



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Come Forth!

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, Sunday, April 2, 2017
The Fifth Sunday of Lent*

You've known kids like this all your life. They grow up as your neighbors, or your nephews, or your friends' children. They're going to change the world, they tell you, and you want to believe them. And sometimes you almost do believe them. They're smart and energetic and hopeful. They have that enviable faith that is resilient and strong, and they are courageous. Dear God, they are courageous. They come from rural Kansas or the Upper East Side of New York. They're from the Bronx or Biloxi or Buford or Billings.

Michael Sharp was one of those kids.

He played soccer as a boy, had a beautiful voice and sang as a soloist in the school choir, and more than anything, he just wanted to change the world. He grew up the son of a Mennonite pastor and was raised on the Christian virtues of non-violence, peace-making, and reconciliation. He wanted to make the world a better place and, unlike many young people who begin with that dreamy notion, Michael was willing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to actually do it. He studied and worked hard. He earned a Masters in Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution at Phillips University in Marburg, Germany. He was fluent in French and German.

"He went to the Congo, formally known as the Democratic Republic of Congo, a massive country roughly the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River. It is home to perhaps more distinct armed groups than anywhere else in the world," according to Max Bearak, writing for The Washington Post. Michael first volunteered for the Mennonite Central Committee, receiving "only a tiny monthly stipend, and even that he wanted to share." A colleague, Rachael Sweet, said, "He refused to eat anything other than rice and beans because that's what everyone around him was being served."

He was extraordinarily successful in his peace building work. He would go to church to make contact with various rebel leaders and, "By his count, he (and his fellow church workers) persuaded some 1,600 rebels to abandon the jungle and go home." His ability to cultivate trust among rebel leaders led him to be hired by the United Nations' Group of Experts, appointed by the Security Council to investigate the violence in that region. "At 34 he was named coordinator of the investigating panel, one of the youngest to ever hold that position." "He was courageous but not reckless," his colleague said. What happened to him is not because he didn't follow protocol. He was the opposite of a war junkie."

Two weeks ago, he and his fellow UN worker Zaida Catalan from Sweden were kidnapped while in a rebel-held part of the Congo, and this past Tuesday, the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, confirmed that Michael and a Swedish colleague had been found in a shallow grave. Their driver and interpreter were still missing.

Maybe I read the original article in the New York Times this week because I saw that he was from Kansas. Or maybe it was the description of him as "a slight, bespectacled Mennonite." I kept reading to find his grieving father quoted as saying, "their Mennonite faith informed Michael's devotion to peace-making." "From early on he caught a passion for peacemaking and peace-building in the world."

Do people really rise from the dead? Do people really rise from the dead?

Lazarus was dead. He was stone cold dead. How dead? He had already been anointed with fragrant oils and tightly wrapped in burial linens. How dead? He had been lying in a tomb for four days and four nights while his family and friends mourned his death. How dead was he? His sister Martha, the practical one, had to remind Jesus that after all that time in the tomb, his un-embalmed body would have begun to decay, and there will be a stench when the stone is rolled away. Now that's dead.

This is the last and most dramatic of the "signs" of Jesus in The Gospel According to John, and it is meant to prepare us for the coming story of Christ's resurrection.

The story begins when Jesus receives a message from his beloved friends, Mary and Martha, telling him that their brother, Lazarus, has fallen ill. And although Jesus is very close to Lazarus and his sisters, he delays returning to their hometown of Bethany, telling his disciples, "This illness does not lead to death" but is for the glory of God and the Son of God.

When Jesus is finally ready to leave for Bethany, his disciples try to stop him by reminding him of recent attempts on his life in Judea. "Rabbi, they were just now trying to stone you and are you going there again?" Jesus responds metaphorically with a saying about the necessity of walking in the daylight (as those who walk in the night will stumble), and he explains he's going to "awaken Lazarus who has fallen asleep." This prompts the disciples, who are hearing Jesus literally, to suggest that if Lazarus is merely sleeping, he'll recover without anyone risking their life in order to make the journey to Bethany! So now Jesus responds to them, literally, and tells them, "Lazarus is dead." And he adds he's glad he wasn't there to heal him, for this death provides an opportunity for faith.

After a dangerous two-day journey, Jesus arrives in Bethany where he's met by an angry Martha who tells him that if he had been there, her brother would not have died. When Jesus says to her, "Your brother will rise again," Martha, who knows her fair share of Jewish teaching, replies, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." (As if to say, "Don't tell me who will rise in the resurrection!")

But here comes the great "reveal," and the true heart of this story, because Jesus replies, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" When Jesus asks Martha if she believes death has been conquered in him, Martha can't confess such a faith. She can't even conceive of such a proposition; but she is able to claim her belief that Jesus is the Messiah, "the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Martha returns home to tell her sister, Mary, that Jesus is calling for her, and Mary comes out to him and kneels at the feet of Jesus and repeats Martha's accusation that if he had been there, her brother would not have died. But when Jesus sees her weeping and those around her weeping, he was, as the author of the gospel describes it, "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." We cannot possibly know what all was in the heart of Jesus in that moment, but here we find the shortest sentence in the entire Bible in the passage, "Jesus wept."

Here Jesus is revealed as fully God and fully man: the divine paradox. A God who so loved the world that he sent a part of God's self to dwell with us.

Then Jesus simply tells the gathered crowd, "Take away the stone." Now this is an interesting command, because he could have removed the stone himself. I mean, if you can raise someone from the dead you can easily roll away a gravestone! But Jesus isn't putting on a show. He's not trying to amaze the crowds. He summons the community to assist in the healing. Raising the dead to life in this holy moment will be a cooperative effort. The invited assistance of others will act in concert with the resurrecting power of Christ.

Finally he says, "Lazarus, come out!" Jesus calls his friend by name, and I wouldn't be the first preacher to observe that if he hadn't called him by name, every corpse in that entire tomb may have staggered to life and walked from the darkness of death into the blinding light of Christ's presence. And then Lazarus steps out of the dark tomb. Calling on the crowd to assist him once again, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go." As if to say, "Free him from this grave!"

How dead was he? Lazarus was as dead as any man can be, and yet Christ brought him back to life. We may prefer to either dismiss the biblical narrative because it has no relevance to modernity, or we can dismiss the biblical narrative because it's simply unbelievable. People rising from the dead? Come-on!

Do people really rise from the dead? They do. They really do. They do it every single day.

Michael Sharp has died a terrible and tragic death. But he rises again in every high school student who believes he or she can make the world a better place. He rises again in every waiter or waitress or messenger working their way through school so they can make their mark on the world. He rises again in every slight, bespectacled, gentle listener who believes the only way to true peace is to understand the stories of those who are at war. He rises again in the next faithful peacemaker who will take his place in that dangerous land where hatred and mistrust threaten to overcome patience and love.

What does the story of the raising of Lazarus finally mean?

It means nothing is so hopeless that it cannot be transformed by Christ.

It means no one is so lost that they cannot be found.

No one is so low that they can't be brought high.

No one is so far outside the boundaries that they can't be brought back inside.

And it means no one is so dead that they can't be brought back to eternal life.

We believe these amazing stories. We believe in a God who brings the dead back to life. We stand with the poor, the oppressed, and those who have no advocate. We go to the dangerous places, and this will always put us in harm's way; but we are not afraid because we find our protection in a God who brings the dead back to life.

"Mortal," said the spirit of the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" "Oh Lord God, you know!" the prophet politely demurred, but we all know what he was thinking. "I don't THINK so..."

Some say The Episcopal Church is dead. That the mainline Protestant Church is dead. Stone cold dead! How dead? Membership continues to decline and there are fewer and fewer young people in our pews. How dead? Our people are less and less capable of describing what it is they believe or why they believe it. Not unlike that description of the whole House of Israel, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost and we are cut off completely." How dead? Some of us have nearly lost the essential hope that lies at the core of our faith.

We have forgotten, somehow, our God is a God who stops charging armies, delivers the innocent from their foes, punishes the wicked, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, releases the captive, brings hope to the poor, and calls the dead to rise....to Rise..... TO RISE! If we are to preserve the tradition of an enlightened, grace-full Christianity which is so precious to so many of us, we will need to call the dead back to life.

"Thus, says the Lord God, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU, AND YOU SHALL LIVE."

Tell that to the next neighbor or your co-worker or your classmate who tells you how quickly you and the rest of your Episcopal friends are going to hell. Tell that to your son or daughter who wonders if "organized religion" has any point at all. And, finally, tell that to yourself, when you begin to lose hope, when you forget how many Michael Sharps there are in this world, when you forget what God has done in your life, and when you need to remember what God still has the power to do.

Amen.

i Washington Post, March 29, 2017, in Worldviews by Max Bearak

ii Ibid, Washington Post

iii Ibid, Washington Post

iv New York Times, March 28, 2017, by Somini Sengupta