

**Christmas Eve 4:00 pm 24 Dec 2019**  
**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Letter to Santa Claus**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

Who wrote a letter to Santa Claus this year? What do you remember about writing letters to Santa? My family had a tradition of after we wrote our letters to Santa, we burned them in the fireplace, under the pretense that Santa had special machine in the North Pole that drew the smoke from the letters to him and could translate that smoke into the words we wrote. If that sounds weird, that's sort of like how Wi-Fi works. And judging by the presents we got, it worked.

Thank you for sharing those memories with me. Christmas is a good time for those kinds of memories. I have to admit my letters to Santa were probably pretty basic; I don't remember being very eloquent. Usually letters to Santa are about asking for what we want, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's part of the fun of Christmas. But sometimes letters to Santa can embody the very Love of Christmas, the Love the poet Christina Rossetti wrote came down and was born on Christmas.

One such letter was written by a ten-year-old girl whose name was Mary McGann on Christmas Eve in 1917, exactly 102 years ago today. Mary addressed her letter to Santa Claus in "Raindeer Land" and even designed her own stamp with a reindeer on it. She wrote: "Dear Santa Claus, I am very glad that you are coming around tonight. My little brother would like you to bring him a wagon, which I know you cannot afford. I will ask you to bring him whatever you think best. Please bring me something nice what you think best." She signed it, "Mary McGann PS Please do not forget the poor."

After writing her letter, Mary, according to the custom of the time, put it in the chimney in her family's small apartment in Hell's Kitchen, a neighborhood on the west side of midtown Manhattan, which at the time was where many poor and working class Irish immigrants lived. And there her letter stayed tucked away until nearly 100 years later, in 1999 when it was discovered by a man named Peter Mattaliano when he moved into the apartment. Peter and his brother were working on restoring the fireplace that had been bricked up when they found Mary's letter. Not only was it remarkable that it survived all those years and all the fires and weather chimneys experience, the words of the little girl proved more remarkable still, as it was Mary's words that reached out beyond the years and touched Peter's heart.

He was struck by the selflessness of a girl who at age ten asked Santa to remember the poor. Peter wondered what a family who couldn't afford a wagon considered poor.

He said he couldn't get Mary's letter out of his mind or his heart. He did some research and discovered the names of her parents, who were Irish immigrants and a brother. He also learned her father had died when Mary was 6 and her brother 4, leaving their mother who was a dressmaker a single parent. Peter said he could relate; his father had died when he was 12, and he could remember what he called several lean Christmases with his mother and three brothers.

Peter shared the discovery of Mary's letter with a reporter from the New York Times who wrote an article on the letter and its discovery. The article focused on how Peter, who never married and has no children of his own, framed Mary's letter and hung it over the fireplace where it was found. He also purchased antique Christmas tree ornaments he hangs on his tree every year to honor Mary and her brother Alfred. He says he feels their presence and shares his space with them.

And wouldn't it be lovely if the story ended there? But Love, the glorious, powerful, beautiful Love that came down and was born at Christmas is so much deeper than remembrance. It is a love that is about deeper connections which means no one's story is ever really over, and the best is coming up with this story.

With the help of the New York Times reporter, Peter found out more about Mary. He found out she and her family moved to a different neighborhood when she was a teenager and got a job as a stenographer. He learned she married a man named George McGahan, with an H. And he learned that neither Mary nor her brother had children. Peter even found out where Mary and her husband are buried, and he went to visit her grave on Christmas in 2015. But when he found her gravesite, he discovered her name was not on the tombstone. Her husband's name was there, probably because he died before Mary, but her name was not. This deeply troubled Peter. And on that Christmas day as he planted a tree on her gravesite and promised Mary he'd get her name on her tombstone.

This turned out to be a very difficult promise to fill. So much more so than getting a child a wagon for Christmas. The cemetery required him to get permission from Mary's family, but because both her and her brother died childless, it didn't seem she had any living relatives. Eventually Peter found she had a distant cousin who lives in Ireland; he contacted the cousin who sent the necessary paperwork for Peter to add Mary's name to her tombstone, along with a jar of soil from the county in Ireland where Mary's mother grew up. But despite getting the paperwork, the cemetery still would not give permission.

Then, about two weeks before Christmas in 2016, Peter was invited to a meeting for cemetery officials in New York by an official who had read his story in the New York Times. Peter went and used the opportunity to plead for Mary's name to be added to her tombstone. One of the officials in attendance represented the cemetery where

Mary is buried and had no idea Peter had been experiencing such difficulty. Needless to say, the cemetery was much more accommodating after that. And on Christmas Day Peter stood before Mary's tombstone with the words "Loving Wife Mary born 1897 died 1979" engraved in it. Peter sprinkled the soil of Ireland over her grave and knew that he'd be visiting her grave every Christmas Day.

That her Christmas gift came so long after she died doesn't seem to matter because what had really happened is despite never meeting Peter and having died before he moved into her childhood apartment, Peter and Mary have become family, and share a genuine connection of love, a love that transcends time.

You see, Christmas isn't really about getting or giving. It is about a Love that transcends space and time to become human and be with us in our space and our time. This Love became such an integral part of this world and humanity that things like time or death or money or adversity have absolutely no power over it. And every once in a while, something happens, and a person finds themselves unexpectedly struck by this Love and lets this Love into their heart and mind, and when that happens, Christ is born again in and we can grow deeper in Love with God and each other. And absolutely anything can make this happen, even a child's letter to Santa Claus. It's all true.

May we all find that Love that is Christmas. God loves you. May God bless you. And Merry Christmas to you.