



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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After Easter

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 30, 2017

The Third Sunday of Easter

Based on Luke 24:13-35

*Come Holy Spirit and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.*

I live close enough to Saint Bart's to walk to the church on Sunday mornings. (A luxury, I know, for those of you who travel here from New Jersey or from the Bronx or from even farther away.) With every step I take on the way to church, I become more aware of the life around me.

On Sunday mornings, the early crew from the corner bar are usually flopping down the rubber bar mats on the sidewalk and hosing them down. Outside the French restaurant, the sous chef is leaning against a side door and smoking a cigarette with one of the waitresses before the rush for brunch begins.

Two small children, laughing and skateboarding on the sidewalk side by side, begin to outdistance their parents... who keep telling them not to get too far ahead.

There's a confused look on an older man's face as he slowly makes his way across 2nd Avenue. He grips his walker like a life-line. Could he have ever imagined this when he was twenty-two years old and *running* these streets on a Sunday morning, keeping track of his personal best?

Small slices of real life in a great city unfolding on a quiet morning: the spare sofa left on the sidewalk after a move, lovers holding hands on their way to get bagels, the low rumble of the subway coming up through the grates on the sidewalk, the line of customers beginning to form at Starbucks.

So, what does any of that... that quotidian, real-world stuff... have to do with what we do in here? When we cross the threshold into this great, cavernous sacred space and experience the unavoidable transcendent moment when our eyes are drawn heavenward and we're obliged to contemplate larger and ever more complex truths.... how can it be that what happens outside these walls... and what happens inside these walls is all a part of one great reality?

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Easter and the Lord is STILL RISEN.

In here.... and out there.

Theologian John Westerhoff once said the fifty days of the Easter season are intended to be the most joyous and festive days in the whole Church year. He wrote, "We sing and live the story of a new world of possibility. God's longed-for, hoped-for reign has begun."

I've always been fascinated by the resurrection account from *The Gospel According to Luke* we've just heard, because this is the story we're given as the sun is setting on Easter Day.

This is the story of the disciples when there's been just a little time to reflect on the unbelievable events which made themselves known at dawn in that empty tomb.

In *this* account, two of the disciples are making their way to Emmaus, a town not more than a day's walk from Jerusalem, and they're taking their walk on the afternoon of that very disorienting first Easter.

The two disciples are talking as they walk, and they're working through the sequence of events that have taken place during the last several days of their lives.

And then, Luke writes, "Jesus himself came near and went with them."

But this is the Christ in a form unfamiliar to the two grieving disciples. It's as if they have encountered a mysterious stranger on the road! And the gospel says, "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

And this mysterious stranger, the Risen Christ, appears to be almost baiting the bewildered disciples by asking them what they've been discussing.

And one of them, Cleopas, replies almost testily, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

So, Cleopas takes it upon himself to retell the whole surreal and marvelous story of Jesus... to the risen Christ himself! And, at the conclusion of the story, Cleopas reveals his genuine disappointment when he confesses, "But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel."

They had all hoped he might be the one.

- The one exception to the rule.
- The one reliable truth.
- The one, true, genuine Savior in a world filled with charlatans, pretenders, and wannabes.

And Cleopas explains further that the women who followed Jesus "...went to the tomb earlier this morning and, when they did not find his body, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive."

What did it all mean?

- Well, for these two disciples, the universe no longer had any fixed points.
- Nothing could ever be as it once was.
- No fact could still be relied upon as absolute, and no truth was beyond suspicion.

Their Lord has been cruelly put to death....and if that wasn't shocking enough, now it seems that death, as a category, was not durable enough to contain him!

As the disciples walk with this stranger, he begins to break open for them the meaning behind the words of scripture and, as they reach their destination, it appears he's planning to leave them and continue on.

I love the human part of this story: These two men, who have experienced something they can't even *begin* to understand in Christ's presence, find themselves begging him to stay with them. "Stay with us...it's almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

And what they don't say—but must certainly be feeling—is that they've experienced more than enough loss and uncertainty for one day and, more than anything else, they want to continue to share the company of this gentle presence who is uniquely wise and deeply understanding.

When darkness begins to fall, and the light fades so quickly... it's good to be with a friend, isn't it?

And so, as night comes, they gather together to share in a meal... and this mysterious stranger takes the bread...and he blesses it... and he gives it to them... and, in that precise moment, it is as if they have been struck by the VERY Power of the Universe!!!!

They realize it is HIM!!!

And just as quickly as they realize that it is Jesus, their Master, he vanishes from their sight.

They're so excited that they travel back to Jerusalem that very night and, *as enthusiastic as two people could possibly be*, they find the remaining apostles and their companions. And here's when they discover they all have come to the same, astounding conclusion: The Lord IS Risen! He is actually risen! And he has been made known to us in the breaking of the bread.

In the Eucharist, we use Bread to symbolize the body of Christ: bread, made from grain which grows through human effort; grain which is crushed into flour and mixed with water to make dough, and the dough is mixed and kneaded and baked. By eating this bread according to Christ's command, we share in his body and we become "one in him and he in us."

And then we use Wine, made from the fruit of the earth, to symbolize Christ's blood. In using wine, we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice and the sacrifices we're called daily to offer in his name. But in using wine, we're also reminded of the joy life has to offer and it is, for us, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

We live in a community with extraordinary expectations and extraordinary pressures. We live in a community that places extraordinary economic demands upon people. We live in a community where people are known to hide their struggles and they sometimes feel as if there's no one to whom they can turn.

When Christ turned water into wine at the Wedding in Cana, he revealed the abundance of his love. He didn't make just enough wine to tide the wedding party over, but he made enough wine to serve a large party for a week!

This is the abundant, lavish, love of a gracious God poured out for us. And this is the reason we're called to be joyous and lavish lovers in return.

You see, even as the darkness comes, I believe in the Resurrection. Even as the day dims and the memories of Easter morning fade, I believe in the Resurrection.

I believe because I see the power of the Risen Lord Sunday after Sunday when we gather around this altar and receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

I believe because I've seen the power of the resurrection in the eyes of people whose lives have been transformed in this ancient re-enactment of Christ's witness.

When we eat this bread, and drink this wine together....

Thanks be to God, I believe we rise.

We rise above the darkness and pettiness of this world into the incomparable light of Christ.

We rise above our own brokenness and find a wider world full of need, yes, but full of hope, too. And the possibility, always the possibility, of transforming and being transformed.

We rise above impossibility. We rise above doubt. We rise above pessimism. We rise above defeat. We rise above depression. We rise above even death itself.

And in our rising, we find the Resurrected Christ—smack dab in the middle of all of life.

In the middle of sidewalks where bar mats are being hosed off, and where workers are taking a cigarette break.

In the middle of children playing on skateboards and older people struggling to make it across wide avenues.

In the middle of all of life, there stands the Risen Christ... ever surprising us by his constant presence and his gentle love for us all.

This sermon has been edited.