



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The Birthday of Hope

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 31, 2013

Easter Day

Based on Luke 24:13-49

A couple of years ago during Holy Week, I received an email from my old college chaplain. It was one of those out-of-the-blue, haven't-thought-of-this-person-in-years contacts that now happen to us as a result of social media. Frozen in my memory as he was nearly 40 years ago, he appeared as smart and funny, reverent but only slightly, a good tennis player, handsome in a forever fraternity boy sort of way, and a great listener. He had come across a picture of me on Facebook and wrote saying that he hardly recognized the old, white-headed man peering out at him from the computer. I obviously had forgotten his mean streak. But in the course of what was in fact a lovely note after that rocky start, he said something that I think I shall never forget. Just at the end of his email, he typed these words: "In your sermon this week, try to have something good to say. Easter is the best chance we ever have—for Easter is the birthday of hope."

And so it is, my friends—the birthday of hope. No matter how dark it has been, no matter how dark it will be again, on this day hope that never ends is born. Easter, you see, is about knowing in that deep space in our souls that even though we were and that we *are* sometimes dead—sometimes the worst kind of dead, the living dead—we don't have to be. Easter means that we rise from the dead, right now in this life, that we can choose to experience the hope of resurrection, that we can seek life among the living rather than remaining among the dead.

On a day like today when all the planets seem to be lined up beautifully and flawlessly, on Easter morning when the church is filled with people and flowers and music and good will, the world seems as close to perfect as we ever get. And it may just be. But we know that it is not as easy as it sounds; we know—and not just theoretically but in our souls—that life for us is not perfect. Not all of the darkness we faced during Lent has magically rolled away for us. Oh, if only it had! Worries, doubts, problems, anxieties—Easter does not make them vanish. It never has, not from the very beginning. Luke reports that when the women returned breathlessly with the news of an empty tomb, the apostles heard these words as an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

We understand that dilemma. Too much good news often makes us suspicious that it is indeed too good to be true. We too struggle with resurrection, the whole idea of it, focusing a great deal of energy and intellect on what we can *believe* about the resurrection, as though believing were the highest achievement. Was it fully physical, we ask, or was it simply spiritual, as though spiritual is ever simple. I can't be much help in that discourse because it doesn't matter much to me. What matters to me is less a question of form than one of effect. I have no direct experience of bodily resuscitation, but I know in a way that doesn't have much to do with believing that resurrection occurs, because I have seen it and known it in my own life and in the lives of many others.

I have seen it most often in the form of hope, which is not to be confused with magical thinking. Magical thinking involves looking at reality with denial and then reconstruction, which is to say making up something else and calling it real. Hope involves facing reality squarely, honestly, but refusing to allow what is real to define or limit who we are or how we shall face the circumstances of our lives. Thank God we are more than our struggles and/or our triumphs.

There are times, sometimes quite regular, when life does indeed go along swimmingly for us; in fact, from the outside looking in, it seems that for some people it almost always does. But we know better: there are no perfect lives; there are only lives. Everyone deals with disappointments, sometimes minor, sometimes tragic, but inevitably. Our best chance is to live in the practice of hope, claiming whatever truth of resurrection we can as those who

want to believe in the power of God to bring the dead to life and to call into being that which does not exist. God knows we need to live like that.

I am thinking today of aging parents who wish for a better, more satisfying relationship with an adult child, admitting longtime complications that get in the way but hoping for a time when life is easier, when feelings of responsibility and the desire to advise are replaced with the bond of simple friendship. They are looking for resurrection.

I am thinking of a friend facing the recurrence of cancer, knowing that it may be the end but living in the present moment, determined to live each hour as fully as he can. He is looking for resurrection.

I am thinking of a couple disrupted from their easy and comfortable retirement, now facing a battle for one's life after a serious heart attack, each trying to imagine life after this event. They too are looking for resurrection.

I am thinking of a mother, whose peaceful life is being uprooted because she needs more care, that which has been the comfort of home for many years now being replaced by the unknown and untested, by the new and uncharted. She is looking for resurrection.

How we face such moments as these, real life moments, as people of the resurrection is our spiritual journey. Hope is the embodiment of resurrection, which Richard Rohr defines as "the universal pattern of undoing death." I believe that he is right; it is the force that stands in the face of what is apparently dead and transforms it into that which is more profoundly alive than we realized. No circumstance is beyond the redemption of God. It is only, though, through practice that we live a life characterized by this understanding. How do we do it? Well, imperfectly, of course, with many stops and starts. Living as one who embraces the practice of hope and resurrection involves a lifetime, a lifetime more about quality than length.

I have had the heartbreaking but profoundly inspiring experience of knowing children whose tragically short lives have catapulted them to the residence of deep hope, despite and through the presence of unbeatable disease, making them wise way beyond their years. I have had the equally heartbreaking experience to know those who have lived long, long lives with very little practice of hope, who now struggle at the end, striving to regain hope that has long since been put aside. As in most things human, the practice of hope involves the cultivation of the mindset that nourishes it. Somewhere along the way those who live in hope come to understand that "feeling" overwhelmed is not the same as "being" overwhelmed. With good cause there is much negativity and cynicism in the world, but we have the capacity of those who seek to be people of the resurrection to refuse cynicism as our default position. Life need not be simply an idle tale but the embodiment of resurrection and hope and goodness.

This isn't a self-help sermon; it is, in fact, a deeply evangelical Easter sermon, because with all that I am I believe that Easter means we can live better lives than we often do and that what God wants for us is not drudgery but abundance, neither of which depends upon how much we have or have not accumulated. A few moments ago we heard some outrageously hyperbolic words attributed to God by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah heard with the ears of his heart the voice of God describing a time when the only sound of weeping will be the joyful tears of rejoicing, when infants will thrive and old people live fully until they die, a time when homes and good food will be not acquisitions available only to some but the possession of all God's children, and a time when the wolf and lamb will lie side by side.

Are these simply the words of a pious unrealistic prophet? Perhaps. But maybe they are ancient words that describe the hope God has for all of us, God's imagining for the whole world. Easter, my brothers and sisters, has come again; and it is the birthday of hope, which means that all things can be new again.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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