



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Finish Line

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 20, 2014
The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day—Based on Matthew 28:1-10

Last Tuesday a solemn anniversary was observed in Boston when many in the city and from around the country gathered to acknowledge a day, which like others in our history, is now sadly seared into our memory. I, like most of you, have been moved and heartened by the resilience of the city and have listened to and read reports of the human-interest stories of which we are so fond, stories of coming back, of choosing to live fully and fearlessly in the face of such acts of violence—stories truly of resurrection, Easter stories in my way of understanding the world.

Vice-president Joe Biden was present for the event. I am fairly certain that I have never before quoted Mr. Biden in a sermon or in any conversation other than to repeat one of his famous gaffes, several of which I desperately wanted to use in this sermon; happily for all good judgment prevailed. One of the remarks he made Tuesday, though, has stuck with me and is repeatable—at least with annotation. Though it is full of the jingoism that I suppose politicians have to engage, or at least think they must engage, it touched me anyway: "America will never, ever, ever stand down," he said. "We are Boston. We are America. We respond, we endure, we overcome and we own the finish line."

"We own the finish line." Even in my hearing of it as a non-athlete, long before age made that status acceptable, this is a marvelous line. Its context was unexamined patriotism, which for me is never good, but somehow I found it not only forgivable on this day but also evocative of Easter. In its literal claim, it remains to be seen whether or not America owns the finish line; already we don't in certain areas. In the end, only later generations than ours will make that call. In Christianity, "we own the finish line" is not a phrase I'd find useful in comparing ourselves to other world religions. If no other message has been proclaimed clearly from this pulpit, surely one is that we do not adhere to the notion that one religion or one denomination has to be wrong for us to be right. We are not always as adept at living that truth as proclaiming it, particularly when I or one of my colleagues decide to take on the whole of rightwing Christianity in one of sermons, momentarily imagining ourselves to setting the whole world straight; but when we are at our best, we do not understand ourselves as locked in a contest about who is most right with eternal life being the ultimate reward for the one who owns the finish line.

So why would such an odd tagline catch my heart on this grand and glorious Easter morning? To answer that, the story must become personal. The Christian story is my story; I've tried some others, some of which I find quite appealing and from which I regularly draw understanding and meaning on my journey. In fact, there are times when I find more resonance in the writings of the likes of Abraham Heschel or Martin Buber than in many of my Christian brothers and sisters. And, yet, when I approach God head-on, it is this story, the Easter story, to which my compass inevitably points, a truth undoubtedly and admittedly shaped by my cultural experience. Easter is for me the moment that owns the finish line; others cross the finish line with different stories, but my crossing it occurs at Easter. Though my tonier, which is to say snootier, music friends question me on this, when MacFarlane's *Christ our Passover* is performed as it was a few moments ago with brass and quite objectively the best singers in the whole world though some of them are themselves snooty, I am there, man! I have crossed the finish line; it has taken me across home plate, into the end zone, and swished me through the net! And from this moment on, I pledge no more sports metaphors in this sermon for I am losing what little cred I have!

Now to be clear, it is not that the resurrection is uncomplicated for me. Theologians of my kind often hide

behind speaking in riddles about the resurrection, claiming on occasion that what actually occurred is not terribly important. While there is some truth in that claim, it is primarily to dodge the question. Of course, historical reporting is important, but that is not what the gospels offer. To claim otherwise or to remain silent about it is for me to be untruthful. The Bible is a different genre altogether, cherished and true in its way but very different from history. Despite that, many Christians can tell us quite precisely what literally happened, basing their belief on the strength of and as evidence of their faith. For some of us, who are unwilling or unable to be bound by a literal reading of what we believe to be a true but not literal record, our believing, our faithfulness, our knowing must come in some other way.

My claim, and that upon which I stake all that I value and hold dear in my heart, is that through the experience of what lives in our lives as resurrection, we have more than enough to calm our minds and inspire our spirits, regardless of what we or anyone else chooses to believe about the body of Jesus. What I know is that I have seen resurrection in this very world, in my life and time. And in my heart, I *know* in a way that is neither measurable nor verifiable that the Jesus whose life story strikes the cord of redemption and hope for me continued and continues somehow through the experience of the Christ of our faith to live in this world. Jesus of Nazareth was killed, not by the Jews, but by a system of imperial and religious power that was threatened by his way of being, his love too severe, too challenging to survive in this world. But the story did not stop there. In a mystery that is quite beyond history, resurrection became and remains a spirit, a person—we say—because we don't know how else to say it, a being whom we as Christians call Christ, the One who lives beyond that or any other grave, beyond that or any other story for us.

I know this Christ—not every second of every day; heavens, there are moments when I think it is all made up. But when the chips are down, I *know* this Christ in my heart and in yours and in the heart of this place, and I know Christ in all sorts of other likely and unlikely places. In moments of unsurpassed joy and in moments when death is clearly winning, I have experienced the existence of Christ, sometimes most clearly in the form of another human being, sometimes simply in a presence that though not visible is unmistakable and as palpable as love ever is. It is Christ who allows the hopeless to feel hope, when there is no basis for any, certainly none that can be seen. It is Christ who allows the oppressed to believe that Christ in others will someday rise up to release them, and it is Christ in us who challenges our comfort, leading us to do more for others than our record of generosity would suggest likely; it is Christ who allows the distracted, the bored, the walking dead to look for more and to believe that there can be.

It is hardly necessary for me to give you a recitation of how desperate much of the world is. The stories coming from South Korea alone are so breathtakingly sad I can barely watch; and there is desperation, my friends, much closer to home than that and other tragic events. Some of us in this very room are dealing with desolation and worry. And though it would be unforgivably glib to suggest that answers and solutions are ever easy, I believe with all my heart that this One whom we call Christ, the embodiment of life over death, will somehow sustain us in ways that may be quite beyond our imagination at this moment, that help will come, that clarity or peace will somehow be restored, and above all that we will not be alone in our struggle for when resurrection lives our eyes and our hearts are open to one another.

It is Easter, and once again resurrection owns the finish line—for Christ is alive.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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