



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## Recognizing Him

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 26, 2020*

*The Third Sunday of Easter*

*Based on Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35*

*Come, Risen Lord, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

### **Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.**

Preaching in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic is a strange and high calling. Peter, preaching in the midst of the Roman Occupation—the fraught, historic circumstance of his time—brought some 3,000 people to be baptized by the end of his sermon as recorded in the Book of Acts. Now that, I think we can all agree, was a SERMON.

This pandemic affects and distorts all our lives in ways both large and small. The isolation is a constant disorientation, which means our hunger for words of faith and meaning is only intensified. Nothing is quite as it was, even if very little has changed.

Life is slowed down in this moment. For busy urban dwellers accustomed to the noise of crowded streets, it's surreally quiet. (Perhaps, we can hope, that quiet will allow the still small voice of God to be better heard.) Many people have left the city and there's an eerie spaciousness in a town known for its population density.

### **Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.**

Many have thought this might be an opportune moment for a spiritual revival, and there are some signs of it. There are gradual signs of inward turning. Laying aside our regular schedules gives us more room to pursue the inner journey. Here at St. Bart's, thousands are watching our livestreamed services, both in the moment and throughout the week. Many people are participating in adult education offerings and Bible studies, some even more than before. Our prayer list is unusually long, which leads me to believe people are still seeking to trust God in a crisis. Our newly revised daily schedules now include the 7:00 pm Liturgy of Gratitude: an outpouring of affection and respect for people serving on the front lines of the pandemic and the personal highlight of my day.

Is it too naïve to think we might truly take this opportunity to re-examine our lives in some way?

- Were we too busy?
- Were we too materially focused?
- Were we too little concerned about the people around us?

Disasters give us the terrible opportunity to reset our lives, to remember what's truly important and what isn't. It *is* chastening to face a virus for which there is currently no cure, and more than one person has told me recently that they have finally written their will. There is nothing quite so sobering as staring squarely into the eyes of one's mortality.

Many people are beginning to think about how this experience will change us; and, as I've said before, I believe we are not so much changed by an experience like this as we are revealed. This plague, this virus, uncovers us, exposes us. Broken relationships are all the more painful in a pandemic. Deeper loves are more fully revealed and more truly appreciated. Simple things of value are more completely cherished, while the tangential things of the world fall silently away.

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There is a strange sort of tired many of us are feeling. For some of us, our work is so much harder than it was. Staring at screens for hours in Zoom or some other video-meeting platform is a different kind of exhausting. Hours and hours of telephone calls. And yet how can those of us who *have* jobs complain about work in the face of so many who have lost theirs?

There is a slow, tolling bell marking deaths by the hour in the background of every day. Death keeps its steady, sad cadence and the tolling reminds us of everyone who has died without the customary comforts of last words with family and friends gathered round. The hope of the Resurrection has never been so desperately important.

This is a strange, ethereal moment and, not knowing precisely how long it will last, adds to its unique burden. There is beginning to be talk about how we will move past this present moment into some form of normalcy, but seven weeks is not yet enough time to reveal exactly what the "new normal" might look like.

**Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.**

Most people who embrace the Christian faith come to belief by one of two roads: the Road to Damascus or the Road to Emmaus. The Road to Damascus was the path followed by the Apostle Paul. The Road to Emmaus is described in the story we just heard in today's gospel lesson.

The Road to Damascus is sudden and dramatic. The Road to Emmaus is slower and much more subtle. It should be said at the outset that neither road is superior to the other. Both experiences will get you to where you need to go. They are simply two diverging paths that arrive at the same destination. It can be said, however, that the Road to Emmaus is the least understood path. Protestants have always been a bit more enamored with the dramatic conversion experience. The Catholic tradition certainly has its own stories of intense transformation—Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and Francis to name but a few—but the Church Catholic, along with the Anglican tradition, tends to lean more towards the evolutionary conversion experience. Anglicans usually favor "the still small voice" over "the blinding light."

Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus is one of the most famous conversion stories ever told. A "Damascus Road experience" is the phrase we use to talk about an unexpected turning point that changes one's life immediately and completely. Paul (or Saul, as he was then known) was making his way from Jerusalem to Damascus in the pursuit of Christians. He asked the High Priest for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found anyone who belonged to the Way, men or women, he could bring them bound to Jerusalem. He's a kind of ancient religious bounty hunter. And notice in the Book of Acts, where

his conversion story is found, Christians aren't referred to as members of a church, but rather as members of a movement. They "belonged to the Way." Not a church. Not an institution. A movement.

Saul identifies and captures Christian believers. He was on the outskirts of Damascus when "a light from heaven flashed around him," he fell to the ground, and he heard a voice saying, "Saul. Saul. Why do you persecute me?" Saul asks, "Who are you Lord?" And the voice responds, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Saul is blinded for three days and can see nothing. A devout member of the Way Ananias is sent by God to care for Saul and his sight is restored. He's immediately baptized and, in the blink of an eye, he's preaching Christ in the synagogue in Damascus.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink* the author argues that our initial, intuitive thoughts about a given situation are much more reliable than we may think. He writes, "The adaptive unconscious does an excellent job of sizing up the world, warning people of danger, setting goals, and initiating action in a sophisticated and efficient manner.<sup>i</sup> There are moments, particularly in times of stress, when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions can offer a much better means of making sense of the world."<sup>ii</sup>

Today's gospel lesson, which is unique to the Gospel According to Luke, begins late on Easter day. The first part of the lesson recalls a conversation between Cleopas and an unnamed believer on the way to the village of Emmaus, located just outside Jerusalem. "Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Gladwell might say this is one of those situations where the disciple's intellectual capabilities prevented them from trusting their intuitive sensibilities. The disciples would have reasoned, "This can't be Jesus. He's just been crucified."

But as the night progresses and the encounter continues, Jesus is revealed to them. "As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over. So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." Later they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Then their eyes were opened. Then they recognized him. Then they understood what was revealed. Then they felt the power and the glory.

This Road to Emmaus is the journey many of us have taken. This is a road I can *begin* to understand. It's getting dark and it's late and everything's a bit unclear. There's an uncertainty hanging over the world. Death is in the air; the Crucifixion is less than 72 hours behind them. It is unbelievably believable, this drama on the Road to Emmaus. Slowly the stranger unfolds his story. Slowly he interprets, beginning with Moses and the prophets, everything there is to understand about the Messiah. Slowly he breaks bread with the disciples. Slowly their eyes are opened, and suddenly he vanishes from their sight.

### **Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.**

They could not see the risen life before them because they were overwhelmed by the death around them. They could not see the risen life before them because it did not come to them in a way they had expected. Their eyes were "kept" from recognizing him—just as *our* eyes are kept from recognizing him—even in this moment. Risen, still. Their heads just could not believe their hearts, just as ours do not, will not. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?" Yes, they were. They actually were!

Some of us have had Road to Damascus experiences—a bright light which blinded us with the truth—and some of us have had Road to Emmaus experiences—meandering journeys which slowly revealed their destination.

Some of us are still looking for roads that no map or GPS will ever find.

And all of us seek the God who seeks to find us on whatever roads we travel.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink; The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, c. 2005, Little, Brown, and Company, New York, New York, p. 12

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14

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