

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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## Peering Through Death's Door

Matthew 28:1-10

Most of us know that story. We've heard it before in one form or another. We just don't know quite what to do with it. After all, in our experience dead bodies stay dead. Truth be told, in the disciples' experience, dead bodies stayed dead. In the soldiers' experience dead bodies stayed dead. To those who wonder if Jesus really died on the cross — you've heard those rumors, I'm sure — to those who question if he was really dead, I ask you, do you seriously believe a soldier could be fooled? Is there a veteran soldier who doesn't know death when he sees it? Jesus was dead all right. Dead and gone. Count on it. And in our experience, in the disciples' experience, in the soldiers' experience, that was the end of the story. Dead is dead. Period.

So it was that a couple of women went to the tomb shortly after dawn that morning after Sabbath. They went according to their custom to cleanse his dead body, to prepare it for a proper burial. They went fully expecting to find what we expect to find when we go to a funeral home. They expected to see a body. Only it wasn't all prettied up by a funeral director. It wasn't embalmed and dressed in Sunday best. They expected a messy, dirty, broken, bloody body, dead since Friday, but because of the late hour, because there was such an argument over taking his body down from the cross, they didn't have time to properly prepare it for burial. So the women went to the tomb shortly after dawn to do just that. They went to prepare a body for burial.

They went to bath him with their tears, to wash away the dried blood and to cleanse the deep wounds. They went to caress him and to cleanse and brush his hair. Perhaps you wonder what's the point? Why do that? Why indeed! When your heart is broken, just doing something, anything helps, even washing the body with your tears and anointing the body with fragrant oil. They went to the tomb as much to mend their broken hearts as to prepare his body for a proper burial. No surprise there. In the world as we know it, just doing something, even if it is bathing a body is medicine for the soul.

So far, you'll note, everything is as we would expect it to be. God is in his heaven. That body is in the tomb, and all is right with the world, as they say. There have been no surprises except, perhaps, the continuing shock of it all. Jesus whom they thought was the Messiah to save Israel was now dead and buried. Death is death. The soldiers were guarding the tomb, not to prevent a resurrection, but to make sure that body stayed where it was. Everything was gradually returning to normal. The women were doing what women did in those days. The disciples were grieving behind closed and locked doors, afraid, staring at the wall, shaking their heads in disbelief, wondering what in the world they were going to do now.

Then, suddenly everything changed. The old world, with its assumed order was shaken to its foundations. Suddenly, nothing was the same as it had been only moments before. There was a great earthquake as an angel of the Lord blasted in like lightning to crash open the grave. The women were startled out of their wits. The guards, hardened soldiers, there to keep things as they were became like dead men. They were impotent, incapable of doing anything. We don't know what was going on with the disciples, but you can bet they were scrambling out of the room lest it

collapse on their heads. Indeed, the whole world order was shattering right in front of their eyes, but of course they didn't know that at the time.

But the women knew. They may not have fully understood, in fact I'm quite certain they didn't understand at all, but they knew. Down deep they knew that something incredible was happening. They would soon realize that nothing would ever be the same in their lives or in the lives of the disciples. Oh, the world would go on as if nothing had happened, but the women knew. The guards knew as well, even if they couldn't do anything about it. They were like dead men, remember? And dead men tell no tales.

So while the angel told the women not to be afraid, it seems rather clear that the angel was quite content to leave the guards frightened out of their wits. And why not? The world they were there to protect was suddenly gone. The old order they were sworn to uphold was broken and undone. And they could do nothing about it. Nothing. The guards and the women knew they had just lived through the end of the world. The guards and the women know the reign of death was ended, and a new reign had begun. It's just that the guards were stuck in the past while the women were free for a new life.

"Don't be afraid!" the angel said. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. Don't be afraid. He is not here. He is not here for he has been raised, as he said. Don't be afraid that all your assumptions about life are undone. Don't be afraid to peer through death's door into an unimagined future. Don't be afraid of this new world, where all things are possible with those who love God. Don't be afraid of those soldiers over there. Like all other earthly powers, they are quite helpless to stop God's great power at work. Oh, they're still dangerous, mind you. The defenders of the status quo are always dangerous. They have the power of death at their command. It's just that in the end they are like dead men, impotent in the face of God's power of new life. Their death dealing is incapable blocking the Spirit, incapable of managing resurrection.

Still wondering? Still uncertain in the face of this amazing claim? Then come and see. Peer through death's door. Check out the tomb that was supposed to keep him safely tucked away for good. Check out the space that was supposed to be his final resting place. Check it all out. Then go and tell what you've seen. Go and tell his disciples that he has been raised from the dead. Go and tell them that you've seen him and that if they have any doubts about the truth of your words they should go to Galilee. They'll see him too. Promise! Indeed, he's on his way there right now, off to the future to create new worlds. It's my job to preach this good news to you. It's my job to shake your confidence in the old world order. It's my job to invite you into a new world where life and hope are more powerful than death and fear. Still wondering? Check it out.

All who come seeking Jesus: Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of the world with all its power. Don't be afraid of the religious establishment where all the pat answers go to die, because the questions aren't allowed to belong.<sup>1</sup> Don't be afraid of the political and economic establishment. Don't be afraid of the world as you know it. Its guards are like dead men. Don't be afraid. You have peered through death's door and found the tomb to be empty. Jesus is not here. He has been raised from the dead as he promised. I know you came this morning looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised as he said.

You'll find him in Galilee. Leave the safety of your old ways and live in new and fresh faithfulness. Leave behind your assumptions about the way things are. Don't even cling to Jesus as you have known him. For he is going before you into the new world he is creating. Look for

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce F. Mase, *Window Pains*, (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing.)

him there, in Galilee. Not Galilee, a geographic location in the north of Israel, but Galilee, a metaphor for the life of faith. “Galilee is the place of Jesus’ ministry among the ‘least.’ There he crossed over the boundaries that separated the clean from the unclean. There he ate with tax collectors and sinners, and proclaimed all of God’s children holy.”<sup>2</sup> Galilee is forgiveness, new life, a place of hope for the hopeless.

We know the story. We’ve all heard it before in one form or another. Until now, we may not have known quite what to do with it. I suggest we enter into it, that we go to Galilee, as he said. When we go to Galilee, when join with him in his work, when we feed the hungry, clothe the poor, heal the sick, house the homeless... well it should come as no surprise that every now and then, when we least expect it, we catch sight of him. And when we do recognize him, we’ll catch our breath, uncertain that we are really seeing what we’re seeing. We’ll try to hang on to him, if only to get a better look. We’ll try, but we won’t be able to. He is not here, remember? He has been raised, just as he said. Indeed, he’s off to Galilee to create the future. That’s where we’ll find him. Come and see.

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah Krause, *Theological Themes, Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. X, No. 5, April 1999, pg. 4.