

On Easter I learned that Marvin Dixon had died on Palm Sunday.

The news started thoughts turning. I went to my book shelves to look for a book of his poems sent many years ago.

I found the booklet, called “**Poems from Hell – A poetical glimpse into one man’s prison**” by Marvin Dixon.

I opened the cover and read the dedication page:

DEDICATED

- **to those imprisoned in institutions**
- **to those imprisoned and don’t know it**
- **to those in hell and at home with it**
- **to those who don’t know what hell is and should**
- **to Art Morgan, a fellow bard who encouraged this work.**

I had forgotten that dedication so was emotionally stunned to read Marvin’s words. I remained in a semi-stunned — stoned(?) — condition as I read through those poems. He shared the hell of fifteen years behind bars.

He also had sent me his autobiography; “**That Saved a Wretch Like Me.**”

He had been paroled from prison at age 30 after fifteen years in and out of various penal institutions. He tells the sordid story of a ruined and alienated and angry life from the age of 15. If anyone belonged off the streets and in prison it was Marvin.

You have to read the book, written in the language of the prison, to understand that the word “**wretch**” is an accurate and honest description of himself.

If you look up his obituary on Google you will find that he didn’t die in prison as most would have predicted. Instead he died as a retired Christian minister in Clarkston WA, after serving churches in Tacoma and Colorado as well as Clarkston. It will tell you about his graduation from the college that accepted him right out of prison, of his marriage to Dawn, of his two daughters, of his graduation from seminary with a Doctor of Ministry degree.

What happened to bring about such a radical change?

His book tells the *before* story. The obituary only tells about the *after*.

Christianity has a history of collected stories that testify to something awesome at work in human lives. They are new-life stories; healing stories; born again stories; rising up stories; resurrection stories. People believed, not because of what others said happened to Jesus, but what they knew happened to them. They are found in the Gospels.

I have known scores of people who have had “coming about” experiences (to use a sailing term). Some have turned to new life through therapy, or therapy groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, or a marriage, or a word from a professor, or an unexpected job opportunity, or maybe a religious experience like Marvin’s. Or maybe a combination. I don’t think Christianity or the church has a monopoly on this experience.

In spite of what we think about ourselves—or others—people can and do change. A biblical word is “grace.” It’s amazing. So healing, forgiveness, a second chance, new life — are possibilities in the world.

Marvin’s story is summed up in those familiar words: “**Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost and now am found, was blind but now I see.**” He understood God as amazing grace.

As I wrote his brother-in-law, John Bristow, “**Marvin’s rising up story is a story of Easter proportions.**”

Amazing grace *is!*

— Art Morgan, April 17, 2012

BOOK CORNER

Marvin Dixon’s autobiography, “**That Saved a Wretch Like Me**” (Chalice Press) is a gripping story, even after all these years. 140 pages that are not pretty, but are thoroughly honest and inspiring. Find the book on Internet — Amazon or Google books.

The Other Book of 420 pages is “**The Gypsy Life.**” My dad is the historian-author, my mother the artist-illustrator. It describes in vivid detail retirement travels pulling a 16 foot trailer all around the US, including Alaska to Panama, with extensive time in ancient ruins of Mexico. Interesting to “be with” them 40 years later.