



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

"Lo, I am with you always"  
means when you look for God,  
God is in the look of your eyes,  
in the thought of looking.

Rumi, thirteenth century

We almost forgot that conversation in the pressure of unpacking and assembling enough clean clothes to get Donn off to first grade, Scott to fourth. But on Sunday, an overcast, drizzly September morning, we drove past the statue of Chief Kisco and pulled into the parking lot of what turned out, indeed, to be St. Mark's Episcopal Church.



## The Golden Cross

There were just the two of us, the children after the long separation from friends being inextricable from various neighborhood homes. We followed a stream of dauntingly well-dressed people through a small stone anteroom and a wood-paneled vestibule, into a dimly lit sanctuary.

I was looking down at my travel-weary blue skirt and wishing I'd worn my best shoes even if they hurt, when I glanced up and stopped short.

I was staring at a bit of medieval England. From where I stood, the center aisle led past thick stone pillars to a magnificent carved-wood screen. The aisle continued through the screen, up three stone steps, past some choir stalls, and up still more steps to a stone altar. In Aunt Helen's Unitarian church, the central aisle ended at an imposing pulpit. But in this Gothic gem, the aisle led to that altar. And in the center of the altar was a golden cross.

## The Question

John was gesturing to me and I realized I was blocking the doorway. We slid into the last pew, safely near the exit. A lady in a stylish black straw hat sat down next to me, pulled a maroon velvet cushion from beneath the pew in front of us, and dropped to her knees. With some apprehension I saw that every single person, on arriving, did the same, kneeling for a moment with bowed head.

And still my eyes kept tracing that route down the middle of the room, through the carved screen, past the choir stalls ... On that rainy fall morning the rest of the church was a shadowy place of gray stone, the brightest spot, the focal point, that gleaming cross. *What are you going to do about me?* it seemed to ask. *Either what happened on the cross is central, or it makes no difference at all.*

The question didn't come to me that crisply that day. I only knew that the architecture of this church was speaking to me as words never had.

Now from a side door came a teenage boy in a white cassock, carrying another cross atop a tall wooden pole. Behind him filed a black-and-white-robed choir. The congregation stood, and I noticed that as the cross passed each pew, the people bowed.

Last in the procession came the minister, taking a seat just beyond the wooden screen. A tall, elegant figure framed by that Gothic carving, he appeared to me to have been designed right along with the church. Only later in the service did we learn that this was his first Sunday at St. Mark's too.

For the next quarter hour I was busy juggling hymnal, service leaflet, and a black-bound *Book of Common Prayer*, which for the lady in the black straw hat seemed to open mystically at the proper place for the different responses. There were times when people stood, which we imitated, and times when they knelt, which we did not. At last the minister - "rector," the leaflet called him - mounted a handsome carved-oak pulpit to the right of the carved screen, and we settled back for a respite from a very athletic style of worship.

## Right Choice

"Before I begin," the Reverend Marcus Hall said, smiling down at the congregation, "I would like to dispel a rumor. I've heard it said that St. Mark's has a reputation as an unfriendly place."

John and I exchanged hopeful glances.

"From those parishioners I've already had the privilege of meeting," the rector continued, "I'm sure there's no truth to such an allegation. I would like everyone here to turn right now and shake hands with the person next to him."

From where John and I sat in the last pew, we could see the entire sanctuary. And in that whole congregation, nobody moved. Not a head turned. On all those ladies' hats, not a feather quivered.

The Reverend Hall waited for an endless painful moment, then snapped on the pulpit light and picked up his sermon notes. What was going through his mind as he faced that stone-still room, I don't know. Nor what was in the minds of those who'd declined his invitation. I only know that in the back of the church, two people rejoiced at having come to the right address.

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