

ON THE PATH WITH THE POTATO DONKEY

by Vicki Sairs

*Editor's note: The following two articles were originally published in **The Mobile Register** (Mobile, Alabama's daily newspaper) and are used with permission. The first appeared in the April 9, 1998 issue; the second appeared on April 8, 1999.*

I am looking at my sons' potato donkeys. I helped them make the little beasts a few weeks ago, when I taught their Sunday school class. We learned about Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey's back. People were so glad to see him that they shouted and waved branches and threw their clothes down on the road in front of him.

We had fun making the donkeys. We used a medium-sized potato for the body, a smaller one for the head, popsicle sticks for the legs, neck and ears, and brown bits of yarn for the mane and tail. After adding eyes, a nose and mouth, we had remarkably lifelike little donkeys in our hands.

My sons' donkeys are wearing scraps of fabric on their backs, and they are walking down paths drawn on a shoe box lid and a piece of cardboard. Their popsicle-stick feet tread on bits of cloth cut out to look like cloaks and robes, and green construction-paper palm leaves are scattered in their way.

They are wonderful and even beautiful, in their unassuming way, and I want to be like them.

I haven't taken leave of my senses. There is something embodied in these creatures that is worth imitating.

Their stance and expression convey so much, even though they're made of such lowly stuff. "Here we are," they seem to say. "We're just donkeys, but we're doing what we were made for. We're doing our job."

They stare at the path in front of them, knowing that's the way they must go if they want to reach their destination. One has a slightly woeful look on his face, like he's thinking, "I just don't know...I just don't know if I can make it." But he walks on, head bent to the task, patient and strong.

The other donkey is different. He had a terrible fall shortly after coming to our house, and his head had to be shoved farther down his wooden neck to make it more secure. This has left him looking as though he's been brought up short by something on the path in front of him. He stares down his donkey nose at the road he's supposed to take and wonders, "Oh, my, look at that. How did that get there? Now what am I supposed to do?" But everything about him says "faithful" so I know he'll stay on the path, no matter what.

Why do I want to be like these Sunday school creatures? They're humble, steadfast and true, qualities I would like to see more of in myself. But there's something more.

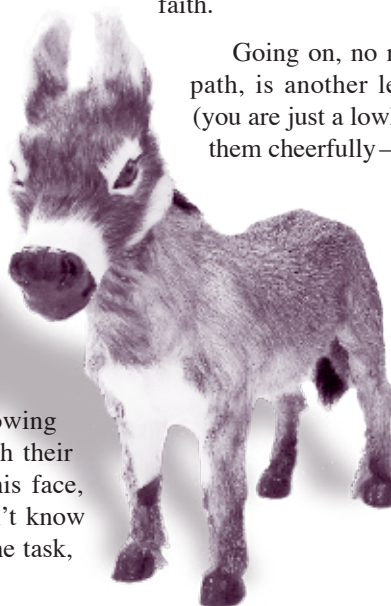
It has to do with what you can't see when you look at them. You can't see their burden. On the day Palm Sunday commemorates, a donkey bore a king. He didn't come to his people in a chariot, but approached them gently, riding on a donkey.

We didn't make a miniature Jesus to ride on our potato donkeys, and it's just as well. A donkey with no visible Jesus on his back is a more consistent image of the life of a Christian today, anyway. Believing in and hoping for what you can't see with your physical eye is the first lesson of faith.

Going on, no matter what's been placed in your path, is another lesson. Knowing your limitations (you are just a lowly creature, after all) and accepting them cheerfully—that's an exercise that never ends.

But bearing your king? There the whole thing breaks down, because we bear his image, not him. No, when I look at these potato donkeys, I don't see Jesus on their back anymore.

I see him at their side, or maybe a little bit ahead of them, guiding and leading the way. And that's another reason I want to be like them.



Easter isn't over

My dad would have loved Alabama, with its golf courses and good food and friendly people. He would have enjoyed going to a Mardi Gras parade, too, but he died before he had a chance to visit us here.

When I went home for my dad's funeral, it took my breath away to look at his body, lying in the casket. "This is not my dad," said my mind, as I stood and stared.

I walked away and sat down. I couldn't stop wondering about his eyelashes and how they brushed against his cheeks so delicately in their death pose. I hated that he was dead, hated that he looked so diminished, so not there. I hated that I hadn't been a better daughter and I hated death. Other deaths make me think of his, even if they're just small ones.

My son had a parakeet named Monday. One day that sweet little bird was calling out from the back of the house like mad. It took me a while to notice there was something different about his cry. There was pain in it.

I rushed into the bedroom where we kept his cage. There, on the top bunk, was my cat Snyder, along with a little gray and white stray cat I'd taken in against my husband's better judgment. Between them lay Monday, squawking in panic and flapping his wounded wings.

I let out a shriek which sent Snyder scurrying out of the room. The stray knew no such shame, but was startled into lifting a paw long enough to let Monday escape. He flew wildly around the room and landed on the floor behind the door.

Poor Monday. He was mortally wounded. I put him in his cage and brought it into our room, hoping to keep him warm and secure, hoping for a little pet miracle.

It didn't happen. Eventually I heard a distinctive moaning and scuffling from the bottom of his cage. Monday was in his death throes and it was awful. I cried and cried.

Looking down at his contorted body, a sad twist of emerald green and blue, I thought about what an enemy death is. Monday's dead body was such a reduction of the delicate bird we had loved.

It haunted me that I was the one who had forgotten and left his cage open. He liked to go in and out at will, and I liked him to have that freedom.



We buried our broken little parakeet in the back yard.

It was a long time before we got another bird. Now we have Romeo, a wonderful love bird we inherited from friends. When the cats are outside, we let him fly around the living room. Sometimes he sits on our heads.

My dad would have loved Romeo.

A while back I dreamed that I walked into our kitchen, and there stood my dad. He was smiling.

I walked up to him, put my arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. "Daddy," I said. His cheek felt real and alive.

It was an overwhelming dream.

By the time this reaches print, my family and I will have celebrated Christ's victory over death. Thinking about it now, I see his body twisted onto a cross, utterly diminished. How good of him not to let the story end there.



How good of him to give me the kind of hope that can look to a time when I really can kiss my dad again. I like to think Monday will be there, too, flying around, flashing his emerald wings, and maybe landing on my dad's head. **BB**