

# Easter Service

*Steve Peterson*

“THE EARTH TURNS. THE SUN RISES. It’s quite simple.”

We turned towards the high peaks to the east—cold, and still smooth and clean with snow, the half-circle of rising sun warming our faces. I squinted at the growing light. I could just make out the silhouette of the three tallest trees at the ridge-line of Horseshoe Peak, 5,000 feet above and beyond us. My fifth grade teacher told us before the semi-eclipse last year that looking at the sun for even a split second would blind us. But this was only part of the sun—I knew the other half would be there soon. “It comes up every day,” Dad reminded us. “You can count on it.”

Behind us our shadows stretched across Elwood’s pasture at the base of Little Hill and faded on into the small town. Dad always made us wake up before sunrise on Easter—even though Sunday was the only day to sleep in during school and Saturday basketball season. We would bundle up and walk the mile east along the old pioneer fence line to Little Hill, then slowly hike the few hundred yards through the sage brush to the top, where we would start our sleigh rides in the colder months.

“Yesterday the sun hit the top at 7:42. We’ll only have to wait for a few minutes,” promised Dad. We watched the line of sunlight slowly moving across the narrow mountain valley towards us, huddling together, glad the snow had left the valley a few weeks ago. I’m always happy to see the snow come, and pray for enough to close down school and bury all the sagebrush on Little Hill for sleigh riding. But by March, when the snow starts to crust up and there is more dark from rocks and brush than smooth, white, clean snow, I’m ready for spring. And even though Easter was early this year, the snow had been gone long enough to allow thin wisps of dust to rise under the toes of my boots.

We don’t have a prayer or any kind of formal religious thing on the sunrise hike. But Dad makes sure we all see Easter from the beginning to the end. “Easter is about beginnings. It’s about faith in the light.”

I was sleepy. For two nights Dad and I had been walking out in the pasture, north, behind our house, about every three hours to check on

Aussie. She didn't see the wire gate I closed on Thursday morning to keep the horses in the upper field, and when she came running down with Zen and Jasper she turned sharply at full gallop into the gate, her momentum carrying her through two complete somersaults. She stood up, shook herself, bled some from the small cuts on her legs, and trotted east in the direction they had come from.

Friday morning she began to walk in an odd gait lifting her left rear leg up high under her stomach. Friday night she acted drunk, stumbling sideways, holding her head at a twisted angle. By the time Dad led her towards the corral to load her for a trip to the vet, she could no longer stand and awkwardly fell backwards on her rump.

When the vet came it was getting dark. We finally got her on her feet, iced the huge swelling on her neck, and filled her with steroids, penicillin, and pain-killers. We left her swaying under the Russian Olive by the ditch. "If the swelling goes down, there's a chance she'll get her feet back under her," the vet said. "But we won't know for several days." He and Dad walked back to the doc's truck, speaking in low voices about "chances" and "expenses."

At 3:00 a.m. when we checked her again, she had walked 100 feet across the field to the fence line by the other horses and gone down. All day Saturday she lay there in the dirt. She would try to raise her head hourly, roll part way to a sitting position, and then painfully flop back down on her side. We worked all day in the field where we could watch her closely. We checked her again just before we started the Easter morning sunrise walk to Little Hill. Her eyes were active; I knew she was wondering why her body wouldn't respond to her efforts. She ate some loose hay from my hand and munched an apple filled with pain-killers.

Most of the ward drove by the pasture after church to see the horse that couldn't get up. Someone from the family was always there. We had Dad's old blue Sam Hall blanket under her head to keep her comfortable. Jack Stevenson parked his new red pick-up on the side of the road, pushed down and straddled the top barb wire, and asked the obvious. "What happened to your horse?" It was my turn to answer.

"We think maybe she broke her neck. She can't get up."

"Huh. Whadaya know. And just this morning my mare had the cutest little colt—sorrel with four white matching stockings. Seems like horses are always comin' or goin'. Come on over and look at him if it'll make ya feel any better."

If people would stop asking me about Aussie, and if she would stand up and walk away, then I'd feel better, I wanted to say. But eleven-year-olds don't talk to their friend's dads like that.

"Sure. Maybe later."

The crowds left around dinner time. Mom and Dad and I stood by

helplessly.

"Give her a blessing," Mom said.

So Dad asked that Aussie either end her suffering quickly or get up. I helped by fasting from all the Easter candy I had collected earlier that day.

Everyone was quiet at dinner. After, Dad pulled me onto his lap and said he was going to call the vet to either confirm that the horse was getting better or give her a shot to put her down. I would have been mad, but I could see Mom and Dad were upset not only for Aussie but for me as well.

We tried to get her to stand one more time that evening. And as we laid her head down she stopped breathing. The vet drove up seconds later, listened to her final two heart beats, and said we had saved the \$50 for the euthanasia shot. He's an old country vet, who spends most of his time nursing cattle and sheep that mean a livelihood to many in our valley. But I could tell he felt bad about this horse.

Gordon Cory's backhoe was nearby at a new house excavation. Dad called him to come and bury Aussie. Death wasn't as tough as I thought it would be. It was the dying that made us all suffer. My cousin and I wood-burned a grave marker and placed some daffodils in the loose dirt. Then we jumped on the Knight's trampoline.

Dad called me before dark. "Do you want to go see Jack's new colt?"

I love little animals. And I love horses. We weren't sure where the pasture was, other than Jack's direction of "just beyond the cemetery." Dad thought he meant the old pioneer plots, but Mom figured the horses were north of the big cemetery.

We drove for almost an hour without finding any new horses. Then just as the sun was going down, I pointed out two Arabians standing on the west side of a scraggly willow patch. Dad drove down the old railroad bed and we found the mare and a friend. But no colt. We drove a bit farther and Mom saw the clump of red horse first.

"Oh no. There's no way it's still alive."

The colt had run into the barb-wire fence on the west side of the field and had twisted his left rear leg in the top two strands of wire. He was hanging outside the fence, with the captured leg sticking up, his body in a motionless heap, and his head in the ditch. He looked like the deer I try to ignore as we drive down 89, stretched out in the wire fences bordering the highway, waiting for the magpies.

Dad was out, pulling on the wires. "We're going to have to cut this to get the leg out."

But he managed to separate them enough so I could pull the tiny hoof through the trap. Mom grabbed a willow and kept the mare at bay. "He's still alive," I hoped aloud. And then I felt him wiggle. We stood

him up, and he kicked both me and Dad while we lifted him over the fence to his mother. It was getting dark. We watched the three horses until they moved away from the wire fence and to the safety of the willow patches.

Mom said, "There's no way that colt would have made it through the night. We were lucky we even saw him."

The west mountains were silhouetted by the last light from the falling sun. We headed east for home.