



I basically have two ways of getting here on any given day: one is where all the cool kids go on the relatively new Opportunity Corridor, which branches out from the gargantuan monstrosity known as the Cleveland Clinic. But, if there are too many cool kids out and about over there, I can still go to the ‘ole reliable Warrensville Center Road with its stop lights galore down to 480. Now, along that path is the trendy Van Aken District that seemed to emerge from scratch over the last few years to open new restaurants and

some retail along with it. However, a couple miles to the west of that seemingly most full of life spot, is an area of Cleveland that had a story brought to the forefront that would rival that of the one we just heard about John the Baptist.

It was fifteen years ago that the local police found eleven bodies of women by a home in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood. That was terrible enough, but what happened to them before their tragic death was far, far worse. And yet, three women managed to escape. One of whom was Vanessa Gay. And it wasn’t just the indescribable pain and agony she endured from someone she thought was a friend. It’s that in the aftermath of it all, Vanessa was convinced that it was all her fault.

That she must have done something to deserve it. That her life must have been worthless. She descended into drug addiction, leading to time spent in prison herself. Vanessa not only needed to find a different outlet to deal with her more than understandable complex emotions, but also the reassurance that her life still held a most incredible value to her family, to the world.

Soon enough, she was introduced to a writing program held in the prison. Every Tuesday afternoon, about ten of the women would gather to share their fears, their anger, as well as the things that made them happy by putting words to a page, no matter how structured or incomplete the sentences: just giving them an opportunity to dig into the depths of their soul when far too often the rest of the world would not listen to them at all. And so, eventually, Vanessa, a still most precious child of God put, together this poem as a trial was about to ensue for her drug use:

*Thoughts avoid  
But filled with truths  
Don't want to face the inevitable news  
Feeling the pressure  
Fighting the pain  
I know death's not the answer  
My life was sustained  
I need not be fearful  
Stand tall and be bold  
I can do this, I can  
So, I've been told.  
I'll quiet my mind  
And live in today  
For I am here,  
Yes, God let me stay.*

Thankfully, the justice system caved into mercy and grace that time around in setting a victim of unspeakable harm back out into the world, into a world that needs more Vanessa Gay’s: people who go through their own John the Baptist-like stories of the grimmest despair and rise

with a relentless hope to rival that of the Resurrection itself. Because Vanessa had more than enough reason to not trust anyone anymore. Vanessa had more than enough reason to only take care of herself going forward, but instead, she insisted on helping women who went through similar pain and anguish: to ensure they not go through the aftermath on their own. To make sure they never succumb into believing as if they did something to deserve it, as if their life was worthless. Somehow, someday, the Gospel of the Lord can still rise in the worst of stories. Somehow, someday, this God of new life can rise in a woman like Vanessa Gay, when so many gave up on her.

Somehow, someday, Jesus Christ can witness supposed friends act as if they don't know him, can witness supposed friends betray him altogether, and still love them to the end and beyond. Somehow, someday, this Lord can endure the cross, can experience the worst our humanity has to offer, and still want to rise to show us just how powerful love and grace and mercy can be against all the hatred and evil this world has to muster. Somehow, someday, the Gospel of our Lord can still rise in the worst of stories, as if the life and death of John the Baptist was meant to more boldly set the stage of the One who would insist that the chapter of the Resurrection not just be for John or Peter or Judas or those of Galilee from long ago, but for Vanessa Gay, for all of us. As if nothing can happen in this life, no matter how dreadful our momentary chapters may be to take us away from that world-saving love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Somehow, someday, this still is the Gospel of our Lord, and it will never be taken away from absolutely anyone. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!