

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **When Mourning Turns to Dancing**

Mark 16:1-8 • Easter Sunday

I can't imagine going to a graveyard and meeting up with an angel who tells me the body I'm looking for has been raised; "he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him." It doesn't fit my experience of the physical world. In my experience a dead man doesn't just get up and go running off to Galilee where I can see him. So my 21<sup>st</sup> century mind tells me I have to explain all this away. That's what many critics try to do. Maybe the women went to the wrong tomb, some speculate. Maybe Jesus didn't really die. He just faked it, slipped quietly away, married Mary Magdalene, had kids and lived happily ever after. People imagine all sorts of scenarios. But one scenario people never imagine is this: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

Those women who went to that tomb Easter Sunday couldn't imagine that scenario either. You don't have to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to know that dead men stay dead. Terrorists and tyrants depend on that. Those women went to the tomb that morning expecting to find the bloody and broken body of a man they knew and loved. They were prepared to peel the burial cloth away from the patches of dried blood they knew would be there. They expected to have to wash his hair and comb the snags and blood clots out. They planned to scrub his body clean and bathe it in perfumes and spices. They went out that morning with tears and great sadness to pay their proper respects to their beloved friend. Instead they got the shock of their lives. Not in their wildest dreams did they ever imagine what happened.

And that's the point. Resurrection of the dead is unimaginable. To be sure there are plenty of ghost stories. But that's just what they are, ghost stories. Nobody claims ghosts have real bodies. Nobody claims that if you open the ghost's tomb, you'll find it empty. This claim of Jesus' resurrection is no conclusion conjured up by grieving disciples who decided that it didn't really matter if Jesus were alive or dead. What nonsense! Does anyone believe the reports of Elvis sightings mean that his tomb is empty? Hardly! Ghost stories aren't connected to an empty tomb. Resurrection of the body, the tomb being empty, is unimaginable. And that's the point.

What those women found changed their lives and the lives of all who believed what they said. It wasn't something they imagined. I know Mark's gospel says they told nobody anything because they were afraid. I also know that you and I have heard their story. Obviously they told somebody and it changed his life. And somebody told somebody else whose life was also changed. And lives were changed all the way through history until somebody told you and me. And if we were at all curious about what we heard, if we wondered what going to Galilee might involve, if we moved out of the status quo of our lives and began to live in a new way, well then somewhere along the line our lives were changed as well.

How do people become convinced that Jesus has been raised from the dead? Who has words for that? If, as I suspect, not all of us are convinced, how shall we become convinced? What can we do to rid our minds of all doubt? There aren't any good arguments to convince us. We can't simply prove to ourselves or anyone else that Jesus was raised from the dead. Like those women so long ago, we come away from the empty tomb full of questions, not answers. Our worldview is shaken. The

angel's claim is beyond our imagination. Will we believe what we've heard or not? Nobody can decide for us. We walk away from that angel's message profoundly disturbed. We've never experienced anything like it.

Jesus is not dead, he is risen. Dead, but not dead. Buried, but not buried. Raised from the dead. Physically raised, not spiritually raised. Not just alive in memory, much as I might remember my Grandfather or Brother. Really alive! The tomb was empty. You know that if the authorities could've produced a body they'd have done it — and quickly! But there was no corpse to parade through the streets disproving resurrection claims. No bones for archaeologists to dig up 2000 years later. The irony in that is that we have Caiaphas' bones. A few years ago, archaeologists discovered the high priest's family tomb. But Jesus, the man he condemned to death? Not dead! Resurrected! Raised from the dead, born again into an eternal existence, never to die again.

In all of history there's nobody else like Jesus. Of all human beings, there's no equal. In all the world's religions, there's no other Savior who was crucified, died, buried and raised from the dead. Jesus is unique among all people. Those who believe in him are also unique. Christians are uniquely set apart, called to live the way Jesus lived, to be oriented towards freedom, healing, life and hope. The world says people live the way they've always lived. Christians say people aren't bound to their past. In Christ they can live new lives. The world demands restitution and penitence before forgiveness is granted. In Christ, forgiveness is freely offered, turning mourning into dancing. Go and sin no more. A new world has begun. A new world, not grounded in military or economic power; it's grounded in the love of God. God has established a new world order, a new opportunity for obedience and hope. Christ is risen to rule a new creation.

A story on Morning Edition this week illustrates that. Camilo Jose Vergara, a photographer, has taken hundreds of thousands of pictures around the USA, many of them focusing on the different ways that Americans depict Jesus. "Vergara found images of Christ in the roughest urban areas — from Skid Row in Los Angeles to the streets of Camden, N.J. Many of those images had been placed in some of the most dangerous places in America by ministers or priests [who] thought that putting the image of Christ there was a deterrent that was going to stop people from committing crime," And you know what? It works! Lives and neighborhoods are changed. Vergara says. "You don't mess around with Christ too much. You know, Christ still has power."<sup>1</sup>

Christ still has power. So claims a photographer who specializes in pictures of Jesus in action. Christ still has power. So claim people who call others to change their ways in Christ's name. Christ still has power even when the headlines suggest otherwise. Like those women at the tomb on Easter morning we may not know quite what to make of all this. But we can do something. The angel commands the disciples to go to Galilee. The issue isn't will we believe, but will we obey? Will we go where Christ says he'll meet us? Or will we simply choose to stay where we are, stuck in dead-end world where resurrection and new life are unimaginable? Christ still has power, power to turn mourning into dancing, power to create in us a new life.

The question isn't will we believe Christ is risen. The question is, will we get involved long enough for the risen Christ to transform our lives. He will, you know. It's not a matter of believing. It's a matter of obedience. Stop hardening your hearts against the poor and start feeding them. Christ will meet you there. Stop thinking of yourselves first, and start serving others. Christ will meet you there. You want to know if Jesus' resurrection is true? You have to get involved, take up a cross and follow Jesus to Galilee. Christ isn't waiting around for us to make up our minds. He's bent on creating a new

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<sup>1</sup> Claire O'Neill, Finding Jesus in America's Inner-City Alleyways, broadcast on NPR Morning Edition, April 10, 2009. Web address - <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102923905>.

people by turning mourning into dancing. He bound to create a new world by calling us to new life. Join in that mission and some day when you least expect it you will see him. It may be only a momentary recognition, over in a flash. Nevertheless you will know. Beyond your wildest imagining you will know: Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.