

Keeping Me Alive

Luke 22

I don't know how many of you watched the Oscars start to finish last Sunday; I didn't make it too far myself, I was twelve hours off the plane from India, so I was asleep on the couch long before *Argo* triumphed and Jennifer Lawrence tripped. But I *was* awake long enough to catch the Oscar for best documentary. I know what you're thinking – best documentary? who cares? That's one of those award moments that serves as a cue to go and make yourself more nachos, that, and say, “sound editing”.

But actually – I really *did* care. 'Cause one of the contenders was an amazing little film that I had watched just twelve hours earlier. That's right, I had caught it on the in-flight entertainment system somewhere over Turkey or thereabouts. *Searching for Sugar Man*, it was called. In all honesty, I picked it out of the list of films to watch because I really wanted to fall asleep, and I figured that a documentary would be just what I needed. It'd put me out like Ambien.

But it didn't. I was glued to that twelve by fifteen inch screen! The movie was great. It was great. And so just hours later when I saw *Searching for Sugar Man* win its Oscar, I was pretty pumped. I also felt a little erudite, a little sophisticated, to be able to say that I had seen the documentary award winner. (David had seen the best foreign film, so he felt pretty erudite himself.)

So let me tell you about this documentary – and I guess this is kind of a spoiler alert, because it's hard to talk about why it's awesome without telling you what happens, but that should not stop you from seeing it. It's a true story – well, okay, it's a documentary, so, *duh* it's a true story – about this singer named Sixto Rodriguez, back in Detroit in the early 70's. He went by just Rodriguez, and you've never heard of him because nobody heard of him. He made two albums, albums with songs filled with passion and hope, anthems to the common man, the worker on the streets of Detroit, the guy who was out there fighting 'The Man' and struggling through defeats. And these albums were great and his producers knew they were great, but they both bombed. Not just as in *sales were disappointing* but as in *there were no sales*.

Except – except in, of all places, South Africa. No one knows how exactly, but one of his albums made it into South Africa. And in apartheid South Africa, Rodriguez’s songs became the songs that inspired and emboldened young activists. His lyrics moved young college students who were boldly challenging the government they knew was immoral. ‘His songs,’ one of them said, ‘were the soundtrack of our lives in those days – what he sang about was what we were living and fighting for.’

Here’s what it gets really crazy, though. Rodriguez never knew that on another continent, he had become bigger than Elvis. Somewhere in the system, someone else gobbled up the money, and he was never *ever* told that his records, far far away, were selling - a half million albums or more. Instead, back in Detroit, Rodriguez set aside his dreams of making it big, and went back to construction work.

In South Africa, no one knew anything about Rodriguez except that they loved him. They didn’t know where he lived, who he was, nothing – and after a while the rumor started that he was dead. But his music, his music was alive – inspiring other young musicians, fueling the passion of the protesters, calling young people to speak for justice. The music of their hero was alive, though he himself – they thought -- was no more.

Until 30 years later, a couple South African deejays decided they wanted to find out just where Rodriguez had lived, and how he had died. And in the most amazing scene of an amazing movie, they not only find him, still working construction in Detroit, but they bring him to South Africa to finally, finally, perform before the people for whom he was, truly, a rock star – though he had never known it.

And I challenge you to watch the scene from that concert without weeping. It can’t be done. To see this man walk out on stage and look out on twenty thousand people who are themselves weeping with joy at seeing a hero whom they had thought was dead – it’s a scene you couldn’t invent. And this is what he says to them – after the screaming and weeping has subsided – this gentle, genuinely humble guy steps to the microphone and says simply “Thanks for keeping me alive.”

Thanks for keeping me alive.

Searching for Sugar Man is not meant to be a religious film, but it is, really – it’s a film about the power of hope and the goodness that is eternal -- And that one line – that one line – *Thanks for keeping me alive*. It doesn’t take a preacher to hear echoes of the Gospel in that line.

Because that is, of course, what Communion is. That is, of course, why we gather around a table set with bread and cup. We gather to keep Christ alive, to see him with us. We gather in hope to remember the love that is eternal. This is my body, this is my very self, I am with you always, do this remembering me. To share together in this meal keeps him alive for us: the one who loved us so powerfully, who loves us still. In bread and cup, we know him to be here, alive, here.

But this is not the only way he is alive for us, not even the most important way he is alive. When we allow *ourselves* to be his presence, when we are *ourselves* his hands, his heart, his love in this world, then, then we are keeping Christ alive.

In India last week, Carol Passmore and I spent several days in the company of a man named TL Reddy, whose love for children is boundless, whose compassion is extraordinary. TL grew up in a family of six, abandoned by their father early in life, in a time when a woman whose husband left received not sympathy but disdain and disgust. *It was terrible, the things people called my mother*, TL told us. Near starvation, he and his siblings were shown kindness by teachers in a neighboring school, who allowed them to clean the school in return for food for their family. *I remember*, TL said, *carrying food home under my shirt, just enough to keep my mother alive.*

30 years later, TL now spends each day, every day, in the slums of Hyderabad, ducking into the huts made of plastic stretched over sticks, talking to the mothers he finds there, and encouraging them to let their children come to his school. His school is our School on Wheels, a traveling classroom which welcomes slum children on board and teaches them and loves them and feeds them. *My poverty was God's gift to me*, TL said, *because when I look at these children, I can feel what they feel, I know that hunger, and I love them so much.* TL is keeping Christ alive. In those slums, on that schoolbus, Christ is alive in the hands and heart and love of that man. *Thanks for keeping me alive*, Christ whispers to him, *thanks for keeping me alive.*

Tomorrow a bunch of our teens will be with a man who keeps Christ alive. He'd be mortified to hear me say it, because he, too, is a man of quiet humility. Every Monday night for the 14 years I've known him, Guy Love – yes, that's really truly his name, Guy Love – every Monday night Guy has made sure that the hungry in his corner of Bridgeport are fed. Guy runs the Monday supper at Calvary-St George's Church in Bridgeport, and what we do is show up with food and helpers. But Guy opens the doors and sets the tables, greets

each person who comes through the door like a treasured and welcomed guest, as indeed they are; offers love and acceptance to each one, no matter who, no matter anything. I have admired him as long as I've known him, and he'd be embarrassed to hear me say it – but the truth is Guy keeps Christ alive. Every Monday night, with a pot of coffee and a welcoming smile, he keeps Christ alive. And to him, too, Christ surely whispers *Thanks. Thanks for keeping me alive.*

It may feel like I'm setting the bar too high for the rest of us. I can't run a schoolbus for slum children, you're thinking; I can't go open up a weekly soup kitchen. Those are the people who, yes, keep Christ alive, but I can't do that.

Yeah, you can – yeah, you do – yes, we are the people.

Here's a simple example. In just a little while, across town at Fairfield Ward high school, a whole lot of people are going to be doing a little something that keeps Christ alive, that keeps Christ's love alive in our midst. A whole lot of people are going to make a little sacrifice that's probably going to feel pretty big in the moment – even though they know it'll grow back. Yes, that's right, it's St. Baldrick's day in Fairfield, and a lot of church folks are headed cross town this morning to do a good thing – to have their *heads shaved* not just to raise money, which they will, but to be in loving solidarity with every child, every person we know who has journeyed through chemo and journeys still. I know Dave and Will and Andrew and all the other good people who are headed there aren't thinking of themselves as being Christ like, but the truth is that what they're doing does keep Christ alive. Keeps compassion alive, keeps love alive, keeps hope alive. And to them, too, Christ whispers, *Thanks for keeping me alive.*

I started this sermon with a story about an awesome little documentary, a film that tells a story of a man whose music helped keep hope alive in a hopeless part of the world, a man who was himself kept strangely alive by people who loved and believed in him.

We have the chance, all of us, each day, to do things mighty and small that keep hope alive for others. We have the chance, each of us, every day, to keep compassion alive by what we choose to do, by whom we choose to be. We have the chance to keep alive what is right and true. We have the chance to love powerfully, to speak courageously, to welcome extravagantly, to care extraordinarily. We have the chance to keep Christ alive for others.

And when, in a few minutes, we share bread and cup, we do it with Christ's words echoing among us – this is my body, this is my blood. Remember me. Know my presence. Keep me alive among you.

You, my eyes in this world, my heart, my hands, you, my love – *Thanks for keeping me alive.*

Amen.