



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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We Rise

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 4, 2021

Easter Day

Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

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

The first Pulitzer prize awarded for poetry was given to American poet Edwin Arlington Robertson in 1921.¹ His poem, "Credo," describes for me the year we've been through and the Easter moment we now embrace.

I cannot find my way: there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
And there is not a whisper in the air
Of any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers wove, and unaware,
Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all—above, beyond it all—
I know the far sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the light.

On this Easter morning we step out from the "awful chaos of the night" and step into a fresh new day. Today we celebrate the "coming glory of the light," a light which shines brighter than a thousand suns, a light which showers hope into every sad and harried corner of an overwhelmed world.

Christ is risen! ...
In spite of everything!
He is risen indeed! ...
No matter what.

In this pandemic year, we have been nearly desperate for this light to come. Like prisoners locked in a cold, windowless cell, when the glory of *this* light shines on us, we instinctively turn our faces towards it to receive its gentle, healing warmth.

There it is. There it is.
The object of all our searching!
The goal of all our quests.

The epistle we heard read this morning is, according to scholar Fred Craddock, “the earliest tradition of the resurrection of Christ preserved in the New Testament. As it stands, the text is set in First Corinthians, which was written in the early fifties, and thus precedes by several decades, Mark, the earliest gospel written.”ⁱⁱ Craddock notes, “When we celebrate the Easter faith, we may be assured it represents one of the very earliest strata of Christian preaching and that it is a sacred message traceable to the very dawn of the Christian Church.”ⁱⁱⁱ As the apostle Paul himself argued, when talking about the resurrection, we come to the very heart of the matter.

Now Mary Magdalene is the star of the resurrection narrative in The Gospel According to John. She’s an interesting case, this Mary. She pushes down her grief regarding the death of Jesus (as she pushes down her fear of the authorities), and she finds her way to the tomb in the dark. She doesn’t know how she will roll away the sealing stone at the tomb once she gets there. She only knows she must go and do whatever she can. Can you imagine what it took to make that walk on that night? The inner fortitude? The quiet courage?

When Mary finds the stone already rolled away and the body of her Lord missing, she doesn’t think Jesus has been resurrected. That thought is beyond her imagining. She can only assume someone, perhaps the gardener, has stolen the body. What else could have happened? Why else would the body be missing?

Perhaps this is a good time to be reminded that the New Testament does not contain any account of the act of resurrection. In the gospels there are reports of the empty tomb, and then there are reports of the appearance of the risen Christ. The principal narratives in John focus on the way some of the original disciples respond to the resurrection. First, Mary and, later, Thomas.

Mary is so far from faith that even the appearance of two angels can’t break into her grief. Even the voice, as well as the appearance, of Jesus fails to move her. It’s only when Jesus finally speaks her name, “Mary,” that she comes to recognize him and believe. Then she goes to the other disciples and proclaims, “I have seen the Lord.”

The biblical narrative makes it clear that not everyone takes the same path to belief. Some come out of their suffering and their pain. Some respond to a word. Others respond to sight and touch. Some need evidence. For others, it’s the relationship that transforms them. The resurrection, it appears, welcomes all comers.

This year Easter falls on April 4, the 53rd anniversary of the death of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And in that we are reminded that everyone who seeks to transform society in some way takes a great risk. Deborah Dean Murphy observes, “When Jesus is summarily executed by the Roman authorities, his followers know that their lives, too, are subject to a brutal state apparatus that thrives on crushing agitators and vilifying the weak. Easter morning—for us, a celebration with flowers and finery—is, in the New Testament, a wrecked scene of dispirited disciples, women disbelieved for their wild tales, and the fearful realization that the words of this rabbi-provocateur will never align with the aims of empire and will always be deemed suspicious, even seditious. That is, until they’re not—until they’ve been smoothed over and conscripted into service of the powerful and the unjust systems from which the powerful profit.”^{iv}

It seems to me that an important part of our assignment as Christians is to retain the messiness: to avoid the smoothing over of the Jesus’ words, to prevent them from being twisted and warped by those who

have a different motive other than transformation. We must never underestimate the power of those who want to keep everything the same as it was, who would conscript transforming miracle into the service of the status quo.

And we can be as guilty of this as anyone. John Buchanan argues, “Easter is an ideal day for us to shake off nostalgic notions of faith and get serious about God’s confidence in the future. One of our most unfortunate mistakes is to view the Bible mostly as a book about the past. It certainly contains an ancient record, but its direction is *forward*, not *backward*. We like to look backward, probably because retrieving or preserving the past feels more manageable than discerning an unknown future. We’re drawn to the rearview mirror, the scrapbooks of faith, the trudge to the cemetery, the warm sentiments of childhood church. Yet the God of scripture is always out ahead of us, leading us into the future.”^v

The resurrection is most truly about what is *now* made possible for the future in the light of its presence. What old fears can now be vanquished? What previously impossible things are now possible? Theologian Walter Wink says, “We’re suckers if we let the reigning intellectual fashion decree that resurrection is unbelievable. What is believable changes from generation to generation.”^{vi} And so it does. And so it does.

In 1799 the armies of Napoleon appeared on the heights above the town of Feldkirch, Austria. It was Easter Day, and the rays of the rising sun glittered on the weapons of the French as they appeared drawn up on the hills to the west of the town. The Town Council was hastily called together to consult about what was to be done. After much discussion, the dean of the church rose and said, “My brothers it is Easter Day! We have been reckoning our own strength, and that fails. Let us turn to God. Ring the bells and have service as usual, and leave the matter in God’s hands.”

They agreed to do as he said. Then from the church towers in Feldkirch there rang out joyous peals in honor of the Resurrection, and the streets filled with worshipers hastening to the church. The French heard the sudden ringing of the joyous bells with surprise and alarm. They concluded that the Austrian army must have arrived to relieve the town. So, they hastily fled and, before the bells had ceased ringing, not a single French soldier was left to be found.^{vii}

We have been reckoning our own strength, and that fails us. We have been depending upon our own intellects, and that fails as well. We have been relying upon our feelings, and those fail us, too. What if we could, like Mary, turn to God and listen carefully for the voice which calls us, each by name?

The great British Methodist minister W. E. Sangster began to lose his voice and mobility in the mid-1950s. He had a disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy. He recognized the end was near, and so he threw himself into writing and praying. Sangster’s voice eventually failed completely, and his legs became useless. On Easter morning, just a few weeks before his death, he took a pen and shakily wrote his daughter a letter. In it he said, “It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout, ‘He is risen!’—but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout.”^{viii}

Mary may have exhibited great courage when she made her way to the tomb that night. Yet she expresses an even greater courage when she shouts—she must have shouted—“I have seen the Lord.” And there are people who express that kind of courage every single day of their lives.

- People staggering under the burden of caring for sick family members.
- People struggling with the demons of addiction.
- People suffering from illness and persistent pain which robs them of their energy and vitality.
- People in the deep fog of depression, who can still remember the light, but who haven’t seen it in the longest time.
- People fighting off economic hardship and ruin, who don’t know where the money will come from and who worry about what will become of them and their families.

Still, they rise, like Jesus from the dead, to face the trials of each new day. They rise. And, through the power of the resurrection, they rise, no longer prisoners of their fears or their dread, but empowered by a force which they cannot fully describe and which they do not completely understand. On this new Easter morning, we rise with them, out of the wreckage of the past year. We rise to the new possibility, the shimmering hope of eternal life, which illumines everything round about us. There it is. There it is...

As Edward Arlington Robinson wrote,
For through it all—above, beyond it all—
I know the far sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the light.

Amen.

ⁱ Source: *The American Poetry Foundation* at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>

ⁱⁱ *Preaching Through the Christian Year; Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*, by Fred Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, c. 1993, p. 229

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 229

^{iv} Deborah Dean Murphy, *Christian Century, Faith Matters, March 19, 2021*

^v Peter W. Marty, *Christian Century*, April 4, 2021, Easter Day, Yr. B, March 9, 2021

^{vi} Walter Wink, "Resonating with God's Song," *Christian Century*, March, 1994

^{vii} Walter Baxendale, *Dictionary of Anecdote, Incident, Illustrative Fact: Selected and Arranged for the Pulpit and the Platform*, Forgotten Books, c. 2017

^{viii} Roy B. Zuck, *The Speaker's Quote Book, Revised and Expanded*, Kregel Publications, c. 2005

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