

Men wanted for Hazardous Journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.

In August of 1914 an incredible attempt to cross the continent of Antarctica began. This expedition was led by an Englishman named Ernest Shackleton, who published the ad above, and the initial excitement of it was soon overshadowed by the immersion of the world into war. A total of 28 men embarked in ship ironically or appropriately enough named the Endurance and began the voyage to the south. They stopped briefly at a whaling station on South Georgia Island before they continued their journey to the continent. They never made landfall there, for they became stuck fast in the ice on January 24, 1915. Though they had a radio, the technology was in its infant stages and they were totally without communication with the outside world. These men were captive in their ship in the ice floe until October 27, nine months later, when the pressure of thousands of tons of ice finally crushed the ship. It took nearly another month for it to sink.

The members of the expedition off-loaded all the equipment that they could and three lifeboats onto the ice pack. They began to move across the ice pack using sledges, but the pack eventually melted and broke apart. After four and one-half months on the ice the men were finally able to get into their boats on April 9, 1916 and make their way to a barren rock named Elephant Island. Shackleton then began preparations to cover one of the boats for the open sea, for there was no hope to be rescued where they were. Leaving the bulk of the party there, six of the men made the journey in seventeen days over 650 miles to return to the 25 mile long island of South Georgia. Once there, though, they were forced by very stormy weather to land on the side of the island opposite the whaling camp. There was nothing to do but climb a mile in elevation over the icy mountains of the interior of the island. This took nearly 30 hours for Shackleton and two others. But finally they approached the station office after being away from this island for nearly 18 months.

As we sit in the comfort of our homes it is difficult to imagine the hardships that these men endured in the year and a half of sub-arctic isolation. Their hair hung down to their shoulders, and their beards were matted with salt and blubber oil. Their clothes were filthy, threadbare, and torn. They were covered with grime and were all but unrecognizable. Even with all of the news of the war, the whalers knew that the expedition had been given up for lost and its members dead. Imagine the shock and awe that fell upon one of Shackleton's friends when one of these "monsters" came to him and said, "Don't you know me? My name is Shackleton." Some have recorded that his friend turned away and wept.

There is another great story of someone who was thought dead but made an appearance to his friends. Jesus Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene, the two on the road to Emmaus, and finally to his apostles. Imagine the sense of awe that struck his followers as he appeared in their locked hide-out room. I think that he appeared to them blood stained and bruised and looking pretty rough. We know that he still had the scars from his crucifixion. As Isaiah wrote, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him... But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." Christ appears also to each of us, knocking on the door of our hearts. He comes with no particular outward beauty, but the Good that comes from within him is much more powerful. We must be inspired by him and accept him fully into our lives.

The epilog to this story is that Shackleton had to make three attempts before he was able to save the remaining twenty-two men from Elephant Island. But save them he did on August 3, 1916 after two years away from civilization. They did not panic, for they had faith in their leader, and not a single man was lost. There is also salvation for us through Jesus Christ who went through even greater hardships for us. We must also have faith that he can and will save us.