



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Silence But Not For Long

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 5, 2015

The Sunday of the Resurrection — Easter Day: Based on Acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8

Last night about three hundred of us gathered for the Easter Vigil, the first Mass of Easter, a service designed to emulate the manner in which the earliest Christians celebrated the Resurrection. Though daylight savings time and good sense mean that we begin the service with a little more light than is historically accurate—it *should* begin in total darkness in the middle of the night—it is a wonderful event, one that I have reluctantly come to love in its way. Its reintroduction to use in the 1970's liturgical renewal movement brought with it some sense of the experimental, which unsurprisingly was not without its episodes of tragedy. Some of you have heard me tell of my own ill-advised and brief detour into liturgical dance—two words that should never be used in sequence.

Despite that lingering memory, over the years the Vigil has been beautifully reclaimed; but there is no doubt that *for me* Easter is about the morning. In part it is just a function of my wiring: I love the morning. I was never able to sleep late even when I was of an age to do so. It was the morning that I loved, not the late night. And still at this point in my life it remains true that it is the first light of morning that fills me with promise. "Weeping may linger for the night," the Psalmist claims, "but joy comes with the morning." And on this morning of all mornings it does indeed!

The women who gathered at the tomb of Jesus were early risers too. Perhaps thusly wired but more likely made so by cultural expectations, they got up with the sun; and though their grief was far from gone, the light of day had inspired them to do the next right thing: to go to the tomb to anoint the body of this one whom they had so tenderly and mysteriously loved. What they encountered is well-fabled—an empty tomb, a puzzling character, a set of instructions, all of which left them amazed and terrified. The earliest version of Mark's cryptic gospel ends just where our gospel lesson stops today with these words: *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

For some this is a rather unsatisfying ending to the gospel—a problem which, as you well know, was corrected by later additions to Mark and certainly the other gospel narrations that followed it. But for me, this one, just as it is, suits me best. It leaves the details of what happened and how it happened only thinly disclosed. No specifics are given as to whether the actual resurrection was physical or spiritual or some combination of the two. What made the tomb empty is a matter of speculation and faith, as I suppose it inevitably is. One could look upon the lifeless body of a beloved and see nothing for its absence of spirit. For some it will forever be a matter of physicality, the full resuscitation of the body; and there will, I suspect, always be considerable consensus for that conclusion. For others it is more a question of life force, of what lives beyond an apparent end, claiming life continues in ways more nuanced than resuscitation and, yet, just as real. The only way one can *know* is a matter of faith, and there are more ways than one to be faithful. The only test of orthodoxy to me is what one *knows*—in that way which is beyond merely comprehending—what one knows in his or her heart. That witness, whatever it is for you, settles it for me.

What strikes me this Easter most particularly about the story, more this year than others for some reason, is the unmistakable fact that the women did not stay silent long. Though muted by fear in the beginning, the story, which became for us in our tradition *the* everlasting story, was dramatically and rapidly freed from the shroud of silence. When the story is good enough, even the deepest fear and terror can contain it only so long. It became a story that would not be silenced, and the power of its telling and retelling changed the world forever.

But what precisely *is* the story? What is it that was for them and now is for us, more than 2000 years hence, so transformative? My guess is that we are just at the beginning of the learning curve in coming to understand the wideness of this story and that we shall no doubt forever continue to be. It is bigger than one or even countless lives can contain or explain. This is not a story that we get once and for all, but one which continues to get us again and again, changing us, molding us, challenging us. It leads us to become broader and broader, more and more merciful and generous; it questions our need for certainty and control, and increasingly it opens us to the unfolding story of God's love for all that never ends. It is quite miraculous in fact, this event; though originating as a sectarian and tribal event, in its fullness it calls forth from those with hearts open to it a story that is beyond any boundary, a love that knows no limits, and a mission that responds with regard to no creed. It is that kind of love that could not be held by the chains of death or the end of a story.

Though it is hard to grasp and our desire for specialness blinds us to it, from the beginning there has been the occasional whisper of the breadth of its message—of its bigness. The Acts of the Apostles, written fifteen or so years after the gospel of Mark by another gospel narrator whom we know as Luke, gives a glimpse of such broadness. Peter, not known for his easy acceptance of those beyond his tight clan, speaks to the Gentiles with these words: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Peter probably surprised himself with his spontaneous burst of liberality, as on occasion we do with our own. His and ours bear witness to how this story convinces us to look beyond our walls of safety and comfort, to love beyond only our kind. Only with great effort, most often fueled by fear and the desire to be exclusively right (which is powerful), are we able to make this a story that excludes great numbers of people. We question its universality for fear that its broadness is too good to be true.

It is not breaking news in the world that religion largely has gone awry; and truth be told, except in its nascent and wildly free iterations, it always has been so. Although a nuanced reading of the "religious wars" of our era includes many factors other than religion, our critics are not without merit in their claims that religion more often divides than unites. The massacre of Christian students at a university in Kenya this week at the hand of al-Shabab militants is the latest evidence of a debased understanding of religion—to the extent that it is about religion at all. We are not well served, though, if we understand these killings only as an example of good Christians versus bad Muslims with no consideration of how extremism is fueled by complicated factors in our increasingly interconnected world. Though the madness of al-Shabab militants and their Al Qaeda sponsors is among the worst of religious extremism, it is by no means the only example of it. And its presence argues, I believe, for the broadest understanding we can embrace of God's goodness and truth. This is not a call for an ecclesiastical circling of wagons. The overriding truth in our story is that as we immerse ourselves more and more into its particularities, we are opened to broadness beyond which we could imagine. Our horror is not that *Christian* students were killed but that killing in the name of religion, or anything else, occurred.

No matter what our beliefs are about the meaning of Easter, whether they are broadly universal or quite sectarian, what we take from the experience of the Resurrection is that love inevitably wins. How we understand the details matters very little, only that love is in the end inextinguishable. Evil never ultimately wins. One of the most moving aspects of the events in Kenya this week is that as some of the Christian students frantically raced from their dormitories, they were welcomed and hidden in mosques by Muslims students. The action, this dramatic infusion of grace, did not change the fact of the loss of many; but it bore the flag of love in the midst of immense hate and lived to tell it. God's heartbroken tears and ours for that small moment were filled, transformed to joy.

Christ is our path to love like that, to love that can sustain and transform anything in its path; and each time we love as Christ loves, we do our part to keep Easter alive forever.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen; the Lord is Risen Indeed.

Amen.