Easter Day (March 27, 2016)

John 20: 1-18 - The Empty Tomb

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

10 Then the disciples went back to their homes, 11 but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " 18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

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A letter from Jan Heckler serving – Madagascar

Tears of Sorrow and Joy

I am standing in the middle of the room in the midst of 20 other people. I am simply astonished, for immediately before me lies the body of my dead friend, Neny. Neny, deceased now for less than four hours, lies prone and lifeless with utter disregard for the people and movement going on around her, possible only for those who no longer breathe.

Raised by Neny, ever since her own mother died while giving her life, Mamy brings me out of my trance as she turns toward me and then burrows her head in my chest and shoulder while producing deep, gasping sobs. Her wailing fills the room as she convulses the heartfelt spasms of pain at the unexpected loss of the person who was for all practical purposes her lifelong mother. Pastor Mamisoa brings us all back together from our thoughts as she begins the first prayer. It is not yet midnight on Good Friday.
My mind works to recall when I first met this grand lady, Neny. Right! It was just last September. Our quick take to one another was due in part to the fact that when we met we were in the city of Diego on the northern tip of Madagascar at a special time.

It was the weeklong (Dorcas) Dorkasy National Meeting and I was there helping train the large Dorkasy national committee on leadership issues. Dorkasy is the women’s division of the PC(USA)’s partner church in Madagascar, the Church of Jesus Christ of Madagascar. Neny was a member of Dorkasy for over 40 years and a devoted supporter. So we were both there in support of the same endeavor.

A second reason that we were taking to one another like the two sides of a Velcro strip was that she knew that her favorite granddaughter (second to Mamy that is), Pastor Mamisoa, and I were also becoming the best of friends. Then it was also the case that Mamy and I had really been getting along as well. Of course with Neny’s having raised Mamy as her own, this has given Mamy’s and my budding friendship a welcomed special luster. Finally, Neny warmly embraced that our Lord had brought me from the farthest corner to serve in Madagascar.

With these warm thoughts in mind, I am suddenly amazed by a newfound appreciation: Just two weeks before tonight Neny had had a vision in which our Lord asked her to share a message with four people: two of her daughters, Pastor Mamisoa, and me.

The message was that each of us still had important work to do, that we should remain focused on our missions, and that Neny was to tell us these things before she would be permitted to die and pass on—a longing she had recently expressed to Mamy and others, perhaps as Paul expressed at one point (Philippians 1:23). I realize only now that Neny had only just finished sharing this message with us a few days ago. And now, here her body lay in evidence that she was gone, leaving us to be with our Lord.

I stand watching as three surviving daughters of hers and some other ladies who were closest to her in life begin cleaning her body with soap and water and then dressing it for the final time in Neny’s favorite white linen suit. As I watch I think of Neny’s spirit, her confident smile, her wisdom, and her unqualified love of God.

Neny had lived her life showing God’s love to all who knew her, and she did this not only by her hard work for her church’s branch of Dorkasy but also as one of the first women in her church to serve as deacon. Further, she had been the past president of her church’s Sunday school branch, had organized and led a weekly prayer group that met for years, and was a compassionate visitor to the various jails in the Antananarivo area, where she ministered to incarcerated individuals. My vision blurs at the joy of knowing this woman and at the huge loss her death would represent to the many who loved her.

Over the next few days Neny’s remains continue to lie “in state” while friends, family and members of her congregation come to the house to visit and pray. Condolence visits (Famangiana manjo) in Madagascar are part of the ritual surrounding the death of loved ones. As we wait at the house, small groups of from 5 to 12 arrive and come into the living room where 16 to 18 members of the family (of the 40 to 50 of us who are in the house at any given time) are seated with Neny’s body.
The condolence visit begins with visitors expressing their love for the deceased and sadness at the loss. Next, visitors provide an envelope containing money honoring the loved one as well as addressing the burden of funeral and burial expenses. And in the end the visitors apologize for the brevity of their stay, explaining how work or other matters require their attention.

From Saturday through Monday, it slowly dawns on me that Neny is being honored in memorable fashion. Honors include the number of condolence visits; the huge number of visitors; the number and size of bouquets received; the number of envelopes and the amounts contained; and the number of wraps (famonosan-damba) donated by loved ones.

The famonosan-damba are made of high quality linen, cotton and silk, nearly always embroidered and always bordered. On Monday afternoon we watch as the men wrap and tie Neny’s body in famononsan-damba, preparing her body for burial. When it is done, we load her bound remains into a modified station wagon and drive to the church Neny attended all of her life, Vinany Tempoly Malala.

As we enter the sanctuary we are struck by how many people have left work on a Monday afternoon to come and be with her and us this final time. The place is packed! Every pew is crammed and we sit hunched shoulder to shoulder as we listen to the pastor praise this wonderful lady and her life of service to the Lord. He makes particular mention of how seldom it has been his pleasure to know someone who had earned so many crowns of glory while here on earth. Though she is most deserving of this praise, we are all surprised that he has laid claim to her life with such awesome praise.

The tears are now flowing unfettered, revealing in yet another dramatic way how greatly loved this woman is and how surely she will be missed—her love, her kindness, her smile, all of it, all of her. Finally, as we remove her body outside to the 100-year-old family tomb (fasana), Mamisoa whispers how Neny used to take her and her brothers to this church while growing up. It is clear how greatly Neny encouraged and supported Mamisoa’s devoted Christian life.

With a sense of bitter sweetness, I suddenly experience a sense of honor that flows over me. Building over the prior days, it has finally dawned on me that I have been accepted into Neny, Mamy and Mamisoa’s family as “one of their own.” Even at this worst possible moment they invited me to sit for condolence visits, to eat with the elders at the family table while we laughed and cried, to share in some of their most intimate understandings and experiences, and in many other small but important ways welcomed me into that place normally reserved only for those who were born into it or who had married to become a part of it.

As the service’s final prayer concludes, Neny is laid to her final resting place along with more than four generations of her relatives. We return to the house for one last evening of food and fellowship together as the family takes its first tentative steps forward without its beloved matriarch but with the cycle of life intact and continuing.

Stories full of the joy of being accepted even while grieving the loss of a significant other do not happen every day in Madagascar, but the struggle of good people against a host of pressing life problems and
realities does. Thanks be to God for the privilege of serving here, and for each one who supports and accompanies me on this miraculous journey.

Jan Heckler