



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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That'll Tweet!

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 7, 2013

The Second Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 5:27-32 and John 20:19-31

On Thursday afternoon I tweeted for the very first time. Although my tweet is already someone's favorite, it has yet to be retweeted. Which is to say I have been thinking a lot about twitter and I have a lot to learn. This is not because I have such a great grasp of Facebook or social media and it does not mean that I have even caught up with my email, but it does mean that I do like to play with new toys.

And so I have been wondering about what I could say in 140 characters or less that would be interesting enough to attract followers. This is not to say that this sermon is going to be in the form of a tweet . . . it has already gone on too long for that, but there will be a tweet at the end.

I have followed a few famous people, and I began to wonder how all these famous people attract so many followers. That was until I read a story in yesterday's paper about the booming business in the sale of fake followers and fake retweets. What is this world coming to? My followers, although few in number, are real. All three of them. I know each one of them personally.

On the one hand none of us wants to be fooled or duped. Like Thomas we all want to see so that we might be convinced what is real, and then we will believe.

Once thirty years ago, while I was in seminary, I spent a very long hot summer working as a chaplain in a neonatal intensive care unit in a rural Pennsylvania hospital. During that time I was invited to assist at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Shamokin. Now, I had grown up in a different part of Pennsylvania, but I was aware that something was different in the church in Shamokin. After accepting the generous offer to assist, I remembered that sometime earlier there had been an apparition of our Lord on one of the silk altar hangings in the sanctuary. I admit my whole first Sunday I looked at the hanging every way I could. I squinted my eyes. I looked from above and from below. I looked close up and I looked from a distance, and try as I might I could not see anything other than a very old silk cloth. The Rector must have noticed my straining, because after church he came up and said, "You can't see it can you?" I admitted that I could not. He explained that about half the people in the parish could not see it either.

In the end the apparition led members of the church to greater belief in God and even closeness between those who could see and those who couldn't. And so, unlike fake twitter followers, I was not terribly disturbed that I could not see or that they did see.

Many of us live our lives maintaining an illusion or two. And what is the harm of it? We live with the illusion that we are good or at least we are not that bad. Some of us live with the illusion that we haven't changed since we were teenagers. Some of us believe that if we are somehow good enough God will love us. Some illusions appear quite harmless and others are terribly destructive and hurtful.

There is no more vivid depiction of the terribly destructive power of lived illusions than Edward Albee's 1962 play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It tells the story of a middle-aged married couple, Martha and George, who receive an unwitting younger couple, Nick and Honey, as guests late one evening and draw them into their bitter and frustrated fantasies. The title is a pun on the song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" from the Disney film *The Three Little Pigs*, substituting the name of the celebrated English novelist Virginia Woolf. Martha and George repeatedly sing this version of the song throughout the play. Albee explained the title thus: "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who's afraid of the big bad wolf . . . who's afraid of living life without illusions." After hours of harsh, bitter dialogue the

play ends with George singing, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" to Martha. Whereupon she replies, "I am, George . . . I am."

Jesus was not afraid of living life without illusions. In fact Jesus was all about living life without illusions. He did not believe that any of us is good—not even himself—and when he was addressed as Good Teacher, he responded by saying only God is good. When he talked about the inevitability of his own suffering and death, Peter jumped up and said, "God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you." Jesus rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" Which is a first century way of saying, "Stop trying to convince me to live with an illusion." The most dangerous illusion of all is the notion that we can control God. If only we offer the correct sacrifice, do only the right things, believe the right things the right way, then we could make God love us and help us more than he already does.

I confess that I understand the doubting part of the Gospel story this morning because I have not always acted, and sometimes still act, as if I did not believe in the effective power of God's love. There are times when I acted and still act as if by working longer hours or working harder I could earn God's love. And yes there are still times when I doubt God's love and I really want to live with the illusion that I am good or at least not so bad. If I could only say the right prayers, do the right things, then God will love me and I will believe. And that is always a destructive, vicious circle. The interesting thing about the resurrection appearances of Jesus is that Jesus appears to people who don't believe and who don't see. Which is to say that perhaps our doubts do not matter to God any more than our sins, our sacrifices, or our righteous deeds. God loves me and God loves each one of you and God loves all of us in spite of it all.

Easter is not about what we believe or what we might not believe. Easter is the most powerful story ever told about God's belief in the human race. God, who created us and gave us the law and the prophets, did not give up on us when we did not get it. Instead he came into the world himself because of his great love for us. Jesus taught us about God's love and commanded us to love one another. When we did not get it, we rejected him, killed him, and he died, And yet he still did not give up. He believed in us so much and loved us so much that his love brought him back to us. He came back to the same people who didn't get it, who rejected him, denied him, and killed him to demonstrate that he still loves us and believes in us. He believes in us without condition.

In the resurrection we learn that indeed, in spite of it all, God continues to believe in us and to love us whether or not we believe in him. In the incarnation Jesus comes among us and sets up God's tent in our midst. In the Resurrection he comes back and sets up God's tent all over again.

And so the question is not do we believe in God. The real question is: does God believe in us? And at Easter we learn that the answer is yes! And we also learn that God wants us to believe in each other and trust each other despite all the evidence to the contrary.

And so this morning I have written my second tweet.

God believes in us. Don't live in fear or illusion. Believe in God's love. Show God's love to others. Encourage them to believe and to love.

That is a message that is worth following and retweeting. And if you want to follow me you can @xroadsnyc

So, "Be quick to love and make haste to be kind."

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