weeks until Christmas and instead of excited anticipation, I was dreading it. It would certainly not be merry!

I knew Jamie and Dad were hurting too. Jamie was typical boy... tree-climbing, hoop-shooting with a relentless curiosity. His many questions reflected thought beyond

his years and often left Dad and me struggling to give good answers. Since Mom died, Jamie's questions had only increased... "Where exactly has Mom gone?" "Why does everybody say she is in heaven, when clearly she is sleeping at the funeral home?" We both attempted to describe the whole body and spirit concept, but I was painfully aware how inadequate our explanations were.

The sorting job finally completed, Jamie helped me load most of Mom's clothing into a dilapidated old crate, for Dad to deliver to a local charity. I kept a few precious, sentimental items but my father was pretty ruthless tossing away his wife's stuff. Several times I heard him mutter under his breath, "No use hanging onto this... she's gone!" I picked up Mom's old metal music box. It was dented and scratched. I turned the severely-bent handle and the first notes of my mother's favorite hymn twanged gratefully. It was actually a Christmas carol... Joy to the World. For as long as I could remember, Mom had hummed or sung that song almost every day. "Let every heart prepare Him room"... I could picture her puttering around the house, singing those words over and over again. But coming from this damaged relic, the hymn sounded unpleasantly tinny and the notes stopped and started with frustrating frequency. I dropped it on top of the clothing crate. I knew Dad would tell me to trash it

but, who knows? Maybe someone at the shelter would enjoy it. I surveyed the mound of stuff we were discarding. "How sad that a person's life can be tossed away so easily. But after all," I thought, "Dad's right... Mom IS gone."

In the next few weeks, Dad, Jamie, and I were pretty much in our own worlds. I did a little decorating. I even put up a Christmas tree, mostly for Jamie's sake. I certainly didn't feel in a festive mood. I kept recalling Jamie's questions and they rattled me. Where WAS my mother? The real woman who laughed and served and SANG? Thinking of her body, that had run and jumped and hugged and held me, now in that fresh grave, made me shiver. Was she actually with Jesus? Was heaven even a real place? Dad had retreated to his shop, where he always found work projects to keep his mind off problems. I heard his power saw buzzing and his hammer banging, and was at least glad that he could distract himself from his loss. Jamie kept busy with school activities but, when he was home, he mostly retreated to his room. Whenever he joined Dad and me, he was quiet and seemed lost in very distant thoughts. None of us felt one bit merry.

When Christmas morning finally dawned, I just pulled the blanket up around my neck, not wanting to even face the day. I could hear Dad moving around downstairs, undoubtedly placing gifts under the tree. Bless him for trying to make this day special for Jamie and me. But nothing seemed special. Instead, it just seemed horribly sad. Mom was gone! I dragged out of bed, got dressed, and went to rouse my brother who was always a late sleeper, even on Christmas.

When Jamie and I stepped into the living room, we immediately spied several colorfully-wrapped packages. At least Dad had managed to get us a few gifts. But we stopped in surprise when we spotted two unwrapped items. On the floor in front of the glittering tree was that old crate which had carried Mom's clothes away. Dad must have salvaged it, positioning it dead-center under the tree. And, instead of a pile of unwanted clothing, Dad had filled the box with musty straw and, on top, had arranged a captivating nativity set. The symbolism wasn't lost to me... Jesus in an old crate. The King of the universe now in frail wrappings. "Nice touch Dad," I thought. Jamie looked serious. He picked up baby Jesus, stared intently at the figure and then gently placed Him back on the hay. His attention had shifted to a second item, a small box on

the floor beside the manger crate. We both knelt down, curious. I picked it up. It was exquisitely crafted from fine wood. I ran my hands over its smoothness, admiring the fine grain. But it was Jamie who noticed the real surprise. "It has a little crank, Sis... there... on the side. Turn it!" I began winding and then let go. The melody was sweet and strong... no stops, no ear-grating tinniness... "let every heart prepare Him room." Our mother's song filled our living room.



"Dad, did you make this from Mom's dented old music box?" I asked.

"Yep," was all he answered. Jamie had plopped cross-legged on the floor in front of the manger, chin on his hands, obviously deep in thought. As the notes of the carol slowed to a stop, my little brother piped up.

"I think I get it... Sometimes God puts something really, really good in an ol', broken down box... like what He did when He put Jesus in that ol' dirty manger at Christmas." His brow furrowed as he reached for the music box and cradled it in his palms. "And sometimes," he continued, **"He takes something like Mom... really good on the inside, and gives her a new really, really better outside. And her inside just keeps on going. But it's even better than before!"**

My eyes overflowed. Tears ran down Dad's face. Our seven-year-old theologian had explained it better than we ever could. Mom lived on! Her spirit was not dead. Because of Jesus, her song rang out now from a much better, an *eternally-indestructible* shell. I pictured Mom in her God-crafted new body, singing with joy in Jesus' presence... forever. I cried. I smiled. I gave Jamie a hug. "You're exactly right, Jamie," I said as I reached for the lovely box and placed it tight against baby Jesus. "Yes, little brother, Mom's beautiful inside keeps on going, only now she's right next to Jesus, and they will live together... happily... forever after! As we will too, one day. And I think that makes for a very, very merry Christmas, after all! Don't you?"

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