

Immaculée Ilibagiza speaks at USF St. Petersburg

In her native language, her name means “shining in body and soul.” She is radiant, her face glowing with an inner light. She doesn’t look like the survivor of a genocide which killed 1 million people in Rwanda. She doesn’t look like the university student who hid in a tiny bathroom for three months. She doesn’t look like the woman who lost nearly everyone she loved.

Although she has survived unimaginable horrors, Immaculée Ilibagiza has dedicated her life to helping others. On April 14, she shared her story of hope with 500 people at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

Ilibagiza’s message was threefold. She urged listeners to find hope, forgiveness, and love.

“No matter how dark it seems to be, there is always hope,” Ilibagiza said. “And light will come.”

Many audience members were familiar with Ilibagiza’s story from her New York Times best-seller, “Left to Tell.” But they still hung on her every word.

“The crowd was mesmerized,” said Carolyn Bass, executive director of the Florida Holocaust Museum.

Ilibagiza says she was born in paradise. Her Tutsi parents, both teachers, raised their children without racism. Their village was a mix of Hutus and Tutsis living in relative harmony. But others in Rwanda did not share their tolerance. In 1994, the Rwandan government launched a genocide against the Tutsi tribe. They urged Hutus to “cleanse” the country of every Tutsi.

Ilibagiza’s father sent her to hide in a friendly Hutu pastor’s home. He gave her a rosary.

“That was the last gift I got from my father,” Ilibagiza said.

For three months, Ilibagiza crammed into a secret bathroom with seven other women.

Their only contact with the outside world was the disturbing news they heard on the radio.

“Don’t forget the children,” the government leaders said, inciting listeners to violence. “A child of a cockroach is a cockroach.”

It was only a matter of time before the killers came for Ilibagiza.

Through a tiny window in the bathroom, Ilibagiza watched them come. A mob of 300, armed with machetes, guns and grenades, surrounded the house. Old schoolmates and friends were now transformed into devils, with horns glued to their heads.

Ilibagiza froze with fear. “It’s over, it’s over,” she thought.

She heard a voice inside her mind. “They’re going to kill you. Open the door of the bathroom. End the torture. Why wait?”

The killers searched the roof, the ceiling. They checked under the carpets for hidden rooms. Ilibagiza’s fear was so intense that pain seared her body.

Another voice, much gentler, spoke to Ilibagiza. “Don’t you remember? Ask God to help you. He is Almighty, and Almighty is what? It means he can do anything. Ask him to help you.”

The killers stabbed suitcases with their machetes in case Tutsi babies were inside.

The first voice hissed again. “There is no God. Stop it.”

The killers searched under the beds. They approached the bathroom door, touched it.

Ilibagiza heard the gentle voice again. “Ask God to give you a sign that he’s listening. Don’t give up. Don’t open that door.”

Ilibagiza began to pray. She begged God: “Don’t let the killers find the door of the bathroom.” She fainted.

When she awoke, the killers had left. She asked the pastor what happened.

After the mob had searched for two hours, one of the men had found the bathroom door. He had turned and looked at the pastor.

“We trust you,” the killer had said, and walked away.

And then Ilibagiza knew. God was real. He could hear her, even trapped inside this tiny room. She began praying to him every day.

“It was a new way of life for me,” Ilibagiza said. Her faith kept her alive.

When Ilibagiza finally left the hidden bathroom, she found her parents, two of her brothers, and her grandparents dead, along with 900 of her schoolmates. Bodies were piled everywhere. She described it as “the end of the world” – an apocalypse.

But Ilibagiza has turned tragedy into a story of hope.

“It is such a great joy to know that a horrible story can bring out something good in people,” Ilibagiza said.

She once visited the man who killed her family. She told him three words: “I forgive you.” Today, she urges listeners to do the same.

“If I can forgive, anyone can,” she said.

Bass said she was moved by Ilibagiza’s ability to forgive. “I’ve met very few Holocaust survivors who have turned around and forgiven,” she said. “That’s really deep faith.”

Ilibagiza said our daily challenge is to love. “How strong can you love? How can you persevere? How can you still reach out?” she asked.

Megan Bailey, an English major at USFSP, said she was inspired by Ilibagiza’s speech. “As a Christian myself, I appreciate everything she’s doing,” Bailey said.

Ilibagiza left her audience with a message. “Hold onto God.”