



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Something More

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 12, 2020
Easter Day
Based on Jeremiah 31:1-6; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10*

*Come, Holy Spirit,
and grant us the courage to peer into the empty tomb.
Grant us the strength to hear the angel say,
"He is not here."
And grant us the hope which sends us to Galilee,
or to wherever in the world Christ would send us to meet him.
In His Risen Name we pray.
Amen.*

I've been preaching the Christian faith for nearly 40 years. I guess I've given most of my life to this calling which, I have to admit, sort of amazes me. Forty days and forty nights is biblical shorthand meaning a very long time, and it *has* been a long time. Although, looking back, I can't truly imagine having spent my life doing anything else. But after all these years, in this particular moment, it appears we're getting down to the very heart of the matter. What kind of hope can be preached in the middle of a pandemic? How can you proclaim Christ's triumph over death when death is taking place all around you?

I believe there's something more.

I really don't need to paint the picture for you. The ambulance sirens are the background music for the surreal horror film that has become a living reality for far too many people in New York City and around the nation and around the world. If there was any question about how interconnected and interdependent we are as global citizens, I believe it has now been asked and answered. In one particularly horrific 24-hour stretch last week, approximately 33 people an hour died in New York State, most of them right here in New York City. New Yorkers are usually a pretty tough lot, but fear in a situation like this is almost unavoidable. People are dying for a fact. Some younger, many older, but no one appears untouched.

Everything, it seems, is just a little bit off kilter. There's a strange, eerie quietness on the streets of the city. I took a long walk (with mask and gloves) this past week, trying to escape from the apartment. As I walked, I noticed I was hearing a noise unfamiliar to me and realized it was the sound of my hiking boots striking the sidewalk as I walked. That's just how quiet it was in Midtown Manhattan at midday. I don't think I'd ever heard *that* before. In this very moment when we want to come closer together, we are, by necessity, kept farther apart. We're all going through something we've never experienced before and, in terms of its impact on the population, one would have to go back to World War II, or perhaps the Great Depression, to find a national event of equivalent impact.

This pandemic affects everyone and “getting back to normal” will actually mean “getting back to a new normal” for almost all of us when the time finally comes. Jeremiah wanted Israel to get back to an old normal. His contribution to the prophetic tradition is unique. No other prophet in Hebrew scripture reflects more directly on their personal spiritual struggles or on the trials they must endure to fulfill their prophetic role. Still, even this “doom and gloom” prophet could be hopeful about the future on occasion. In the passages appointed for today, Jeremiah writes about the joyful restoration of Israel, and it may just resonate with us.

The people who survived the sword... found grace in the wilderness...
Again I will build you, and you shall be built...
Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria.

“Again.” We certainly pray so. These words hold fresh meaning for all of us who, so far, “have survived the sword” and hope, once again, to “take our tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.” These words hold restored meaning for all of us who hope to “plant vineyards on the mountains,” because, you see, planting a vineyard is a sign of hope for the future. It takes at least three years for the grapes to go from being planted to being harvested. A lot can happen in three years. You have to have faith.

Jeremiah believed there was something more.

Peter’s testimony to Cornelius and his friends about the Resurrection is a summary statement of the Christian faith but, even as he’s sharing it with a group of Gentiles, the Holy Spirit falls upon them; and Peter realizes he cannot withhold baptism to those who have already been baptized by the Spirit, even if they’re not Jewish. This good news must be for everybody!

Peter believed there was something more.

Based on the biblical accounts, Mary Magdalene was the only person who was certifiably present at both the cross and the tomb. Maybe that’s why, wherever she’s mentioned in scripture and in the company of other women, Mary is always referred to first. (With the singular exception of John 19:25, where the female members of Jesus’ family are listed before her.) Otherwise, she’s named first. I’m just sayin’. By the third century, Hippolytus would refer to Mary Magdalene as “the apostle of the apostles,” since she was the very first person to proclaim the Resurrection.ⁱ In 2016, the Vatican came to the same conclusion, which was, I suppose, better late than never.

The author of Matthew writes that the two Marys—Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James—“left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” With fear and great joy: Is there any other way to respond to an experience like the Resurrection? The late German philosopher Ernst Bloch observed, “It wasn’t the morality of the Sermon on the Mount which enabled Christianity to conquer Roman paganism, but the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In an age when Roman senators vied to see who could get the most blood of a steer on their togas... thinking that would prevent death... Christianity was in competition for eternal life, not morality.”ⁱⁱ

Mary Magdalene believed there was something more.

Events like a pandemic are always revealing. They expose us. They expose our biggest fears, our greatest hopes, and our deepest values. They reveal all our inequalities. Poorer people, people of color, immigrants new to our country get sick more often and they die more quickly and more frequently. Real life is usually lived somewhere between the fear and great joy. In the Episcopal burial office, the priest proclaims, “All of

us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.” I have pronounced that line with tears streaming down my cheeks, with fear and great joy. Yeah, that would be about right. Fear and great joy. Even at the grave we sing our Alleluias.

In his book *A Different Christianity*, Robin Amis points out that the early leaders of the Church believed that the Resurrection of Jesus existed in three ways:

- The Resurrection existed outside of us as a single event *from the past*. It was an historical and theological fact that *had* happened.
- The Resurrection exists *in the future* as the consummation of the life of faith. We will all be raised on the last day with Christ. We live in the “almost but not yet” waiting for the coming glory.
- The Resurrection exists within us *at any given moment*. It is always present and accessible for those who seek it. The grace of the Holy Spirit imbues the heart and mind with the Presence of the Resurrected Lord, and a “knowingness” comes with it, and that “knowingness” takes a variety of forms.

For an example of this, listen to Dr. Ira Byock, a hospice and palliative care doctor, who writes, “Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones. But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thigh bone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink, or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety, and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, Mead said. We are at our best when we serve others.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout history, human beings have thought there was something more.

This is yet another face of the Resurrection. The way in which we become transformed from selfish individuals to people who worry about vulnerable parents, neighbors and co-workers, children and friends, and people we don’t even know is a testament to the transformative qualities of Resurrection living. Believers in the Risen Lord have a holy hope that may look ridiculous to the skeptical. But this holy hope makes selfless acts of care more possible because they haven’t given in to despair. And they won’t give up on the possibility that they could make the world better. They actually transform tragedy into hope.

They believe there is something more.

Now, I have shared this story with some of you before, but it is such an important story to me in this context that I will ask you to allow me to share it again. In 1989 I was a seminarian serving as a Clinical Resident at the Washington Hospital Center and Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. When you were the on-call chaplain in that complex, you were actually serving five hospitals, including the VA Center and the National Rehabilitative Hospital. I served there when Washington, D.C. had the highest per-capita murder rate in the United States, primarily due to the emergence of crack cocaine.

Everyone understands the dangers of “organized crime,” but crack cocaine had a destabilizing effect on the drug trade and “disorganized crime” ends up creating a lot of casualties. You could hear gunfire from the Critical Care helipad at any hour of the day. At the end of my first two weeks I had seen more death,

tragedy, disaster, and heartbreak than I had seen in my entire life. Children's National Medical Center was a particular hell because all of the patients were children and all the parents were united in feeling responsible, no matter how irrational the thought, for their child's being there.

So, I went to visit a wise old Roman Catholic priest who had served at the Hospital Center for 25 years. (Twenty-five years! I couldn't even imagine it.) I went to him on a Friday afternoon and finally got up the courage to ask him, "How do you do it? How do you come in here, day after day after day, and deal with all of this suffering and all of this pain? I've been here two weeks and I'm not sure how I'm going to last the summer."

And he gently looked into my eyes and said, "Ahhh, Dean. Here... here you have to be really clear about what you believe about the Resurrection. Perhaps if you're serving some small suburban parish, you won't need to be so clear. You'll have a tragic loss, a death, an accident once in a while, and you can make it through. But here, if you believe this is all there is," and he gestured around the room, "you won't make it to the end of the shift." And as time passed, I found the clarity I needed regarding the Resurrection.

He was right. I *did* need to understand the power of the Resurrection. I *did* need to know that death is not the end of every story. I *did* need to know, in the words of John Chrysostom, that "Christ has destroyed death."

What kind of hope can be preached in the middle of a pandemic? The belief in something more. Something glorious. Something eternal.

*Easter is about much more than an afterlife;
It's about the renewal of THIS life.
It's about the assurance that we can rise from the disappointments and frustrations and brokenness
that are the deaths we die every single day.^{iv}*

And today, Easter Day, no matter where we are, no matter what circumstances surround us, we proclaim the timeless truth: *Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed!*

Amen.

ⁱ *Synthesis*, Year A, Easter Day, March 31, 2002, p. 4

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 4

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Ira Byock, in his book on palliative medicine; *The Best Care Possible: A Physician's Quest to Transform Care Through the End of Life* (Avery, 2012). (Thanks to Dr. Jamie Ferrara for this quote.)

^{iv} Source unknown