

Rev. Sharon Risher
WITH SHERRI WOOD EMMONS

For Such a Time as This

HOPE AND FORGIVENESS AFTER
THE CHARLESTON MASSACRE

FOREWORD BY REV. DR. MICHAEL W. WATERS



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Prologue

On the evening of June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof walked into historic Emanuel African Methodist Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, and joined a group of parishioners gathered for their regular Wednesday Bible study. Emanuel AME is one of the oldest African American churches in the South and has a long history of social justice engagement.

The black congregants warmly welcomed the young white stranger into their group, unaware that he was an avowed white supremacist. They were solidly engaged in learning as Roof stayed nearly an hour with them, quietly listening as they reviewed various passages of Scripture from their study sheet. They had given Roof a copy so he could join in. When the group rose and bowed their heads for a closing prayer, Roof reached into his backpack, pulled out a .45-caliber Glock 41 handgun and began shooting. By the time his rampage ended, he had slaughtered nine people.

As Roof carried out his murderous mission, the Reverend Sharon Risher, a hospital chaplain working in Dallas, was busily engaged in her duties, helping the hurting and distraught. Little did she know she was about to become one of them. Among the lives taken at Mother Emanuel that evening were those of Sharon's mother, two cousins, and a dear childhood friend. The Charleston church shootings thrust Rev. Risher into the national spotlight. She has since become a passionate activist for sensible gun laws in the United States.

This is her story.

Sherri Wood Emmons

June 17, 2015

“Granddaddy done had a good life. We knew this was gonna happen.”

It was a regular Wednesday night at the Dallas hospital where I worked as a chaplain. I was helping a family whose patriarch had died. They were unusually stoic, so I offered to pray with them.

As I prepared to complete the customary paperwork with the family, I realized I didn’t have it with me. I excused myself and went to my office. I still think my forgetting those papers was an intervention by the spirit of God.

I had left my phone charging on my desk and decided to take a moment to check my messages. I’d missed several calls from my daughter, Aja.

The reception was bad in my office, so I took my phone into a conference room and wiggled my way into the corner where I knew I could get a strong signal.

“Aja?”

“Mama, JonQuil called me. Something’s going on at the church in Charleston. Granny’s church.”

My mother’s church was Emanuel African American Methodist Episcopal Church. We all called it Mother Emanuel.

Aja told me all the information she’d been able to gather. My sister’s son, JonQuil, told her something bad had happened at the church, but he had been unable to get more details. He and his mother, Esther, were going down to the church to see what they could find out.

I had a really bad feeling, but I brushed it aside because had to do my job. A family was processing the death of their grandfather.

You don't know what's happening yet in Charleston. Go and help these people who lost their granddaddy, then get back to your office so you can start calling people.

As soon as I returned to my office, I started making calls. I got through to my baby sister, Nadine, who lives in Charleston. She hadn't heard anything, but she was going to go check it out: "I'm putting on some clothes and going down there to the church."

I called JonQuil. He told me, "Auntie, we down at the church but nobody's letting us get close to the building." His tone conveyed his concern. "They just keep saying something happened in the church. Maybe some shooting. We don't know."

He said authorities were gathering family members at a nearby hotel. So while everybody was there, holding onto each other, I was in Dallas alone. I kept calling my nephew and my sisters, but the calls went to voicemail.

Whatever was going on, I knew Momma would have been at church that evening. Every Wednesday there was a Bible study, and she made it her business to be there and make sure the church was ready. She opened the doors and was always one of the last people to leave that church—every night. My mother *loved* that church. As long as she was able to get out of her bed, Ethel Lance was gonna be at that church—you could count on it.

One time she said to me, "For all the things that I might not have done right in my life, the more time I spend in this church, the more I get to talk to God and ask for forgiveness."

"Ma, I don't think you did so many things wrong."

Her tone turned maternal. "Hey, you never stop asking God for strength and forgiveness."

Every Sunday, she loved to discuss the sermon with me after church. She would call and say, "Girl, Rev. Pinckney threw *down* today."

I knew she was gone. I had nothing to confirm it, but I just knew. My shift wasn't over for another hour, but I needed to get home. I left early. I had to pull off the road twice because I was crying so hard. The usual twenty-five-minute drive took me an hour that night.

By the time I got home, the nightly news broadcast was filling in some of the details my family couldn't. A gunman had entered Mother Emanuel and started shooting. I kept saying to myself: *This can't be happening. This just can't be happening.* There was no mention

of fatalities at that point. The reporters kept repeating that they didn't have all the details.

My head felt like it was exploding. I couldn't think. I didn't want to be by myself. But who could I call to be with me?

I paced my apartment smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and staring at the news. I kept reaching out to family members—calling, and calling, and calling. No one answered.

I drifted off to sleep on the couch, likely out of sheer exhaustion.

Finally, my niece, Najee, called about three in the morning. She was with a FBI chaplain. She confirmed what I already knew in my spirit but hoped I would never hear: Momma was in the church.

Momma was dead.

My body felt like it would crumble. I already knew something bad had happened, but I just kept thinking it couldn't really be *that* bad.

I heard screams. They were mine. Screaming was all I could do. I don't remember the rest of the conversation with Najee and the chaplain. My poor dog Puff. He had never heard a guttural sound like that coming from his favorite human, so he started barking. *Oh Lord, I gotta stop screaming. It's three o'clock in the morning and there are people living upstairs. I gotta get myself together. I made myself stop screaming.*

When I finally calmed down, I grabbed Puff and fell down onto the couch. Lying in a semi-catatonic state, I held onto Puff and I just cried. I was on my own. *Who can I call at this time of night? Who can I call? I can't call nobody.* I was in that abyss that we sing about so often in the Black Church—that time when you're poignantly aware that you have nobody but Jesus to talk to.

Later that morning I called my boss at the hospital. It went directly to her voicemail. "Linda, I wanted to let you know that my momma was killed last night in the Charleston church shooting." I guess I was blunt, but I didn't know a better way to say that I was in the midst of the worst tragedy of my life.

Finally, I called my son, Brandon. We talked and we cried. And then we cried some more. We decided not to call Aja right away. I knew she would be exhausted. She had been up all night. *Let her sleep. God knows, we all needed some sleep.*

For the next two days, I stayed in my pajamas. I didn't even bother to shower. I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. I drank coffee and smoked cigarettes.

I didn't leave my apartment. I couldn't pull myself away from the television updates that really didn't tell me anything new. Still, I wanted to see everything. *Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe they'll find out that Momma was in the bathroom when the shooting happened. She could have been cleaning up. That's what she did! Maybe she got the chance to hide somewhere. I know she was in the church, but maybe she found a way to escape the carnage. She can't really be dead.* Everything was a blur.

My support system in Dallas wasn't very big. I had friends at work, but we didn't do a lot together outside of work. I knew people at the church I'd been attending, but ministers generally don't form personal relationships with the people in the church.

Truthfully, even before the tragedy, I had started to pull away from that church because I realized that I was going nowhere in ministry there. So maybe the people at the church really didn't know how to deal with me in the aftermath.

Despite the distant relationship, the morning after the shootings, the pastor and the bishop of the district came to see me. I was looking like hell run over, and I knew it. I didn't care. I was just a mess.

"What can the church do to support you?" They asked with genuine concern.

Well, I needed to get reservations to go home. But where would the extra money come from? Hospital chaplains don't make a lot of money, and I didn't have an emergency fund for something like this.

They already had a check prepared.

Then the bishop asked if I would do a press conference.

My immediate thought was, *This lady must be crazy.* I was sure my thought showed on my face. "Press conference? No, I'm not gonna be able to do a press conference. And please at this time don't divulge my name."

They respected my wishes. When the Texas news airwaves reported there was a Dallas connection to the killings, they just said a chaplain from Parkland Hospital.

At some point during those first days my boss and two of my coworkers came to see me. I don't remember a lot about the visit, but I remember they brought food and an envelope of money they had collected.

I spent a lot of time on the phone those first two days, talking with Brandon and Aja, and my sister Esther. She was having a very

hard time. Her son JonQuil thought he might have to take her to the emergency room at one point. She couldn't stop crying.

Esther, hold on. Hold on, Esther. I'm coming. I was the oldest, and Esther always gave me the respect of an elder. I kept trying to reassure her on the phone, "Hold on, Esther. I'm coming. I'm coming."

My kids then were just as dazed as I was; still, they were trying to make sure that their mother was okay. For them, it was like walking on eggshells. They didn't know what to say; and if they did, would it set me off on another crying binge?

I'm kind of like my momma when it comes to giving attention to details. I'm a planner, so I was trying to make sure things were being arranged while I collected myself to make the plane trip home. "Okay, what time am I gonna leave? You know I want to get to Charleston early. Let's not mess around." So I was probably getting on their nerves. But they were focused on making sure that I was able to get to Charleston.

Even after days of watching, I could not tear myself away from the television. If I was awake, the TV was on. The day after the murders, the police arrested Dylann Roof—I hate to even acknowledge his name. The news outlets had been showing a video of him leaving the church. The next day a woman recognized him driving his car and called the police. He was taken to jail in North Charleston.

Evil.

The first time I saw him, saw his face, he personified evil to me. I was stunned by his youth, though. *How did such a young boy get so much hate inside him?* His eyes looked dead. That picture they showed of him with that little smirk on his face—I hate to see that picture because it represents pure evil to me. It's gotten better for me as time has passed, but that look in his eyes is just haunting.

I was captivated by the proceedings on television. *Praise God! You are not gonna get away with this. They got you now. They got you now.*

On June 19, Dylann Roof appeared in court by video from the jail. The whole thing was televised, and I was transfixed on the screen, still watching from Dallas.

How could this be? How could this be? They are actually talking about my momma, a little old lady who—I mean, not an old lady, because Momma was so spry and spunky—but a person who, you know, wasn't nobody. She was everything to her family, but she was kind of nobody in the grand scheme of things—just a nameless black woman who faithfully went to church every chance she got—except to us. And now her name was on

nationwide TV. She was killed in church by this little fool. I just could not understand.

Many of the victims' relatives attended the hearing, and I was feeling guilty because I wasn't there. I felt like I should have been there with my sisters, Nadine and Esther. Since Momma had died, that sort of made me the family matriarch.

The judge extended an unexpected invitation to family members to address the killer. I later learned that since none of the family members had prepared statements, no one was planning to say anything.

Nadine accepted the judge's offer. As she walked toward the podium, everybody looked at each other like, *Oh hell. We don't know what is getting ready to come out of her mouth*—because, honestly, we just never did know what our sister would say.

True to her reputation, she said something totally unexpected, just what would be expected from her. "I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again—but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

I started screaming again. Nadine's words went through me hard, like an electric shock. I wasn't ready to forgive. *Did she think she was speaking for the entire family? How dare she?!*

I felt faint. I was light-headed and my stomach felt like it had dropped—upside down. I stayed on the couch holding my precious Puff while the tears rolled down my cheeks. The daughter's raw hurt forced its way in front of the measured composure of the ordained minister who dealt with grief and hurt on a daily basis. I have studied the Bible for scholarly and for personal reasons. I know that God commands us to forgive, but I was not ready to forgive this monster who killed my mother.

People can judge me any way they want. Forgiveness is a process. I will get there when I get there. I answer to God.

My faith had carried me through many life hurdles. But could it carry me over this mountain of grief, anger, and loss?