

“In My Seat”

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I have friends from church and last fall they sent me an e-mail with a story, and I found it so profound that I wanted to hold on to it and save it for this morning.

It is about a gentleman named Steve Scheibner and his wife named Megan. Steve is a pilot for American Airlines. He has been with American since 1991. He was the first officer at the time. Before that he was in the Navy and flew P-3s out of Brunswick, Maine, and he flew on active duty for eight years in the Navy. He had over 3500 hours in those P-3s and is currently flying Boeing 757 and 767 airplanes.

Now Steve was a pilot in September of 2001. We all remember that date very clearly. But Steve's story starts the day before on September 10, 2001.

Steve said, “September 10 means a great deal to me. I did what I usually did on that day. It was the day before the day I was able to fly again. My flying is broken into blocks of availability, so I was finishing a break and coming back for another block of availability and that started on September 11.

So at 3:00 p.m. on September 10, I logged in on the computer and I set up a time to fly. I looked and there was only one flight available on September 11. It was a trip from Boston to Los Angeles: flight 11. It was a 2-day trip and no pilot had yet been assigned. So I logged in and put my name on it. It [the log] shows up the pilot's name and the flight number, then the plane number and all of the other specific information.

“I have had to go through a lot of drills,” Steve said, “over the years - especially for an overnight flight.”

He walked in and told his wife, “I signed up for a flight, from Boston to Los Angeles tomorrow.”

So he went out to the car, popped the trunk got out the luggage with all of his dirty clothes in it (because let's face it that is where guys keep their dirty clothes until they just have to change them). He threw all of the dirty clothes in the washer and got out his other stuff, and his wife was ironing his shirts and put the epaulets on, and got him packed.

The final assignment comes via a phone call that day. No phone call - no assignment. But this was late in the day and he was sure he was going to fly. The only way he wouldn't fly is within a half-hour window when one of the pilots who was more senior would have the opportunity to bump him, but that was very rare. So he waited for that half hour from 3:00-3:30. No phone call. He thought that was strange. “But,” he thought. “Hey, I get paid for the trip and I get the day off.”

What he was unaware of at the time, was another pilot named Tom McGuinness, who was one of the line-holding pilots who had seniority. He was celebrating his birthday on September 10, with his wife and children. So he didn't call in until the very last minute, with about 5 minutes left in that half-hour window. He called in and asked if he could bump whoever was on that last flight. He had logged on and saw Steve Scheibner's name, so he asked if he could still bump Scheibner. The woman said, “You still have five minutes. Yes, you can.”

In that moment, with just five minutes left, Tom McGuinness bumped Steve Scheibner off flight 11, from Boston to Los Angeles that was to take off relatively early on September 11.

It was a beautiful day in New England. They pushed back from the gate on time and took off on time. They went up to 23,000 feet and Tom engaged the autopilot. It was at that point that all hell broke loose. There is no other word to describe what happened.

At 6:31/15:33 time, flight attendant Betty Ong makes an emergency call from Flight 11: "Somebody's stabbed in business class, and I think there's a mace. We can't breathe and I don't know, but think we're getting hi-jacked."

They asked, "What flight are you on?"

"Flight 11, Boston to Los Angeles. Our number 1 has been stabbed and our number 5 has been stabbed; can anybody get up to the cockpit? Can anybody get up to the cockpit, they are not answering their phone, and we don't know who is up there."

"Betty, are you still there, talk to me. Betty, are you there? Betty?" That was the last they heard.

While that was going on Megan Scheibner didn't have a TV or radio on. She was helping her kids with homework. When a head controller contacted her from the airline (this man has called before) and asked, "Where is Steve today?" She said, "He is at the Navy. He went to work since he didn't get an airline trip."

The controllers were scared. They thought he [Steve] had been on the flight, and they were going to be calling his wife and dealing with a distraught woman at the loss of her husband.

The emotional gravity that Steve felt didn't really happen until his cell phone rang. In that moment a secretary from a school that he had taught in called him. When he said, "hello," she started to cry. Then Steve said he started to cry, because he realized at that moment that she thought he had been killed. He immediately got another call, as he hung up, from a friend from Texas, and Steve said to himself, "I need to get ahead of this." So he started making phone calls, first to his wife and family then anyone he could get a hold of.

He still didn't realize which plane. He just thought everyone was calling anybody who had a relationship with American Airlines. He didn't realize that the flight that he was supposed to be on was the one he was now watching on TV himself. He said it never clicked with him that, even though he knew the flight number, it just didn't click. He felt he was in too much shock.

When it finally clicked with him later on that evening, he thought, "I wonder who *was* on that flight? I wonder if I can find out?" He went to his computer and logged in the same way he had the day before - on September 10 - at the American Airlines site and looked in. What came up on the screen looked exactly like it did before: same flight number, same plane numbers, all of the other information, except where it said Scheibner, S. It said: "Sequence Failed Continuity." Those three words were code for the airlines which meant the plane never made it to its destination. What an understatement!

Steve Scheibner said, "When I got that information, I was overwhelmed; that was my flight."

He said, "I packed my bags for that flight."

Then he was even more curious. "Who bumped me?" he thought. "Who took my seat on that plane on that day?" The words could not describe that moment of realization that it should have been him, and this odd sense of guilt Steve felt - even when it was beyond his control - and that someone else died in his place.

Steve said, "Twenty years ago, I wrote a life objective and it goes like this: To seek, trust and glorify God through humble service and continual prayer. To rise up qualified disciples as quickly as possible. So that someday I might hear God say, 'Well done good and faithful servant!'"

"September 11th took my life objective to a whole new intensified level," Steve said. "The fire just keeps getting hotter now. But someday, I want to stand in the Lord's presence, and hear Him say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.'"

I would hate to get in God's presence and hear him say, "Well, Schreibner, I see your name is written here. Well, why don't you go and have a seat?"

"I don't ever want to hear that," Steve said. "I want to hear, 'well done my good and faithful servant,'"

"I need to hear him say that," he said. "That is what is on my plate these days. That is what motivates me." Steve said, "Why does God take one and leave another? It's not because I'm a better person than Tom, or God wanted to do more with me than what he could have done with Tom."

Steve said, "I think, in God's providence that is just God's choice. What has stuck with me all of these years - he did not leave me behind. I need to act like I am living on borrowed time because I am. I can look and see my smoking hole, because it was on national television for everyone to see. I saw where I should have died - but I didn't - and now there is an obligation that comes with that. I have to live my days with the sense of urgency, and I have to make sure that I make the most out of every one of them and not the most for me. I think we live in a world where everyone tries to get the most for them. It is not about me. This is about the distinct privilege I have been given that someone died in my place."

"What I know is that somebody died in my place - not just once but twice; that is where God comes into the whole thing for me," Steve said, "You see Tom sat in the seat that I was qualified to sit in, and by all rights that was my seat day. I should have been in that seat. In fact, I have sat in the seat that Tom sat in." Steve said, "I have flown every one of the 757s and the 767s that American Airlines owns - flown in every one of them - including that one. It should have been me. But Tom didn't die for my sins."

"Jesus Christ is the other one who died in my place. He hung on a cross for to pay a price for me, that I wasn't qualified to pay. I was qualified to take Tom's place, but I was not qualified to take Christ's place. I didn't have the same qualifications as Jesus. So one guy sat in a seat I should have sat in and the other one hung on a cross for each one of us."

But it didn't stop there. Jesus didn't just die for us. Jesus was resurrected for each one of us.

Now, a couple of weeks ago, Ken came into my office - and when Ken comes into your office with that glint in his eye, you worry, because there is always something interesting going to come out of his mouth when he does that. He came up with the most profound statement and I'm so glad he didn't use it when he was preaching last Sunday, so I could steal it for today. Ken said, "God didn't roll the stone away; to let Jesus out. Jesus didn't need to have the stone removed because he had already been resurrected, he could have walked right through that stone. The stone was removed not so Jesus could get out but so we could get in."

The resurrection was as much - if not more - for us getting in than it was about Jesus or his getting out. This day isn't to commemorate what happened to Jesus over 2000 years ago; this day is a day of celebration where we shout, like I taught the children, because Easter morning is the moment the resurrection began for Jesus and for each one of us. The resurrection doesn't happen when we die, the resurrection is already happening in our lives right here, right now, this day. We live in moments

that can be painful and can even feel like death. In those moments Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, enters our lives; picks us up and makes us live again; giving us hope and renewal.

That is resurrection in the moments we are living right now; Jesus brings life and in that moment when we take our last breath on earth that resurrection continues as we are lifted up from death to life anew in God's Heavenly Kingdom for all eternity. That is just another part in the resurrection that we are already experiencing. You are living eternity right now, but most of us don't act like it. We don't live with that kind of joy, we don't live with that kind of hope and assurance, and yet we should be.

Like Steve, we are living on borrowed time on earth, but on eternal terms the resurrection has already begun and by the grace of God we are already accepted; invited in and God is already saying to you and to me, "you are my good and faithful servant."

You come to church on Easter Sunday, not hopefully to satisfy your spouse, or hoping that the sermon or the music will be entertaining, I mean, it's a plus if it is, but that is not why you are here, hopefully. You are here to give thanks to God, who took your seat for you and by grace rolled the stone away so that you and I could go in and experience the resurrection relationship with God for all eternity. That is what should have brought you here this morning and will bring you back every week, week after week, month after month and year after year, for the rest of your earthly life. You and I have a lot of love and grace to be thankful for, because it has all come from God and given as a free gift for you.

Renew your faith, appreciate the seat on the cross Jesus took for you and rejoice in the grace that rolls that stone of separation away, and allows God to say to you, each new day, "Come, my good and faithful servant, who I will love now and always." Amen