



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## More

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 12, 2021  
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Based on Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58; John 11:21-27*

*O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come;  
Be thou our guide while life shall last,  
And our eternal home. Amen.*

The crisp air that bright September morning was brimming with potential. Anything could have happened.

A young man, hours away from proposing to his girlfriend, showed up for work at his new job. A young woman, eight and half months pregnant, went about her morning meetings while cradling the life developing within her. A dishwasher who had moved to New York from Peru was celebrating his twenty-fourth birthday. A flight attendant was on her way to Hawaii for a vacation with her sister. A firefighter was finishing his very final shift before enjoying retirement with his wife.<sup>1</sup>

If things had turned out just a bit differently, these people—and so many others—might still be alive today. The marriage would have occurred. The child would have been born. The vacation would have happened. The retirement would have begun. The twenty-four-year old would have turned twenty-five.

If only he had missed his train. If only she had stayed in bed. If only they had called in sick to work. If only she had chosen the next flight instead of that one. If only he had not stopped to use the bathroom. If only she had walked down instead of up. If only the steel had been stronger. If only the weather had been different. If only we had been better prepared. If only—at any point—the terrorists had been stopped. Think of the lives that could have been saved, the fear, the pain, and the suffering that could have been avoided. It could have turned out differently. In some alternative universe, those towers would not have fallen down.

The first few weeks of 2020 also showed promise. The subways were crowded; restaurants and bars were teeming with people. New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day came and went as usual. The 2020 primaries galvanized the attention of politicians, while Tokyo was preparing to host the Olympics in the summer. The Music Man was set to open on Broadway; Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker were planning on

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<sup>1</sup> These vignettes are based on real people. See Garrett M. Graff, "On 9/11, Luck Meant Everything," <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/september-11-blind-luck-decided-who-lived-or-died/597688/>; Jennifer Senior, "What Bobby McIlvaine Left Behind," <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/09/twenty-years-gone-911-bobby-mcilmvaine/619490/>; Tom Roston, "The Restaurant That Died on 9/11," <https://gen.medium.com/the-restaurant-that-died-on-9-11-906ac340ee1f>.

co-staring in another show. Here at St. Bart's we were getting ready for Holy Week and Easter, expecting hundreds of people to pack themselves tightly into this sacred space.

And then everything shifted. First there were the scenes from China that seemed so far away. That will never happen here, we told ourselves. Then, there were the rumors and the panic. Was it here or wasn't it? Should we be concerned, or is this something we can power through? What do we need to survive, and how much of it is left at the store? Then, the ICUs filled up. Sirens could be heard almost continuously. We sent ourselves away and locked ourselves at home, separating ourselves from one another, hoping we could ride this one out alone.

To date, nearly 660,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States, over 200 times the number of people who died because of the attacks on September 11, 2001. 2,977 people died in the September 11 attacks; just three days ago—on September 9, 2021—3,231 people in died of COVID-19 in the United States.<sup>2</sup> A headline in one major newspaper read: COVID-19 brings a new 9/11 every day.<sup>3</sup> And it's not only those who have died who have been affected: it's also those of us who mourn them, those of us who have lost our jobs, those of us whose way of life is not the same. The isolation and anxiety that all of us at some level know have real ramifications.

It appeared, at least at first, that it didn't need to be like this. If only the virus had stayed in China. If only we had done a better job of screening travelers to the United States and quarantining them once they arrived. If only there had been more testing available. If only there had been more PPE. If only we had worn masks right away. If only we had discovered a vaccine earlier—or a cure. If only we had been less callous and more careful. If only something had been different, the virus would have been held at bay, our lives would not have experienced so much upheaval, and our friends and loved ones would still be with us today.

If only. "If [only] you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died." Martha's lament to Jesus reflects a general human tendency to respond to calamity by imagining another world in which that calamity did not occur. Martha, like the rest of us, seeks comfort in finding one specific thing to blame for an awful tragedy that has happened. Such a simple explanation, correct or not, helps a person process a shocking and terrible event; it brings what feels completely overwhelming down to size; it takes what is impossible to fully understand and makes it at least somewhat comprehensible. If only he had exercised more often, he would not have had that heart attack. If only she had tried harder, she would not have lost her job. If only he had been nicer to her, she would not have filed for divorce.

Jesus, however, shows little interest in litigating or analyzing the past. He will not accept blame for Lazarus' death or pretend that it could have been avoided. Whether or not Lazarus' death should have happened, it has happened. Jesus cannot—or will not—go back in time to change the course of history. Instead, Jesus points Martha to the future: "Your brother will rise again." Despite appearances, this is not a pollyannaish claim. Jesus is not a denialist. He admits that Lazarus has died and that death is not a happy state for anyone.<sup>4</sup> In a famous passage, Jesus weeps over Lazarus' death, touchingly revealing the intensity of his own grief at the loss of his friend.<sup>5</sup> But, while Jesus acknowledges the reality of what has happened, he refuses to be trapped or defined by it. Jesus knows that there is more to come, even though it seems as if all is lost. "Your brother will rise again," he tells Martha. All is not lost. There is a future

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<sup>2</sup> "Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>; "Casualties of the September 11<sup>th</sup> Attacks," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties\\_of\\_the\\_September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_September_11_attacks).

<sup>3</sup> Neil Steinberg, "With COVID-19, a new 9/11 every day," <https://chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/2021/9/10/22662429/september-11-attacks-terrorism-20th-anniversary-covid-coronavirus-death-toll-first-respond>. The original online title was the one cited.

<sup>4</sup> John 11:14: "Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.'"

<sup>5</sup> John 11:33-35: Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...Jesus began to weep."

ahead. “We will not all die,” Paul writes, “but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” “The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,” Isaiah envisions, “a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” Death is real, but it is not the end of the story.

In September 2015, a writer named Amy Krouse Rosenthal learned that she had ovarian cancer. At first, Amy was optimistic that the cancer could be beaten. After surgery and treatment, her cancer was in remission. But soon, the cancer had returned—and there was no beating it this time. In March 2017, only ten days before she died, Amy published a column in the Modern Love section of *The New York Times*. The column was titled “You May Want to Marry My Husband.”<sup>6</sup> As Amy prepared to leave this world, she wanted her husband, Jason, to have a new person to love. “I have never been on Tinder, Bumble or eHarmony,” Amy explained, “but I’m going to create a general profile for Jason right here, based on my experience of coexisting in the same house with him for, like, 9,490 days.” She went on to extol Jason’s good looks, his impressive cooking, his romantic flair, and his extraordinary parenting skills. “I am wrapping this up on Valentine’s Day,” she told readers, “and the most genuine, non-vase-oriented gift I can hope for is that the right person reads this, finds Jason, and another love story begins.” Amy’s essay ended with a few blank lines. “I’ll leave this intentional empty space below,” Amy wrote, “as a way of giving you two the fresh start you deserve.” Amy didn’t want Jason’s life to end with hers; she wanted his life to keep going.

It wasn’t easy for Jason—he couldn’t help but feel guilty when he thought about moving on and finding love in other places—but ultimately Jason was grateful for Amy’s gesture. “What a gift Amy gave me,” he observed, “by emphasizing that I had a long life to fill with joy, happiness and love. Her edict to fill my own empty space with a new story has given me permission to make the most out of my remaining time on the planet...what I finally came to realize was that being happy again would actually be a testament to the thirty beautiful years I had with Amy, and my memories of them that, no matter what happens along the way, I’ll cherish for the rest of my life. It’s because of her that I know I have the capacity to love deeply and to embrace every minute of joy I can possibly create.”<sup>7</sup> By loving other people, by moving on, Jason was not forgetting or rejecting or disrespecting Amy; he was fulfilling her wishes; he was honoring her.

About a year after Amy died, Jason was invited to give a TED talk about the experience of saying goodbye to Amy and of moving on from her death. At the end of the TED event, there was a big, festive party, and Jason ended up bumping into a female acquaintance he had known for years. The two eventually started dancing. At one point, another couple on the dance floor approached Jason to thank him for his meaningful talk. Still dancing, they disclosed that they too were recovering from recent losses. “‘My wife [died by] suicide a few months ago,’ the man shouted over the music... ‘Yeah, my husband died just a few months ago as well,’ the woman loudly announced.”<sup>8</sup> The couple, like Jason, was grieving, but their grief didn’t get in the way of connecting with others. Their grief didn’t stop them from dancing.

Amy often walked with Jason and their kids in Chicago’s Lincoln Park, which was near the house that Amy and Jason shared. Recently, thanks to Jason’s efforts, a work of public art was installed in the Grandmother’s Garden section of that park. It’s a nine foot umbrella made of yellow glass, and it features the word “more” emblazoned on its panels.<sup>9</sup> “More” was the first word that Amy uttered as a child, and it

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Krouse Rosenthal, “You May Want to Marry My Husband,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/style/modern-love-you-may-want-to-marry-my-husband.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Jason B. Rosenthal, “My Wife Said You May Want to Marry Me,” 199, 220.

<sup>8</sup> Jason B. Rosenthal, 186.

<sup>9</sup> Jason B. Rosenthal, 223.

was a word she had tattooed on her left forearm shortly before she died.<sup>10</sup> “More” was also a word that represented her approach to life and the hopes she had for her husband’s life once she was physically gone. Through the yellow umbrella, Amy continues to inspire us to transcend the limits of death. Through the yellow umbrella, Amy urges us to consider the possibility of new adventures ahead. Life, the yellow umbrella tells us, persists after the difficult news of a cancer diagnosis or the dreadful devastation of a loved one’s demise. There is always more.

I can’t tell you with certainty what happens when we or our loved ones die. Is resurrection a literal phenomenon or a figurative idea? Will we inhabit our bodies forever? Will we drink actual milk and honey and walk through real pearly gates? Will we see our friends and family on the other side? Scripture is equivocal and contradictory enough, and my own faith is imperfect and incomplete. What I can tell you is this: death—whether the death of others or the death of our selves—is not the end. There is a future beyond the grave. The next time you find yourself thinking about all the ways in which your life has fallen apart, the next time you wonder if you’ll ever love again, the next time you are tempted to believe that you can’t possibly keep on going, look ahead. Peer into the empty space you have left to fill. Remember: there is more.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Amy Krouse Rosenthal, “You May Want to Marry My Husband”