

THE SIGNAL FIRE ON WATCHTOWER HILL



In the small lakeside town of Willow Creek, people left their doors unlocked and waved to each other from their porches. Children rode their bikes freely through quiet streets, and the scent of pine trees drifted down from the hills.

Above the town stood an old stone tower on a ridge called Watchtower Hill. No one remembered who built it, but everyone knew why it remained. It was there to watch the sky, because one day, Jesus would return.

Every Saturday afternoon, five friends climbed the hill together: Aiden, Sofia, Noah, Mei, and Mateo. They came from different neighborhoods and they were good friends.

Aiden carried binoculars. Sofia carried a small notebook. Mateo carried snacks, always more than necessary. Mei brought a flashlight and a small toolkit. Noah brought questions, endless questions.

As they climbed, Noah kicked a pebble down the path.

— Do you really think Jesus will come back someday?

Sofia answered without looking up from her notebook.

— He promised. And promises matter.

They reached the tower and looked across the valley. The lake shimmered. Smoke curled gently from chimneys. Everything looked peaceful. Too peaceful.

Aiden lowered the binoculars.

— Nothing ever happens.

— Watching is kind of boring — shrugged Mateo.

Mei pointed to the words carved into the stone wall beside the tower entrance:

Stay awake. Stay ready. Love one another.

— That's how we prepare while we wait — said Sofia.

One afternoon in the town square, they saw a man shouting through a megaphone. A cardboard sign hung from his neck: **JESUS IS RETURNING IN THREE DAYS!** — Sell your things! Quit your jobs! Nothing matters anymore! — he cried.

Some people stopped to listen. Others shook their heads and walked away.

Noah looked worried: — What if he's right?

— People have been guessing forever. — said Aiden shaking his head.

— Jesus never told us to guess the day. — Sofia argued. — He told us how to live while we wait.

That evening, as they climbed Watchtower Hill, they saw Mrs. Alvarez struggling to carry heavy grocery bags up her steps.

— Watching can wait. — said Mateo running to help her.

They all followed Mateo, carrying the bags, steadying the door, and listening as she thanked them again and again.

On the way back up the hill, Noah said quietly:

— Maybe waiting doesn't mean doing nothing.

Inside the tower stood an iron bowl filled with stacked firewood.

— Ok, so if Jesus returns, we light the signal fire — Sofia explained.

— What if we miss it? — said Noah looking at the wood.

Aiden pointed to the carved words again. — If we live like that, we won't miss it.

They soon discovered being ready had less to do with staring at the sky and more to do with how they treated people.

Next day at school, Mateo accidentally knocked over his juice, soaking Noah's science project. The room went silent. Noah's face turned red. — Mateo! I worked on that for two weeks!

— I didn't mean to — Mateo whispered.

Everyone watched. Noah clenched his fists. Then he remembered the words on the tower wall: **Love one another**. He took a deep breath. — It's okay. We can fix it.

After school, they stayed late rebuilding the project together. The new one turned out even better. On the walk home, Mei smiled. — Love didn't just fix the project. It fixed the moment.

A week later, during a cold rain, they noticed a boy sitting alone at the bus stop with a soaked suitcase. Aiden approached him. — Hi. I'm Aiden.

The boy hesitated. — My name is Amir. We just moved here.

Mei stepped forward. — You know people now.

They brought him to Watchtower Hill. Mateo shared snacks. Sofia told stories. Noah demonstrated how to skip stones. Amir laughed for the first time since arriving in the new city.

He looked around the tower. — It feels safe here.

Noah shook his head. — It's not the tower. It's the people.

Soon they discovered everyone had something to give proving what Noah said. Aiden helped fix Amir's broken bike. Mei shared extra mittens from her backpack. Sofia helped with homework. Mateo shared food. Noah shared jokes.

Amir shared courage, the courage it took to start over somewhere new.

One night, a violent storm rolled across the valley. Wind roared. Rain lashed against windows. Lightning split the sky. From their homes, the friends saw a flash strike near Watchtower Hill. By morning, they discovered the fire bowl had tipped and the wood had scattered across the stone floor. If Jesus returned, the signal fire could not be lit.

Without hesitation, they ran up the muddy path. Wind pushed against them. Rain soaked their coats. Working together, they gathered the wood. Aiden relit the lantern while Mateo cupped his hands to protect the flame. Mei steadied the bowl, and Sofia carefully stacked the wood beside them. Noah held the light firm and unwavering as Amir stepped in front, shielding everything from the wind.

When they finished, they sat against the stone wall, exhausted and soaked. — Why did we come in the storm? — asked Amir.

Aiden nodded toward the carved words. — Because being ready matters.

— And because we do it together. — said Sofia.

The next morning dawned bright and calm. Jesus had not returned, at least not in the way they expected. But something in Willow Creek had changed.

Neighbors worked side by side, repairing broken fences. Warm meals were passed from hand to hand, and people paused to check on one another. Mrs. Alvarez waved from her porch as Amir rode past on his newly repaired bike.

Noah looked around in wonder. — It feels like the town is glowing.

— Maybe this is part of being ready. — replied Sofia. — Maybe when we love, serve, forgive, and welcome, we're lighting the signal fire with our lives.

That evening, they climbed Watchtower Hill again. The valley stretched peacefully below. No trumpets. No shining armies. Only the quiet beauty of Willow Creek.

But inside their hearts, something burned brighter than firewood: hope, love, readiness.

Noah read the carved words once more. — Stay awake. Stay ready. Love one another. — He smiled. — I think we're finally learning how to watch.

High above the quiet town, the signal fire waited, not only in wood and stone, but in hearts learning to love like Jesus. And until the day He returns, His people keep the fire burning.

This story was adapted from Rev. Lucas Bruder's sermon "The End of Times is Near", with the assistance of AI tools.