
A Snow Cone, A Sister, and Hope

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"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."
~ Frederick Buechner

Several years ago, I saw a man die on one of the world's most beautiful beaches. He was 38 years old and had been on a cruise to Bermuda with his family. It was a heartbreaking, desperate situation. I just happened to look over at the very moment the lifeguards pulled him out of the water and began performing CPR. A crowd soon gathered, and I did what I thought I could from a distance, praying and also removing our children from the scene so that they would not get in the way of medical personnel or become upset by what was happening.

After a while, the paramedics who had arrived to attend to the man rolled him up a path on a stretcher and loaded him into an ambulance. They drove him away. Hours later, I learned that he had died. A cloud descended on me for the rest of the day. I was deeply saddened by what I had witnessed, imagining the man's wife and children at the hospital when the doctor, shoulders slouched in defeat, came out to say that no more could be done; thinking about the impact on the young lifeguards for whom this traumatic event may have represented their first on the job failure; wondering how the ship's crew would feel as they packed up the family members' belongings from cabins to which they would not return.

My spirits sank lower and lower, even as my two children, hale and hearty, slurped down blue slushies from a snow cone stand near our hotel. I tried to refocus, chatting with my husband about the snorkeling trip we had planned for the next day, then starting a family game of "I Spy." Somehow, though, the more I sought to divert my attention, the more it wandered back to the sad scene I had witnessed that morning.

And then I saw her. A girl of about ten, just home from school and still wearing her uniform. She was running through the open field above the concession stand, waving a few Bermudian dollars in her hand. I will never forget the sheer delight on her face. Her smile stretched broadly from cheek to cheek, her eyes reduced to slits by the combination of the bright sunshine and her ebullient laughter. Someone at home had given her money for an end of the school year treat, and, boy, was she going to enjoy it! I watched her as she reached the stand, took several long minutes to ponder her selection, then carried it carefully back up the hill and to the door of a modest house. The small head of a little boy poked out, followed closely by an eager hand. The girl had gotten the snow cone for her younger brother.

"In the midst of life, we are in death," some older forms of the burial service say. Seeing that Bermudian schoolgirl that afternoon reminded me that the reverse is also true: in the midst of death, we are in life. This is no mere sentiment, but the very heart of our Christian faith. Beautiful and terrible things happen. Some days—some years—it seems that the terrible things will win out, that the darkness will overcome the light. And yet we do not lose hope. We need not cower in fear. For Jesus has defeated all the forces of despair and destruction that threaten to undo us. You and I can bear witness to this truth by the way we live our lives, caring for one other through acts of love both big and small. We can show the joy and possibility that still exist. We can point to the beauty, even from the midst of the ruins.