Like many people, Luke Hatten is a man who had some great ideas in mind for when he retired, including finally getting a new truck he had longed for for years. But on a winter's day, a cancer diagnosis changed his plans.

Roberta Messner was the nurse who worked in the cancer ward at a hospital, and she was accustomed to working with people who were nervous and afraid.

She walked into his room, and eyes wide with terror peered at her from the hospital bed.

"You must be Luke Hatten," she said, as she scanned the name on his ID bracelet. His work-roughened hands nervously fingered a pamphlet. Its bold, red letters shrieked "When You Have Cancer."

Roberta cleared her throat uneasily. She introduced herself as an RN, and said his doctor and wife thought it might be helpful if she visited him when he was discharged, and if it was alright she'd stop by the following Saturday.

Mr. Hatten stared blankly out the window at the barren view. In a couple of months, the hospital grounds would be awash with a carpet of crocuses, vibrant azaleas and hyacinths in Easter-egg hues. But this was the cancer ward, were time was measured in moments - not months.

Mr. Hatten's roommate caught up with Roberta by the elevator. "You've got your work cut out for your nurse," he stated flatly. "They say it's terminal. Ever since Luke got his sentence, he walks the floor all night. He told me, 'I can't sit for long. When I sit, I think."

Roberta felt defeated from the start. Here it was the eve of spring, with the promise of new life, and her patient was dying. How could she help him, she asked herself.

On Saturday morning, a short, stout woman met her at the door of the Hattens' tiny rural cottage. She introduced herself as Ida and tugging at her apron let Roberta in.

Luke sat in a frayed wing chair in a corner of the living room. He forced a smile. Just two weeks before, he had undergone surgery for colon cancer.

But the relentless disease had spread. Once a hard-working handyman, a now-weary Luke clutched his abdomen in a spasm of pain. “Lord, help me know what to do,” Roberta silently prayed to herself.

Ida explained that he had just taken a pain pill. She invited Roberta to have some coffee in the kitchen while the medication took hold. Roberta followed her to the gingham-curtained kitchen window. A look of desperation stole across her deeply-lined face.

“This is all such a shock,” she said, tearing up. “He worked so hard - always tinkering on something. And just when he thought he was ready to retire, this happens.”

Ida bit her lip, then pointed to the shining red truck in the driveway. “He wanted that truck so bad. Drove it straight from the showroom over to the clinic. His belly had been painin’ him a little, but we never dreamed it was cancer. Next day the doc just cut him open and sewed him right back up.”

Roberta walked back into the living room and remarked that it was quite the truck he had .”

“Never even got to show it to the crew down at the hardware store,” came his faint words. “Doc says I can’t drive. I’m on too many pills.”

“Sometime when you feel up to some fresh air, I’d love to take a look at it,” Roberta told him. “My husband has a truck too but it’s an old clunker.”

Luke’s brown eyes lit up at this news. “Had old junk heaps all of my life. Always kept hopin’ to get a new one. Then I did - just before this thing hit.” He struggled out of the chair and pressed a kiss to Ida’s cheek. “Gimme my coat, Hon.”

With marrow-deep determination, Luke led Roberta to the driveway. He pointed to a row of brittle, lifeless bushes. “There’ll be yellow blossoms like you never did see on them come spring. Sure would like to see spring come one more time.” Dusting the glistening truck with the sleeve of his plaid flannel jacket, he cautiously peeped in the windows as if it belonged to someone else.

Roberta exclaimed how her husband would love the truck, and how the chrome bumpers and black leather seats looked great.

He invited her to climb in and have a seat. He settled himself behind the steering wheel, reaching in his pocket for keys, commenting that it felt funny not having a floorboard full of old rags and oil cans.

Roberta invited him to start it up to charge the battery.

He turned the key in the ignition and said it was best to let it run a moment or two to lube the engine, and honked the horn with the fervor of a three year old.

A neighbor looked out and joked with him what a pretty young nurse was doing in the the truck.

He toyed with the power seats, the electric mirrors, the quartz clock, the heater. Roberta’s idle hands longed for a stethoscope. A thermometer. Anything to avoid the inevitable discussion. But all of her gadgets were in the Hattens’ living room.

She asked him how he decided on the color of red. Luke explained it was the same color as the bike he got the Christmas he turned seven. His dad made him wait until after supper to ride it up to the holler and it seemed like forever.

Once in the driver's seat, Luke changed. He emerged a strong, in control person who finally opened up to Roberta. "One day," he said "I was drivin' this truck off the car lot, and the next thing I knew, they were sendin' a nurse to help me die." Roberta nodded and reached for his hand.

He continued, "Doc says I don't have long. I gotta put things in order, nurse. I'm telling you this 'cause I don't want to worry Ida."

Roberta visited Luke several times each week. He'd be waiting in the driver's seat with a thermos of coffee and two mugs. They talked freely of their shared Christian faith, his fear of dying and leaving Ida alone, and God's promise of eternal life. But in essence, Roberta was also a chaplain to him, helping him to build his spiritual strength. As Luke learned to face his pain, he grew more peaceful. After their "truck talks," they'd head back

to the kitchen where Ida waited. There they would discuss the details of Luke's care and help Ida prepare for an uncertain future.

On Palm Sunday that. year, Roberta went to church before checking on Luke. Her pastor spoke of how Jesus became a man so that we could know God. He closed with the story of Jesus facing death in Gethsemane. Jesus told his disciples "My soul is sorrowful even onto death; wait here and watch with me." Even Jesus he said did not want to face death alone.

That afternoon, Roberta found Luke leaning on Ida by a budding forsythia bush. His old leather belt curled about him, gathering his trousers in loose folds. He handed Roberta some freshly cut branches, wrapped in wet paper towels and newspapers. He told her to put them in a jug of water when she went home and they would take root, and that someday she would have a yard full of forsythias.

Roberta smiled but deep down she doubted his wisdom. With what little she knew of gardening, she was sure a budding branch had a slim chance of taking root.

Over the next few days, Luke's condition rapidly worsened At their last visit, he lay ashen and listless, his breathing rapid and labored. She leaned over to give him a hug.

"I'm not afraid anymore," he whispered. "Jesus is right here, reachin' his arms out to me. I'll live again, just like my Lord."

Luke died that evening. Roberta drove over to be with Ida. Ida wept and remarked how much she would miss Luke, but then said "I'll miss him so much, but how could I drag my Luke back to his Earth. He's living with Jesus and one day I'll see him."

As Roberta left their home, she paused by Luke's truck. Gazing into the window, she studied the empty seats where the two of them had so often sat. The air was fragrant with the scent of spring flowers. With the sleeve of her sweater, Roberta buffed the red gem as Luke would have done, then lifted the windshield wipers to release a wayward cluster of golden forsythia blossoms.

She thought to herself, “to really make a difference in the lives of others, we have to meet them where they are.” She might never have known the real Luke in his bewildering, antiseptic hospital room, which was her secure environment. There, in her rush, she realizes she might have patted his hand, offered reassurance and gone on about her duties.

But sipping coffee in that truck, Luke’s Garden of Gethsemane, the barriers she realizes were broken. There, two strangers experienced the promise of Easter.

And in the years that followed, she said she is reminded each spring by her yard full of Luke’s forsythias.

To say this past year has been a challenging one would be quite the understatement. We’ve all dealt with the effects of the pandemic. And I think for so many, there has been a lot of fear about it as it’s all the media has covered. Death is something we understandably prefer not to think about; the hospital, the nursing home, or even cemeteries are places many folks do not visit.

There is nothing wrong with living in the moment and enjoying life; indeed I think it's so important we strive to get back to "normalcy" through covid and back to dinners, social events, and sharing the things as humans that give life such meaning. But death is a true reality. Luke had to face this. And understandably he was scared at first. But he died with peace even if he did not have the chance to finally drive his new truck because he knew something far greater was in store for him.

Easter is the most important event in human history, because it changes everything for you and me. In the death of Jesus, His Body and Soul are separated; He truly dies. When the Father raises Jesus from the dead, death as a limit on human life is overcome. Christ's humanity enjoys a new, glorious existence and it radiates the glory of His divinity. This also applies to us too; think if the stone being rolled away a bit like another stone throne into a water with ripples. Saint Paul, in our epistle from the Easter Vigil says "are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, s that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life…we know that Christ raised from the dead dies no more; death no longer has power over him." On

Easter Sunday, Paul says to the Colossians “When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.” This is the language of a man, Paul, who has encountered the resurrected Lord. The resurrection affirms Jesus’ divinity, and that He is who He has said He was - God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God. This is why inevitably when we are fearful, God is with us to dispel those fears. God’s love is more powerful than anything in the world. Violence, cruelty, sin and all forms of human dysfunction bring Him to the Cross, and on this He takes all of this on. He goes into the muck of our human condition and is risen. It’s why Paul says nothing can separate us from the love of God. So what is it that makes you afraid? Perhaps it is thinking of your own mortality. Maybe it is thinking of some of the things you’ve done and how you’ve let yourself down at times. Perhaps its being rejected by others, or looking at the world and seeing how things are going. Or maybe it’s speaking what you truly believe and about your faith, fearful of being crucified by a culture that can be so hostile to what we believe. Whatever your fear, know that God’s love is there for you. In the resurrected Christ, we find our hope. We are wounded by sin and darkness and the reality of our human condition. But in the resurrection, we find our salvation.

With this though there is a detail - it's up to you and me to commit ourselves to Jesus; to remain on the path he sets out for us. To live out the faith.

One detail from the resurrection in Mark is the man in white at the tomb. Note he's not an angel; but a man. Last week in the Passion from Mark, a man left behind his garment and runs off naked at Jesus' arrest in the Garden. Some have thought this was a younger Mark himself; others though see in the man every baptized Christian. Maybe that's the best interpretation because note now he is wearing this white garment. He's made his comeback. And now he is announcing what has happened, just as Roberta announced this to Luke. So how does this Easter event change us? Like Roberta, we can meet people where they are at and announce who Jesus is to them through our presence, through our patience, through not being afraid to speak to our faith, through our forgiveness, and through our love.

You probably know the name of Fred Rogers; known to millions of us as Mister Rogers, a man who's neighborhood I entered regularly in my preschool years. You might know he was a Presbyterian Minister too; but

he took his faith very seriously in doing just that. Elizabeth Usher loved his show. As a child at 5, she had up to 100 seizures a day, when she would fall and bang her head on the floor. The only way for her mom to shower and dress for work without worrying was to prop her up with a soft set of pillows with her 7-year old brother next to her with Mister Rogers Neighborhood on, and she didn't have a seizure; something in his voice calmed the electrical currents in her injured brain and allowed her body some rest. This went on for two years; and she came to see him as her real friend, not just her TV friend, even talking to the TV. Eventually she needed surgery. Her mom called the TV station where he filmed the show, thinking maybe he'd send an autographed photo or perhaps even a note. But he actually called her mom, and Elizabeth was told a "friend" wanted to talk to her on the phone; something she hadn't known much of because seizures scared adults, and really scared other kids. But Mister Rogers talked to her about brain surgery and she told him things she says she didn't even tell her parents, like wanting the other kids in her class to like her and to play with her. She told him of her love for the Neighborhood characters. It was over an hour; she said "I love you Mister Rogers" at the end and he said he loved her too. He sent her many cassette tapes including "I Like You Just the Way You Are," a song he sang that soothed

her, and was played when she was in ICU. She was in a coma after the surgery due to brain stem swelling; but Mister Rogers called daily. While she was still in a coma, he asked to visit and being told she might not respond did not stop him at all. He flew to Baltimore and with a little clarinet bag went into her room, taking out King Friday, Lady Elaine Fairchild and Daniel the Striped Tiger, her favorite. He sat there for an hour while she lay in a coma, leaving the puppets there. She awoke several weeks later excited to see the puppets. He'd call often in the next few years, and when she was 11, she got to see him speak at a commencement address that Elizabeth helped him to write, speaking on kindness for others; her family hosted him for the weekend as her mom worked at the University and was on the commencement committee. He gave her encouragement as she learned how to walk, talk and read again after being paralyzed on her right side. As she grew older and stronger, she kept thinking about his words to her, "I like you just the way you are." She's now in her early 40s, and this friendship with him helped change her life. This is the message God gives to us: I love you as you are. So who is the real you? Life can be quite scary, and it can be quite bleak at times. And we can also battle guilt and shame, and be so angry at one another and the world. But God sees past all this, because he likes and also loves us. His love is more powerful than

anything. So let that love envelop you, and bring you peace. Luke knew his final destination wasn't a shiny red pickup truck, but heaven because through Jesus, death had no more power over him. Cancer may take his body, but it would never take his soul. Neither will death or sin for you and me. It's quite alright to be afraid in life; it's not good for fear to take over though. This day is the answer to our deepest fears. So let us be not afraid, knowing God's answer to our fears, to sin and death has the last word, and let that love envelop us as we journey through this life knowing we will die, but we too will arise. Ponder again the words used at the blessing of the candle and Easter Fire Christ Jesus, the same yesterday today and forever; the beginning and the ending; the Alpha and the Omega; His are time and eternity, His are the glory and dominion, now and forever. By His wounds we have healing both now and forever…May the light of Christ who is risen in glory from the dead scatter all the darkness of our hearts and minds." Alleluia, He is risen, and so will we too arise - so let us face our lives with hope not fear, and put on our baptismal garments and declare this message of hope to the world.

Have a happy and blessed Easter.