



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Alleluia. Christ is Risen.

*Sermon preached at the seven o'clock service, April 19, 2014  
The Great Vigil of Easter—Based on Matthew 28:1-10*

It has been a very difficult Lent for me this year. Personally balancing the demands of an aging, forgetful father who lives hundreds of miles away, a spouse who is out of work for more than six months and the death of a young friend by suicide during the third week of Lent have threatened to unmake me. Professionally there have also been challenges. There is a new drug on the street that has increased aggressiveness of diners in the soup kitchen. Even the increased funding given to Crossroads to help us meet the increasing demand for pantry services has meant more work. I am telling you all of this to give you some context, so that when I say that I was reluctant to get up this morning and put the finishing touches on the Easter sermon, you could understand my reluctance. I just wasn't feeling very hopeful.

Before saying my prayers I ate breakfast and read the New York Times. In the United States section there was an article about an Episcopal Church, Truro Church in Fairfax, Virginia. I know the story so well that I almost didn't read the newspaper article. Truro Church left the Episcopal Church after the ordination of the first openly gay bishop and has been in a long, acrimonious and expensive lawsuit with the Diocese of Virginia. I know this story so well but faced with my last opportunity to delay prayer and finishing the sermon, I decided a little rehash couldn't hurt. It turns out, of course, that my version of this story was very last decade. In the spring of 2011 the Rector of the Truro Church and the Bishop of Virginia had begun a friendship. The friendship has not always been easy because as the Rector of Truro Church is quoted as saying, "Peacemaking doesn't necessarily mean agreement but it does mean that you stop trying to hurt each other."

As I considered the story of this improbable friendship and the fact that it filled me with hope I wondered if I was really over-reacting. My inner cynic, that part of me that knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing, told me that this was just another Saturday feel-good piece about religion in the newspaper. And as I continued reading, I discovered that none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury has remarked that this "friendship despite immensely different views sets a pattern of reconciliation based on integrity and transparency and such patterns of life are essential to the future of the Anglican Communion." As I continued to ponder the idea of reconciliation based on integrity and transparency I realized that this pattern of life is essential not only to the future of the church but also this country and even the world.

Another source of hope for me this Easter is the 2013 movie *Philomena*. In the movie, Philomena Lee became pregnant in Ireland in 1951 and was sent to a convent by her father. At the convent she delivered a healthy son, in a breech position, without medical assistance and without pain medicine. In return for her care Philomena was forced to work long hours in the convent laundry and was permitted to see her son for one hour each evening. When he was three years old, her son was abruptly sold to an American adoptive family against her will. The movie tells the story of Philomena's search for her son, which began on his fiftieth birthday. At the end of the search, to everyone's horror, Sister Hildegard McNulty, the aged-wheelchair bound nun who had been in charge of the convent, screams about the carnal incontinence of the women that were in her care. Philomena silences the nun and everyone else by announcing that she wants Sister Hildegard to know that she has forgiven her. The secular journalist who has accompanied Philomena during her search asks incredulously, "What, just like that?" Philomena, played brilliantly by Dame Judi Dench, says, "No not just like that. That is hard for me, but I don't want to hate people. It happened to me and it is up to me what I do about it. It is my choice." The journalist says, "I couldn't forgive her; I am angry." Dench looks down at the journalist, her face filled with compassion, and says, "Yes, you are angry and it must be exhausting."

The interesting thing about this scene in the movie is that it is only a story. It didn't happen that way. It turns out that the real Sister Hildegard actually died seven years before Philomena began her search. The scene was created to reveal the actual truth about the way the real Philomena Lee has chosen to live her life.

In the same way that the act of forgiving another may look easy but never is easy, I believe that if we allow ourselves to think that the suffering of Jesus ended when he died on the Cross we run the risk of trivializing Easter. Death is inevitable and is often much easier than life. The separation of death is hard but many bereaved persons will tell you that the real difficulty after death is the daily decision to go on living. The mystery of the Resurrection is that after enduring the horrible events of betrayal, denial, trial, and crucifixion Jesus was willing to forgive humanity and to return from the dead. That is sacrifice. In the story of Philomena Lee it is not the particularities of her reconciliation that are important but the fact that she is able to live a reconciled life after all that has happened to her. In the church fight between the Bishop and the Rector, the relationship has had its ups and downs, but they still consider themselves friends. Partisans on both sides of that divide are anxious about the friendship and what it says about their cause, and then Jesus appears and says do not be anxious, do not be afraid.

The problem with Jesus is that he keeps appearing and calling us to join him in choosing life beyond the death of resentment, anger, and fear. Jesus is like the phone call from my forgetful father who asks one more time if he has paid the water bill. He just can't remember that the water bill is paid by automatic bill-pay. The problem is that, like a forgetful parent, Jesus keeps calling as if he can't remember—but he does remember. He remembers how hard it is to choose to forgive and to return from the dead. And he also knows how exhausted we are, even when we don't remember. And for that reason Jesus continues to appear and call us to leave the grave of anger and resentment. He calls us into new life. New life happens when we can promise to stop trying to hurt each other. New life happens when we choose not to hate those who have done horrible things to us. New life happens when we choose to live in relationships based on forgiveness, transparency, integrity, and authenticity. New life happens when we believe anything is possible. For you see in this new life even the dead are resurrected. Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!