



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Making Easter Last

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 27, 2014
The Second Sunday of Easter—Based on John 20:19-31*

The title of my sermon today is "Making Easter Last." I loved last week—all of it, the crowds and the hats and the over the top music, the almost palpable joy that comes from celebrating the highest holy day we have as Christians, surrounded by those whom we know and scads we don't know. I am not one of those clergy who secretly resent the crowds on such days. Their presence honors the importance of the day and somehow corroborates what it is that keeps some of us here all the time. I will take that gladly—not to mention the fact that I still believe that coming to church is better than not, no matter how often or how seldom or not to mention the grand possibility of passing the plate to that many people! Someone told me a story this week about attending an Easter mass some time ago in another city in which the priest made this comment just before communion: "Welcome everyone. Just to be clear, our guideline for who can receive Communion and who can't is that you need to be baptized into this denomination in order to receive. Today there is an additional requirement: only those who are regular attendees are invited." I am not absolutely sure what will make Easter last, but I am positive that it is not that.

In a book written almost 60 years ago, one that a diminishing number of us remember, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm, a long deceased Neo-Freudian analyst and author, distinguished between the breathtaking and essential but short-lived experience of falling in love and the real hope of knowing sustained love, which he called standing in love. Falling in love is mostly feeling; standing in love is the decision to love, the choice to love when many of the fireworks have subsided. After all these years, the book is marvelously relevant and worth a modern hearing. In some ways the difference between last week's Easter Day and the Second Sunday of Easter, which is today, is not unlike the distinction between falling in love and standing in love.

The celebration last week was like falling in love, romantic and thrilling, overflowing with feeling. Nothing about that is bad; in fact, it is all good. I love to fall in love; who doesn't? But falling in love is also inevitably inchoate, a marvelous beginning but still a beginning. Standing in love is more challenging, more real. It sees more, and what it sees is seen more clearly—and yet loves anyway. To be clear, I am not suggesting that those who only come on Easter Day are those who fall in love and are somehow, therefore, bad and that the rest of us who stand in love and attend regularly are somehow good. The analogy for me is deeper than that. To me, falling in love with Easter means remaining in the fantastical elements of the story while standing in love involves answering the question: so, what now?

It is not possible from the four canonical gospels to get a clear reading about the post-resurrection appearances. But what we can glean from the disjointed and even conflicting stories as recorded is that in the early church, in these first 70 years or so after Jesus' death, there was a tradition, first only oral, that Jesus in some form appeared to his followers. Even in this one passage from John, there are questions about what Jesus looked like. He appears in the room as though passing through the wall unlike a real body could; yet Thomas is invited to touch his wounds, which could only occur bodily. But for the moment, and hopefully forever, let's set aside questions about what really happened, about who saw whom and in what state they were seen. In whatever way Jesus appeared to this group of followers or if the appearance in the narrative is in fact a literary technique of the narrator of John, the message of this passage is clearly about what comes next. Don't stay in the past; move forward.

In a few weeks we shall celebrate Pentecost, and we shall speak of it as the “birthday of the church,” as the time when the spirit of God came upon the new Christians, empowering them to go forth into the world with the message of God’s inclusive love. We will rely on the well-known story from The Acts of the Apostles, when the spirit was experienced as coming down upon them as tongues of fire. But that is only one tradition of Pentecost; in this passage today there is another. Though not generally spoken of as a Pentecost experience, in this story the disciples are sent: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” said Jesus. “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

On the very night of the resurrection, then, the narrator of John tells his story as an Easter **and** Pentecost moment. Easter, the fantastical moment like falling in love, has occurred; and now it is time to stand in love, to receive the power of mission, marching orders for living the Good News, not in some glorious moment of the past but in the here-and-now of ordinary lives. It is as though in this vision Jesus himself is saying, “Don’t fixate on my death; go forth in the world and live and love as I did.” This seems to me to be the point of this passage, not pondering Thomas’s doubts, which always leads to pondering our own doubts. Of course Thomas doubted; of course we doubt. So what? Get up, and get going. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

And even now we, as people who believe without seeing, are sent. The truth of Easter is never the end of anything; in fact, it is the beginning of everything. If we truly believe that because of Easter our message to the world is that life wins over death and that light triumphs over darkness, then we are beholden to be about bringing that life and light to our lives and to all whom we touch. Standing in love with the risen Christ means that our lives are transformed and that we do all we can to be a part of transforming the world. There are a million ways to do it:

- ❖ Praying, whether we think prayer does any good or not, praying not only for ourselves but for others as well, praying for peace in the world and living peacefully in our own corner of it, praying that we will be open to hearing the quiet voice of God calling us;
- ❖ Giving of our selves, giving what we have and what we are, to be a part of bringing God’s kingdom on earth;
- ❖ Serving in whatever way our life situation allows, whether it is simply gathering some canned goods at the grocery store for the food pantry, serving on the Altar Guild, becoming a reader or chaliceist in the liturgy, preparing a meal for our homeless shelter guests or staying overnight, or just writing a check;
- ❖ Loving the best way we can and not on our power alone but believing that we have been called and **empowered** to love in a way that will amaze even us, **choosing** to love even when not doing so would come more easily, more naturally.

The list could and should go on and on; it is for you and me to complete. But notice that it has nothing to do with who’s in and who’s out, about who’s in church when and who isn’t. What I believe is that whatever we choose to put carefully and lovingly on this list as our response to the mystery of Easter, in whatever way we can believe it, will be what makes Easter last for us and not just us but for the world. Easter wasn’t an event; it is an invitation to a life full of joy and meaning.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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