



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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What to Make of This?

Sermon preached at the seven o'clock service, March 26, 2016
The Easter Vigil —Based on Luke 24:1-12

Wow! This is one of my favorite services of the year!

It's certainly one of the most unusual, starting as it does in complete darkness, full of history and mystery, of sounds and smells, of flickering candles and splashes of water, moving to light and celebration.

It is meet and right for this first service of Easter to be this unusual—and to start in darkness. Take tonight's Gospel reading: On the first day of the week, at early dawn, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women came to the tomb, carrying spices.

These are the women, the "Daughters of Jerusalem," who had come with Jesus from Galilee, who had followed Jesus to his crucifixion, beating their breasts and wailing for him. These women had been with Jesus in his life and ministry. They did not desert him at his death.

In the world of this time, providing proper burial was one of the important obligations of friendship; it was one of the strongest obligations of family members. Taking spices to a tomb is what family members would do. [1]

Ordinarily the women would have anointed Jesus' body before his burial. But Jesus died so close to the Sabbath's beginning that there wasn't time. Jesus' body had to be quickly wrapped and put into a tomb—a new tomb hastily arranged by Joseph of Arimathea. Who knows what strings he had to pull to get that tomb ... Nothing could be done on the Sabbath, Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.

So now it's early Sunday morning—pre-dawn, likely still dark—and these women come, bearing spices, to do what there was no time to do late Friday afternoon. They're carrying a lot of spices, because after 36 hours in the tomb, the smell of decomposition would be strong.

The women come looking for the dead, looking for a body. They find—not Jesus' body, but "two men in dazzling clothes," which is code for angels, heavenly beings. The women are terrified and bow their faces to the ground. Which is the proper response. If you are ever confronted by an angel, your proper response is terror—you should be frightened out of your mind and bow your face to the ground! In turn, the proper response from the angel is to reassure you, to say, "Fear not."

These angels don't make the proper response. We don't know whether they are rude or perhaps inexperienced—still in the training program. These angels don't say, "Fear not." Instead, they ask an abrupt and rather impertinent question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Why do you seek the living among the dead? A good question for us to ponder in our own hearts.

The angels say, "Remember what he told you ..." The women do remember, though they can't fathom what it means—who could? They go back to the eleven disciples. We can imagine they rush back to tell the others what they've experienced. So the women give the first Easter sermon: He was not there. He is not here. He is risen, as he said he would.

The women's words seemed to the others "an idle tale." There are good reasons for that: a) This sounds completely absurd, and b) women of that time were not to be believed. Women were considered "hysterical." Their testimony was considered completely unreliable. For anything to be believed in that world, it needed two male witnesses.

Funny...women in that culture were not considered to be reliable witnesses. Yet all of our gospel accounts agree the first witnesses to the empty tomb were women!

Peter ran to the tomb, found only the linen burial cloths, just as the women had said. Peter went home, amazed. Did *he* tell anyone? Did he go back to tell the others? Did he confirm the women had told the truth? We don't know.

Tonight's Gospel leaves us right there—for *now*. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't make an appearance in tonight's Gospel. Tomorrow, and for the rest of the Easter season, we'll hear of the Risen Jesus' appearances. He'll be mistaken for a gardener, thought to be a polite stranger on the road, taken for a ghost.

Then, every day for the rest of the year, all the way around until next Holy Week and Easter, we'll unpack and wrestle with what those appearances mean for us. And we'll try to live out the truth we celebrate in such stunning fashion here tonight.

But the real message of Easter is the truth that Jesus is risen! That is the best news ever! But impossible to explain. In a wonderful article in this weekend's *Wall Street Journal*, the Jesuit priest, editor and author Father James Martin writes about "The Challenge of Easter."

Martin admits that the Easter story, foundational as it is for Christian belief, can be a confusing one, even for believers. The accounts we have of Jesus' appearances after the Resurrection don't all match up neatly—they don't agree. They are mysterious in the extreme. It's hard to describe what goes beyond words, but is no less true.

So what does the Easter story (or stories) mean for us? Easter means that nothing is impossible with God. That life always, always wins over death. That love always, always wins over hatred. That hope will triumph over despair. That suffering is not the last word.

Believing Easter (even when we can't explain it) means that we have to pay attention to what Jesus says, and to act on it. We, like the women, are to remember what Jesus said and do our best to do it. Love your neighbors. Forgive. Care for the poor and the marginalized. Live a simple life. Put the needs of others before your own. [2]

None of that is any easier today than it was in Jesus' time.

God raised Jesus in the dark of the night, catching us off guard, and we are still struggling to catch up. "In the fertile darkness of divine grace, God is at work growing the crops even before the farmer is up, and knitting together the wound even before the clinic opens." [3]

Easter means we can be sure that God is at work in every darkness—from the darkness of peace and rest, to the darkness of illness and catastrophe and terror.

By leaving that tomb, Jesus changed everything. No wonder we celebrate!

God IS at work in every darkness, bringing life out of all death, bringing light into the world, and catching us off guard every time.

[1] *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, by Malina and Rohrbaugh, p. 410.

[2] http://www.wsj.com/article_email/the-challenge-of-easter-1458916153-lMyQjAxMTE2OTIyNjMyNDYxWj

[3] <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-02/sunday-march-31-2013>