



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Why It Matters

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday—Based on Mark 16:1-8*

I am so glad you're all here this morning! I'm just so glad you're here to listen to this amazing story. This is one of those mornings when I'm grateful to be a clergyman, because if I didn't have this pulpit from which to preach, I'd have to go out on Park Avenue and shout this Good News to people walking by. People who would, I'm pretty sure, give me a wide, wide berth.

Now I love the fact that it takes four separate, unique gospels to convey the facts of Jesus Christ's Life, Death, and Resurrection. These four different witnesses differ in style, theological inclination, and even in their recalling of exactly what took place and when. It must be difficult for those who want to draw simplistic conclusions from the Bible when they encounter such an intricate mosaic.

But there's one fact upon which these four gospel writers completely agree; one fact that is not in dispute. It was the women who stayed with Jesus until the very bitter end of his death. Not the men, not those who would later be termed "apostles." It was the women, once again, who became the first witnesses of the inexplicable miracle of finding nothing, absolutely nothing, of the body of Jesus in his abandoned tomb.

The willingness of these courageous women to stay late until the gut-wrenching end of the crucifixion and the willingness of these women to return early, bone weary with grief the next morning, says so much about how deeply they cared for Jesus. The women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salomé—were willing to risk their lives to ensure Jesus was given a proper burial. Jesus, who hours before had been full of wonder and life, would now, in death, be merely an empty vessel. It takes a lot of courage to see something like that straight on.

The Gospel of Mark reminds us that the very first proclamation of the Risen Lord originates in those brave, confused, frightened, and tenacious women who fled "with terror and amazement" to tell the others that the tomb was empty. It was God who ordained them to be bearers of that fantastic truth, first to the other disciples and then to the entire world. These women were true disciples, and their first word from that empty tomb should forever silence anyone who questions whether or not women should be ordained.

Now I think it's always interesting when we go looking for something, and we're overjoyed when we find absolutely nothing. Most of our lives are spent in the pursuit of an elusive something. Often, we don't know what that something is, and, usually, we don't know where on earth we might search to find it. But there are moments when it's better to discover nothing at all. There are the times when we want the MRI to reveal absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. There are the times when we pray the test will indicate an absence rather than a presence. We're relieved to learn our child did nothing, comforted when we discover the angry words were truly never said or that the malicious act didn't actually take place. Sometimes we're relieved to find absolutely no one waiting on our doorstep.

I would argue that the discovery of absolutely nothing on that long-ago morning is far and away the most astonishing discovery ever made by anyone, at anytime, anywhere!

A former Bishop of Lincoln was once asked why, year after year, he continued to preach the very same Easter sermon without changing so much as a single word. He famously replied, "I continue to preach the same sermon because I have yet to substantially change my opinion on the subject."

Is this absence—this no-thing—really all that it's cracked up to be? Well, yes, it is, because the story of the Resurrection is more than merely the story of a missing body. It's what that missing body signifies that counts. It's not just that one death is overcome; it's that death as a category is overcome. It's not just that one tomb is found empty; it's that every tomb has been symbolically emptied before us. It's not just that the fear and grief of the women at the tomb have been relieved; it's that the very architecture of fear and grief has been transformed.

I received an email from a parishioner the other day who said a friend of hers, another parishioner, told her that this year it's been harder to imagine and feel the good news of God's love during Lent and Easter. "We have been so traumatized," she wrote, "in one short year with all the negative behavior, violence, lack of truth, bullying, etc., that we have fear, dread, and anxiety in our guts now. It's hard to overcome." Add to that the natural disasters, a growing fear of nuclear genocide, and a dissolving confidence in government to fulfill its part of the social contract, and one begins to get the picture. It is hard to overcome, and were it entirely up to us, I'm not sure we could overcome it.

The brilliant Frederick Buechner observed, "Anxiety and fear are what we know best in this fantastic century of ours. Wars and rumors of wars. From civilization itself to what seemed the most unalterable values of the past, everything is threatened or already in ruins. We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good we cannot hear it. But the proclamation of Easter Day is all is well. And as a Christian (Buechner continues), I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well, but as one who has faced the cross in all of its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has

known, one way or another, what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord has risen.”¹

Now this isn't a story I'm completely comfortable sharing, but when I was in seminary, I was having a very difficult time. I was having a really hard time because I wanted to be an amazing scholar, and I'm not. And I was failing at being an amazing scholar by a fair distance.

I received an opportunity to spend part of a summer studying at Saint George's College in Jerusalem and, in some ways, it was a fairly harrowing time to be in Israel and Palestine, just on the heels of the first Gulf War in 1991. One night I was in a car with one of the guides from the school at a very tense military checkpoint where a misunderstanding was taking place, and I realized that my very experienced guide was becoming more and more nervous about how this situation was evolving. I, on the other hand, realized I wasn't nervous at all. It was the strangest thing. I'm not really all that brave, but I realized I just wasn't frightened.

And then, I realized something deeply disturbing. I realized that I was less scared of being accidentally shot in a misunderstanding at a security checkpoint than I was of failing an exam or, worse, receiving a poor evaluation on a seminary paper. I was actually more afraid of failing than I was of dying. Even I could see, confused and befuddled though I was, that this was a fairly twisted way to go about living one's life.

But then I discovered, I wasn't alone. I wasn't alone. I began to realize just how many other people live lives of varying degrees of worry and fear. No one seems to be able to avoid it completely.

If you're young, you wonder about who you will grow into being, and you worry about what you will need to do to reach your goals. You work on achieving the accreditation you need: school, certifications, graduation, so that your dreams can come to pass. If you're a little older, you wonder if you're on schedule to reach all of your dreams. What do you still need to achieve by the time you're 40 or 50?

When we're older still, we wonder, "Will there still be time to do what we've most wanted to do with our lives?" Will there be time to fulfill our true calling? And, if we're still older yet, we wonder if what we've been chasing all these years has really been worth having spent the better part of our lives in its pursuit.

Are you trying to work your way into heaven? Are you trying, by your good works and your manner of life, to earn your way to a place on God's celestial shore? Do you think that if you become somehow more amazing it will make you more beloved of God? That just isn't how it works.

You don't have to be more amazing. You're amazing already. God made you that way. You just have to realize you are loved, and God has taken care of that part of the equation. We simply cannot save ourselves, and when we try, we're soon overcome by what my friend John Claypool used to refer to as "our not-enoughness," a genius phrase if there ever was one. Are you still unable to forgive yourself over the things done and left undone in your life? Do you still believe God will NEVER forgive you for that? That's just not how it works.

God gave himself to us out of God's great compassion, and that's the whole purpose of the story we're telling this morning. And I know there are plenty of folks, especially some clergy, who'll be happy to tell you that with enough guilt and anxiety and fear you can begin living what they call "a Christian life." You can be "leveraged" to accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. I'm so sorry, but that's not Grace and that's not Good News. And I am telling you—or more reliably, all four Gospels are telling you—that just isn't how Christianity works.

Through the Cross, through the amazing power of the Resurrection, you and I have been released from all of that. It's not about what you've done or ever could do. It's about what God can and has done for all of us. In the presence of such love, all you or I or anyone can possibly do is to choose to receive it, accept it, appreciate it, revel in it, and, finally, give profound thanks for it.

We're called to live our lives in the Light of the Resurrection and it is a very bright and clarifying light indeed.

My father and I were very close; he died nine years ago. I miss him still. His health had been failing over the last years of his life, and I remember speaking to him over the phone. He sounded weaker and more confused than I can ever remember him sounding. Now you have to understand that this was my father—that larger-than-life figure who used to race speeding bullets and leap tall buildings in a single bound. He haltingly expressed his love for me, and I told him I loved him, too. When I hung up the phone, the thought came to me that his death was going to be unbearable to me. Absolutely unbearable. And if I did not believe in what we are celebrating this very morning, it would have been unbearable. I honestly don't know what I would do if I did not believe, as St. John Chrysostom proclaimed it in the Easter Sermon he preached some 1600 years ago,

Christ is Risen, and you, O death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!
Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its deadⁱⁱ

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Synthesis*, April, 2015, p. 2

ⁱⁱ St. John Chrysostom, Easter Sermon, copied, translation unknown