



## ***THE TRIUMPH OF FORGIVENESS***

Suddenly, it's Easter week! Easter epitomizes spring. It signals a time of triumph and renewal—gently lifting our spirits and ushering us closer to the warmth of summer. These are days of brightness and new beginnings. We've been through the winter. But we're coming out green, vibrant and alive. Easter: a time of hope, healing, restoration and change.

Local stores are filled with multiple ribboned and bejeweled straw creations. On Sunday, bonnets of every style imaginable will burst with spring blossoms. Mothers will slap slightly-tilted hats on the heads of their recalcitrant little girls and put crisply pressed trousers on their little boys.

Easter is deeply imbedded in our heritage, our legacy as African Americans. Filling church houses becomes easier because Sunday is part of the trifecta of the African American worship experience. As one of the major CME days—Christmas, Mother's Day and Easter, even occasional worshippers show up at church. The resurrection of Jesus is at the center of our songs of praise and worship.

At Easter we're reminded of the certainty of love and the power of forgiveness—extreme forgiveness. The thrilling discovery of the power of forgiveness sets us free.

My friend, Kim, introduced me to a living example of *forgiveness on steroids* when she spoke of meeting women who forgave those who meticulously, brutally murdered their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers. Battered and bruised—the women of Rwanda were left to pick up the pieces of their devastated lives and communities, to bind up the ragged remnants of their families and country. Hearing their stories, I could only ask: "How is this possible?"

Kim made six international trips to minister in Rwanda after the genocide, arriving first in the capital of Kigali. Stunningly beautiful, Rwanda is known as “the land of a thousand hills” because of its resemblance to Switzerland. What comes most readily to mind, however, is the eruption of 100 days of slaughter in 1994 and the loss of over 800,000 lives.

In the northern border town of Gisenyi, Kim was part of a conference for women from Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. One group of attendees lived so far into the bush and were so impoverished they actually lived naked. The ministry provided clothing; the women walked two hours to the nearest road then were picked up and driven to the gathering. Many others walked for hours, babies strapped to their backs. After eight or nine hours of teaching, they still hungered for spiritual strength.

One woman, in particular, stood out. After Kim’s presentation, this woman stood up and shared her story. In one single day, she had lost seventeen members of her family—husband, parents, in-laws, brothers, sisters, and all of her children. Three months later, she gave birth to a child who also died. In conclusion, she announced that she thanked God for all He had done in her life and for sparing her.

My friend, Kim, walked out of the room. She had never met forgiveness at that level and was trying to find a point of balance after hearing her words. To live in joy, despite such dire circumstances was remarkable. Often, the first thing we do is blame God.

Kim said, “We went to Rwanda to help in any capacity we could. What we quickly learned is that we were the ones who were changed; we learned what it meant to forgive. The Rwandan people became our teachers, by example. I was forever changed.”

Forgiveness is a choice. Each day, the Rwandan people choose to forgive. To do otherwise is to live in bondage to anger and bitterness. They were actually mingling with many of the same people who were responsible for the deaths of their families; yet, they are choosing to forgive. Kim said, “They still celebrate and praise God and forgive people who didn’t even bother to ask for their forgiveness.”

I recently interviewed Dr. Robert D. Enright, founder the Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin, who describes forgiveness as “a merciful, loving act, freely given, toward or for the person who was unfair to you.

Forgiveness is an expression of the love and hope which we extend to one another.” According to Dr. Enright, whenever people who have been deeply wounded can forgive, their anger, anxiety and psychological depression go down, while self-esteem and hope for the future go up.

Most of us have experienced harsh words or betrayal by someone we know. The message of Easter is that extreme forgiveness is possible. More important, the consequence of being unforgiving is that we're deprived of joyful living.

Jesus' resurrection and unconditional love demonstrate the power of extreme forgiveness. He forgives us; He died for our forgiveness. Whenever you think you've suffered an unforgivable hurt, remember the Rwandan woman whose unfathomable loss still left her healed and whole.

(Note: PBS maintains a vivid report of the Rwandan genocide entitled "The Triumph of Evil." Dramatic footage, interviews and readings remain available at: <http://to.pbs.org/eRmWs3>)

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