

# Letter from Rebecca Young in Indonesia

April 27, 2009

## With Mary and Martha at the tomb

Friends,

At 3:00 a.m. on Easter morning, I was awakened by the enthusiastic chattering of young girls, ages 6 to 19, eagerly assembling bamboo, fuel, and matches to light torches so we could “go with Mary and Martha to visit Jesus’ tomb.”



Left to right: Rodelina Wader, Becca Young, and Rodelina's nieces Neta and Veronica, on Easter Sunday, 2009, Biak, Papua.

I was visiting the island of Biak, located along the southwestern edge of the Pacific Ocean. A friend of mine, Rodelina Wader, is from Biak and lives in the town of Bosnik, where she coordinates women’s activities for the Presbytery of East Biak. I first knew Rodelina 20 years ago when I worked in west Papua as a nutritionist.

It was exciting to see her again and celebrate Easter with her and her family in Biak, a part of the province of Papua. Papua is the only one of 33 provinces in Indonesia that is predominantly Protestant, with 87 percent of its two million inhabitants professing Christianity.

It was a thrill to get to see how these faithful people welcomed the resurrection of our Lord. We had been to church services on Good Friday and Saturday morning, at the decent hour of 9:00 a.m. each day, but on Sunday we got an early start. The girls, consisting of Rodelina’s nieces and her daughter, Miranda, quietly rapped on my door to ask me to join the procession.

We walked out into the night under the light of a spectacular full moon. Our path took us along a quiet beach, with moonbeams bouncing off the waves and illuminating the way. Eventually we met up with a larger group, torches lit, gathered in the middle of the road singing Easter songs, such as:

Hey, Mary, don’t cry  
The tomb of Jesus  
is already opened.  
Who opened it?  
Angels opened it  
For those of us whose life is fleeting.



Rodelina's daughter Miranda and friend Maranike accompany Mary and Martha in search of the empty tomb, Biak, Papua, April 12, 2009.



Carrying torches in the pre-dawn beneath the full moon, Biak, Papua, April 12, 2009

They also sang other more familiar tunes, translated into Indonesian, such as “I’ve Got the Joy Joy Joy Joy,” and “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God.” They sang with amazing energy at such an early hour, but they were clearly filled with the spirit of Easter. It was inspiring to imagine that we were sharing the joy that Mary and Martha felt when discovering the empty tomb.

We waited for other groups from various parts of town to join us, then set off in the direction of the church. Eventually there were 250 of us, some with guitars walking alongside strumming along to the various songs of joy and triumph.

Arriving at the churchyard, we formed a semi-circle on the lawn, lit only by

torchlight. The church pastor led us in more songs as the sun began to burst through the clouds just east of us. Within moments the entire sky was illuminated in a variety of pinks and yellows and blues. After a brief worship service, we headed back to Rodelina’s house for a nap and breakfast before going to the Easter service.



Sunrise service in the yard of the Bosnik Christian Church, Biak, Papua, April 12, 2009.

The sheer joy and excitement of the event is hard to capture in words. These people truly felt that they had accompanied the women to Jesus’ tomb and discovered it empty, so their elation was palpable throughout the celebration.

### A brief history of Papua

It is especially fascinating to witness the strong faith of the Papuan people in light of their history. Beginning in 1898, they were a Dutch colony referred to as Dutch New Guinea (the western half of the island of Papua). But in 1961, just as the Dutch were promoting independence for the Papuans, the Indonesians invaded and demanded the Dutch hand over the coveted territory.

President Kennedy pressed the Dutch to place Papua under Indonesian control as a temporary measure to control what a White House advisor referred to as “a few thousand miles of cannibal land.” The unpublished goal was to keep the Indonesian dictator, Sukarno, from straying too far towards Moscow and communism. In reality, Sukarno knew exactly how to play the various powers against each other, and in doing so gained unhindered access to one of the richest islands in the world in natural resources. A single American company extracting copper and other minerals out of Papua pays the Indonesian government an estimated \$1 billion per year in taxes.

The Indonesian government also continues to practice what’s called “transmigration,” in which people from the heavily populated areas of Java and Bali move to Papua and are given prime real estate, houses, and schools plus capital for starting businesses. Although the stated purpose is to reduce overpopulation, it has the added effect of reducing the power, status, and livelihood of the local Papuans, as they are pushed off their land and bereft of government support of any kind.

Not surprisingly, considering the circumstances, an active rebellion movement has been ongoing in Papua since 1965. The number of Papuans killed by the Indonesian military in the past 44 years is hard to determine (the government is loath to admit the scale of the violence), but estimates range from 200,000 to 500,000 people. Thirteen people have already died this month alone, although the military

have tried to blame the deaths on the rebels. On April 17, the Papuan Union of Baptist Churches publicly accused the military of creating paramilitary groups to incite anger and violence against the separatists, a notion given credence by the Indonesian Chief of Police.

On March 23, the 85-year-old leader of the rebellion movement, Nicholas Jouwe, returned for the first time in 40 years from exile in Australia and called for peace with Indonesia.

Let us join together in prayer that this positive move by the well-respected leader will lead to peace and some measure of prosperity for the long-suffering people of Papua.

In the meantime, thanks be to God for the strength of the Papuan Christians' faith in spite of their struggles, and for their enthusiasm in accompanying Mary and Martha each year to discover, with great awe and delight, the empty tomb.

Christ has risen! Alleluia.

Becca Young

*The 2009 Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study*, p. 113