



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation &*

## Real World Resurrection

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 19, 2020*

*The Second Sunday of Easter*

*Based on Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31*

*Let us pray.*

*O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

It was not an ideal Easter all those years ago. As news of Jesus' resurrection began to break, his disciples—his friends and followers—were not really in a good place. Sadness and disappointment had overwhelmed them; they were more than aware that things had not gone as well as they could have. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," they said to one another, ruefully admitting that they had wanted something different, reluctantly resigned to a bleak future ahead. They were also desperately afraid. They had locked themselves in a room—not to protect themselves against a hostile occupying force nor to find shelter in the wake of an imminent natural disaster but, as John's Gospel puts it, "for fear of the Jews." The disciples were convinced that their own people could cause them harm. They had made the decision to stay away from the very community in which they were active members in order to keep themselves safe.

Things hardly got better when they saw the empty tomb, which should have been a promising sign to them that Jesus had been raised. The women who traveled to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body were first perplexed by the absence of the body they expected to see and then terrified by the angels who appeared in the body's place. Peter and John ran to confirm the tomb was empty, but had no idea what it meant. Mary Magdalene was upset. "They have taken my Lord out of the tomb," she said, "and we do not know where they have laid him." Even the arrival of Jesus himself did not resolve the disciples' uneasiness or allay their fears. Mary couldn't recognize Jesus at first and assumed he was the gardener. "Sir, if you have carried him away," she pleaded, "tell me where you have laid him." Two disciples walking to Emmaus talked at length with Jesus before finally realizing, after sitting and eating with him, who he was. Thomas, though he had heard that Jesus visited his fellow disciples, refused to believe it, insisting on incontrovertible proof.

Jesus' resurrection was a pivotal turning point in the great drama of salvation, a triumphant victory in the epic struggle against sin and death, but it did not elicit immediate expressions of happiness or relief. Trumpets were not heard, grand festivities did not occur, hoards of people did not throng the streets to cheer their conquering king. A small group of sad, confused and fearful people reacted to an unusual, life-altering situation with sadness, confusion and fear. Yet the resurrection happened all the same.

A week ago, Christians throughout the world strove valiantly to mark the most important event in Christian history while simultaneously combatting a global pandemic. We sang our Alleluias, but they felt and sounded different. The usual fanfares and ornamentations were absent; gone were the crowds and the cymbals and the buffets at Easter brunch. Pope Francis addressed a non-existent congregation in St. Peter's Square. Here at St. Bart's only seven people were present physically for a service that typically draws a thousand. The restaurant next door, which any other year would be bustling and packed, was quiet and still. On a very surface level, it didn't seem like Easter at all.

Preaching his Easter sermon virtually from his home in North Carolina, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry gave voice to the sentiments of many: "It's Easter Sunday," he said. "It doesn't look like it; it doesn't smell like it; it doesn't feel like it. But it's Easter anyway."<sup>1</sup> The next day, presiding over his daily press briefing about the coronavirus, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo highlighted the cruel irony of six hundred seventy-one New Yorkers dying on the day devoted to the celebration of Christ's resurrection. "I'm Catholic," he remarked. "Easter Sunday is the high holy day in many ways...and to have this happen over this weekend is really, really especially tragic."<sup>2</sup>

No, it didn't seem like Easter last weekend. Isolation, fear, confusion, and death complicated the unbridled joy that we expect to feel on that day. And yet it was Easter last weekend and it's Easter still. Resurrection cannot be stopped by isolation, fear, confusion, or even death. Resurrection has co-existed with isolation, fear, confusion, and death from the very beginning. The first disciples, like us, knew isolation, fear, confusion, and death well. Like us, they were holed up behind closed doors, agonizingly aware that members of their own community could be threats to their safety. Like us, they were terrified of what was happening around them and what the future could bring. Like us, they had trouble understanding how God's goodness could be at work behind it all. Like us, they had witnessed the horror of death firsthand. And for them, as for us, resurrection happened all the same.

Resurrection is the perseverance of life and hope in the face of death and despair, not the avoidance of death and despair altogether. Jesus was resurrected in the real world, one that knew pain, turmoil, and grief intimately. An ideal and perfect world, free of trial and tribulation, doesn't need resurrection—only a real one, full of trials, does. The loneliness that consumes us in our small, dark spaces, the anxiety we battle each time we open up our door, the uncertainty that hovers over everything we do, the rising death counts in this city and around the globe—none of these things invalidate Jesus' triumph that Easter morning. Rather, they affirm the importance of it.

A month ago, clergy everywhere began to fret as they realized that the self-isolation imposed by COVID-19 would last a bit longer than two weeks—that it would not abide by the structure of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-easter-sermon-from-the-livestreamed-service-at-washington-national-cathedral-english-spanish/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/video-audio-photos-rush-transcript-governor-cuomo-holds-briefing-new-yorks-covid-19-response>

liturgical calendar. How can we possibly celebrate Easter, they asked, in the midst of all of this? That's the Sunday on which more people come to church than any other. How, without an in-person worship service, will we facilitate a meaningful connection between the faithful and this central feast in the Christian tradition? How will we speak a word of hope in such a grim time? What will be the impact on us financially? The questions went on and on. Into all of the nervousness and concern, a priest in Chicago named Erika Takacs made an offering of her own. It was a poem she described as "a reflection for those who are worried about Easter this year." She called it "A Coming Alleluia."

They say there will be no Easter this year.

No hats.

No hunts.

No hymning.

No lilies to fill a bright room  
with a fanfare of pollen.

No garden, no angel,  
no victory.

They say that our journey  
born in sackcloth and ashes  
will lead us at last  
to nowhere.

And so we sit worried  
that the tomb, this year,  
will be found, for once,  
still full.

That Mary and the others  
will leave with their spices  
and come back home with nothing.  
That this year the women will finally end their work—  
anoint and then  
leave empty.

Ssh. Be still.  
Do you not hear her?  
Clucking close by like an old mother hen,  
brooding and sighing and  
stretching her wings?

Fear not, she says,  
for I did it before  
in the silence  
in the dark  
in a closed and locked room  
in a world that had known  
only death.

Did I not once prove  
once for all

that there is nothing you can do,  
no decision you can make  
(for good or for ill)  
that can stop  
me  
rising?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://earthandaltarmag.com/posts/a-coming-alleluia>