



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

## The Holy Spirit and the Locked Room

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 23, 2017  
The Second Sunday of Easter—Based on John 20: 19-31*

Our great dome, which we are so carefully restoring, is supported by four arches that are grounded by these four great columns. And all around these columns are a series of panels, eight of them. They are limestone, and rather high; you might miss them or not be able to distinguish what is happening in them. They all portray the life of our patron saint, Nathaniel, also known as Bartholomew. Each of these panels, carved by the Piccirilli Brothers a hundred years ago, takes a moment of Bartholomew's life and fashions it into a tableau of stone, taking us from his calling by Jesus under a fig tree in Galilee, through Jesus' arrest and resurrection, to the end his ministry in the Far East, helping to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. As the stones of the columns hold up the great dome, St. Bartholomew's life holds up our great common life as a parish. Our gospel reading for the day includes one of the precise moments of the Resurrection that is featured in the life of St. Bartholomew. It is found on the southwest column, the panel facing the center.

You see the disciples in the room of a house, ten of them, and they are all drawing away from the center of the room, recoiling, clutching one another, looking and pointing at who has just appeared among their band of grieving brothers. It's Jesus, their Lord and master, their friend. . . their dead friend. They know that it is their dead friend, because they see his face. They see his hands and his side, both pierced by Roman nails and spears. In the panel, Jesus is wearing a loincloth, and like someone trying not to be shot, or a priest praying over Holy Communion, he is holding up his hands. You have nothing to fear, his arms are saying to his friends. Look, it's me. You have nothing to be afraid of. This carving is frozen right at the moment where the disciples are afraid, and Jesus begins to teach them how not to be afraid. How to be at peace. Especially after all that has happened. And what is inscribed next to the Risen Jesus with his arms raised? For, remember, Jesus doesn't just appear. He says things. He does things. He sets his friends off on a path with him in a particular direction; even after his death, he still calls out to them. Inscribed next to the Risen Jesus are these words: "Peace be with you." This is not just him saying calm down. Although it is partially that. He keeps saying it, after the initial startling has subsided. It's a deeper peace he seeks, the peace that comes with knowing that the sun has already started to rise on the horizon, you can see the dayspring, and you can be at peace that the long night has ended. That kind of peace.

For, you know, the disciples have options. They could take their righteous anger at the death of their friend and teacher, nurse it, focus it, and seek vengeance. What more righteous cause could there be than killing the people who killed God's son? But just as Jesus asked Peter to put his sword away in the Garden of Gethsemane, just as he forgave those who were killing him on the cross, that same peace is there. He has come to his friends in their hidden room to call them to sheath those ever-ready swords in their hearts. Jesus' peace is one that passes all understanding, that the world cannot give, because so much of our world and our logic is based on "you hit my cheek, I hit yours." Jesus invites his disciples into a new world where all that grim logic is released.

He makes it ever more clear during this Appearance by breathing on them. He gives them this air, spirit, wind projected from his insides. He gives them that baptism that John warned us about. He baptizes his disciples, not in the water that washes away stains, but in holy spirit: with the energy of a holy life lived for God. Hear how he says to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit." But there's more to it than some vague, warm, fuzzy presence. There is a specific meaning, a particular mission. In receiving the Holy Spirit, they are reminded of their power, the power that God has given them in Christ: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." And then they are reminded of the power that everyone has—and is nothing new—the power of stigma and shame: "If you retain the sins of any, they are

retained.” In this, Jesus points out two paths, holding them up, side by side, so that you might see how one is so much better than the other. The world where sins are retained, where sins stain, the old world. Or the new world, a world that had always been there, where forgiveness is ever ready to work. Ever ready to make all things new. Which world would you want to live in?

I remind you that during Jesus’ ministry, he both astonished the crowds and infuriated the religious by forgiving sins. There was once a paralyzed man that he saw on the path, and he said to him, “Take heart, son. Your sins are forgiven.” As soon as he said this, a lawyer accused him of blasphemy, one of the worst crimes around. But Jesus insisted that this authority was God’s and his. And he heals the man of his paralysis, for good measure, to try to convince them. The crowds were convinced. The accusers not so much.

This principle shows up again and again in the Gospels. With every act of God, every time God displays God’s mercy in Christ for a scorned person, there is overwhelming relief and gratitude in one camp, and volcanic rage in another. God’s love would divide people. Tragically, the best of humanity often summons the worst of it. Jesus suffered under this principle. His disciples would. And yet they found the strength and courage to persist.

You know, we share many of the limitations of the people in Jesus’ time when it comes to forgiveness. Who can forgive notorious sins in our day? Maybe a pardon from a judge or a governor? Maybe a person will have to abase themselves before a daytime or late night talk show host to show how very sorry they are. As all PR and legal experts know, public forgiveness, if it is to work, is a narrow path. So many careers depend on that path staying narrow. So many economies rely on sins being retained. And if forgiveness, love, human charity is shared and bestowed beyond these curated boundaries, well, the system demands that a person be ignored or scorned just as ferociously.

And yet, every Easter and at every moment, Jesus calls out to us from that locked room in our hearts, “Receive my Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.” Every time this call is followed, the center of gravity of our world shifts ever closer to the divine. Do you see how our faith is not primarily about believing something particular about Jesus, but it is about far more? It’s about being in communion with Jesus. In communion with the Holy Spirit.

Recall one of Jesus’ “farewell prayers” at the last supper: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” And, as we learn from the encounter with Thomas, this union doesn’t depend on us seeing Jesus or the Holy Spirit with our eyes, but with our own spirits. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Jesus, the Holy Spirit, God: they all as one long to equip us with the divine power that intends to knock the world off its grim foundations. To be a Christian is to have a kind of spiritual union with this mighty and loving power to dissolve so many chasms, walls, stains, and desolations. Even in a world of great trauma and horrible loss, Jesus showed us that it could be done. And that legacy has miraculously reached us in text and stone and song, in water and bread and wine, like golden threads winding their way through the soiled tapestry of history. To be an Easter people, to be people of the Resurrection, is to know that what Jesus started never stopped. Christ’s power is our power, gifted to us, breathed into us like divine CPR, giving us an enduring strength that almost defies belief. Death has no power over the power he bestowed to his disciples in that locked room, and death has no power over the power he bestows to us in this open, public, grand room.