



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

## The Crucifixion that Failed

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, Nov. 20, 2016*

*The Last Sunday of the Year—Based on Luke 23: 33-43*

Today is the end of our church's calendar year, the last Sunday of Pentecost, right before we start into the ever-growing light and hope that is the next Advent. It is the end of our year, and, at least as far as our gospel reading is concerned, it is the end of the line for Jesus. It's a sort-of mini-Good Friday today, for, like that day in Holy Week, today our attention is drawn toward something from which any reasonable person would rather turn away. A decent person wouldn't dwell too long on this, and yet our people keep coming back to it, to this day on Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. I was walking through the grand St. Francis Xavier Church near the Flatiron, and they really bring the point home by having fourteen large murals, the traditional Stations of the Cross, expanded to larger than life, the colors of the murals growing ever darker as Jesus is broken down and entombed. Every time you worship in that space, those panels encircle you in a sequential Cyclorama of anguish. Every day is Good Friday, there, in a way.

At St. Bart's, not so much. Every day is Transfiguration for us, thanks to this magnificent mosaic above the altar we had made in Ravenna. You know, it was the disciples who wanted to stay on that mountain forever with Jesus, in that sublime glory. And Jesus had to insist that they must leave, that he had to go to Jerusalem and face his grim destiny there. We at St. Bart's, in a way, have figured out how to stay on that good mountain forever. We allude to the crucifixion in our building. You can see the elegant cross that we have above the altar, white marble on yellow. Also, the entire building is in the shape of the cross, another elegant statement.

The only place that I can find, in all of the glass and sculpture of this building, where the Crucifixion is actually portrayed at St. Bart's is above the main, center door. Have you noticed it? Right above the door is a crucified man, with a head hanging low, hair draped such that no face can be seen, covered in the soot of the street, and he is surrounded by a host of mourning robed figures on either side, keening and clutching their bodies in grief. And there is a floating circle hanging above the company with the words "It is finished" inscribed there, as if the sun itself were honoring this moment, displaying Jesus' last words.

We don't dwell on it for long, but the Crucifixion is there, in stone, the doorway through which all the beauty of this place is found, and that horrible cross is the structure that contains all this beauty and joy. Within the cross we find God? How can we dare to say that? Isn't that where God is proved to be the most absent? Isn't the death of an innocent man the very sign that God has forsaken this place? How can it be the staging ground for our way of life? How can it be the door to all that is good in heaven and earth?

Well, this is not just any crucifixion. This crucifixion, one of hundreds of thousands that the Roman government produced, this crucifixion is the one that failed, the one that failed to do what it intended to do. They intended to destroy not just Jesus of Nazareth the man, but his entire movement, and not just destroy it, but layer on propaganda that would proclaim it as treason, blasphemy, and hubris. They mocked him using his name, Jesus, which means, "he saves." "Well, well, Mr. 'He-saves,'" they laughed, "if you are so good at saving, save yourself, Mr. 'He-saves!' Save yourself from this!" And then they sought to give him a different name. A name that would show that he deserved what he got. He was no savior, he was nothing less than a power-mad rival to the Emperor! "The King of the Jews" was the sign they placed above him, when he never said that about himself. They placed a crown of barbed wire thorns around his head to mock this claim. But

remember, again and again, he avoided the times when the crowd wanted to make him king, against his will. He renounced Peter when he took up a sword to defend him. His kingdom, he said, was not of this world. And yet, there was the title, like the fake news headlines that bedevil social media. The crucifixion tried to drown out the truth of what he was saying and doing in the world, tried to rewrite his history through making his broken body a bully pulpit of ridicule and lies.

But it didn't work. Somehow, this time, the light of God's love was not stamped out. God in Jesus shined ever brighter!

Somehow, our dear Jesus speaks words of blessing even in the Place of the Skull. It's why we celebrate that horrible day: so we can remind ourselves that it is possible. It can be done. The darkness doesn't have to overcome the light. While being killed, He keeps praying to God. He asks for mercy, in fact, for all those who are lost, especially the ones who are killing him. And the last person he speaks to in his life is another one of the other people who have been crucified next to him. This particular person among the condemned actually defends Jesus against the people who are mocking him. This is one who sees what no one in the blood-thirsty crowd can see. This is one who summons his last morsel of fading life to take Jesus' side. To say, with his last breath, "This man has done nothing wrong." In fact, he did everything right. And in it this criminal shared breathtaking intimacy with Jesus. Did you know that no one in the entire gospels dares to address Jesus as merely "Jesus"? We often forget how forward it is to use a person's first name, and how striking it is for us to be so casual and familiar with the divine in our conversation, or in our prayers. Everywhere else in the Gospels, except here, people call Him Lord, or Rabbi, or Messiah, or qualify his name with "of Nazareth." This person alone, hanging with him on the cross, sharing in his death, addresses him as a brother would: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." It is as if he is saying, "Even in this place of horror, I see what you are doing. I want a share in the world that you proclaim, in the world that you are living out, a world that is not defeated by death and the cross, even here on Golgotha, it can be on earth as it is in heaven. May I be your disciple? With what little life I have left, may I too follow where you lead?" And so, as Jesus is mocked for being unable to save, he saves the person next to him, lifting him up in hope, in a place where everyone would say that hope had abandoned. It didn't work for Jesus, and it didn't work for the man next to him. A light was shining and spreading in the darkness, and the darkness couldn't overcome it.

As disturbing as the story of the Crucifixion is, it is the ground upon which we stand, especially when it seems that all is lost. Many of you here have experienced a taste of loss in this past election. By some polls, 90% of the voters on this island are feeling the sting of defeat, and many have told me that, in a way, part of their idealism died deep into that Tuesday night. Many are afraid that this loss signifies a turn away from values that enshrine the dignity of every person. And we are alarmed to note that a certain precious veil of civility has been lifted that allows mockery and scorn to flow ever more freely from the lips of our leaders and from our neighbors. We have discovered that political prediction is not a science, and so it seems like the future ahead is not ours to know. Was it ever?

Well, if there is any solace to be taken from God for those of us who experience defeat in political life, or professional life, or family life, it is that the life of God, the love of God is not taken away from us in any of these worldly defeats. We see it in Jesus' life given back to us at Easter, and in the bread and wine of this altar; but, even more impressive, we see that love displayed from the Cross. As Paul proclaimed to the Roman Christians, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In Christ, it is as if we made our way to the bottom of the sea, in the deep dark and under crushing pressure, where the earth is cracked and weeps fire, only to discover that a flower blooms there. And if it blooms there, may it bloom here.

**©2016 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York**

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022