



April 9, 2023
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Matthew 28:1-10
The Stairway to Heaven



Golden Verse

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Corinthians 5:17

Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. II Corinthians 4:10

Jesus Christ has risen! (*He has risen indeed!*)

As we recite these ancient words of Easter greeting, we mean many different things. Some of you say these words with utter conviction that Jesus bodily rose 2,000 years ago, and others of you are not so sure, while others of you are convinced that it did not happen. But regardless, we all find ourselves here this morning and I am convinced it is something more than nostalgia, vain hope, and uplifting music.

We are all searching. For meaning, for consolation, for fellowship, for love, for hope. Hope in this world.

And we are here because we want to know what *did* Mary Magdalene see when she looked into the face of this Jesus? When she grasped his feet and proclaimed, "*My Lord and my God!*" And what did Peter, and the other disciples, and the seventy and more, who are claimed to see the resurrected Lord.

We want to know because each of us has a hole. A hole in our heart and in our soul, a void, a fracture. I know because I have read these prayer concerns you share on Ash

Wednesday. Your heartache, your fears, your worries, your pain. And as successful as any of us are, we still have this hole and we know when people met Jesus, He filled that hole with such love, power, truth and compassion that they left feeling as if in the face of Christ they had seen the face of God.

People saw in the face of Jesus the power, truth, and love of God, and as they came to know Him, they came to know more God. Not more about God, but more God. That is what the human soul hungers for. And Jesus' presence was the bread of heaven to these hungry souls. More people have come to see and believe in a God of love, hope, and mercy through this Jesus of Nazareth than anyone or anything in all of history.

And this is what we want today. To know and see the presence of God.

This is the purpose of our faith. It is not to ascend to heaven.

The stairway to heaven has become a wrestling match of sorts within Christianity and the religious world in general. Many proclaim exclusive doctrinal certitude that you need to be in my religious camp if you want to know the way and get to the good place. Wars have been fought. Children disowned. Kingdoms toppled.

But Heaven is no more the goal of faith than sitting in the Lincoln Center is the goal of opera. We go to the Lincoln Center to hear the music; we go to heaven to experience the presence of God. And so, the end of faith is not a place but a presence. And it comes not through doctrine but through an honest, open search.

It was the way Jesus lived, the depth of His compassion, His willingness to sacrifice, His love for the outcast, indeed for everyone. But it was also what they saw in His face when He looked in theirs. He saw them as children of God. That each of infinite value, unique, beautiful, and wonderful. This is why Mary grabbed His feet, to know that love.

Zacchaeus the outcast, Peter the fumbler, the doubting fearful father, the woman with the 12-year disease, and so many more became whole in body, mind, and spirit, and left praising God.

But the good news is we don't have to wait until heaven to see God. God sightings are not just for those 2,000 years ago. Jesus showed the disciples and us that people can see and know His presence in our face as well.

I have spoken to people throughout this country and indeed this planet. And what the Bible tells us has proven to be true again and again. We are the body of Christ. And even if our faith is shaky, when we show others His love, they see His face in ours. And they praise God as they find healing and hope.

Thus, we climb the stairway to heaven step by step by being and seeing the face of Christ.

He can be seen in the eyes of an enemy through a figure larger than life.

Listen to this description of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

I grew up in South Africa during Apartheid... He stood up time and again against the brutality and repression of the Apartheid government, and spoke up for peace, equality and freedom, at a time when doing so could lead to a person being tortured and murdered by the state. He has spent his life working for peace in our beautiful country. Once, he jumped into the middle of a lynch mob and saved a person who the crowd believed was a police informant from being burned and stoned to death.

He can be seen in the face of a random stranger on the street.

One very practical and analytical pastor told me she experienced God in the face of a homeless man, after the death of her husband.

I received a holy nudge... I teach people not to give money on the street... I saw a guy... with a thin blanket shivering... I see this guy and he reminds me of my husband. And so, I walk up to him and said are you hungry; he wanted a biscuit and

coffee; I looked at him; in some ways he reminds me of my husband... I am a sucker for blue eyes... I had peace knowing that at least in part God put him there for me.

His face can be seen in a heroic nurse who travels the countryside.

I was with church members visiting a deeply impoverished neighborhood. They showed me a picture. It was of a young boy, utterly emaciated, on the verge of death; surely from that picture he was going to die at any moment; and his parents faces showed the sorrow they felt at knowing no hope. But God works wonders. And we entered those doors it was to see a delightfully plump young boy and his parents who faces beamed. They beamed because Cora from Canada was there. She was the face of God to them; She is a nurse and discovered their boy was diabetic and she got electricity, a refrigerator and a supply of insulin that brought him back from a certain death.

He can be seen in the face of an English professor.

Some have gifts they don't see as divine because it is simply what they do in daily life. One Charleston college professor was caught off guard when a fellow church member asked him to help her write her obituary. She was dying

and did not know him or the pastor of the church very well at all.

The request was a surprise, not only because he had no interactions with her, but he had never done anything like this in his life. He presumed she asked because he taught English. During the visit they came to know one another, and indeed it was clear she had only a few days left. They decided not only to write the obituary but plan her funeral as well. Again, something he had never done.

Though she was not a regular attender it became clear that she could use a visit from the pastor and a final communion as well. The pastor, professor and another elder came to her room and together they shared the sacred meal. At the end she lifted her hands and with enthusiasm and clarity beyond her physical condition she declared, "I am ready to go!" And a few hours later she died.

He can be seen in the eyes of your mother.

One daughter of a church member was lying with her mother as she died. She had been catatonic for years. Never spoke a word nor moved a muscle on her own. She asked me to come over the pray for her mother. She explained she was an atheist, but her mother would have wanted someone from the church to come and pray. We had a

nice visit, I offered to pray and that was it; or so I thought.

A few days later her daughter called to let me know she had passed away. But she was also shaken beyond the loss. I could hear in her voice and so I asked.

"I have been an atheist ever since college. But what happened to my mother has me wondering. Her breathing was growing infrequent. Several times a minute. Twice a minute. Then a full minute with no breath. And then it happened. She took a lung full of air, and my mother who has not spoken or moved a

muscle in years sat straight up in bed, pointing of in the distance; her face which never had any expression suddenly was filled with peace, and she laid down and died. I think she might have seen God.

I think so as well.

We may have different convictions, but we are all here to know the power and the presence of God. Jesus Christ is alive. Yes, He reigns in heaven, but He is alive in all the faces of those willing to risk as He did in order to bring hope, faith and life.

Jesus Christ has risen! (*He has risen indeed!*) Amen.