



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Make Room for Resurrection

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 24, 2022*

*The Second Sunday of Easter*

*Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31*

*We walk by faith, and not by sight  
No gracious words we hear from him  
who spoke as none ere spoke;  
But we believe him near. Amen.*

Happy Easter! We had a wonderful Easter celebration here at St. Bart's last week, with all that glorious music and so many hundreds of people worshipping together in person and online.

As we walked together through a beautiful Holy Week and Easter Sunday, I couldn't help but think back to how things were two years ago, that first Easter in lockdown. I remember how strange it was to be isolating at home on the day that Jesus Christ burst out of the tomb. And in the midst of our Easter joy, we were surrounded by so much fear, so much grief, so much loss.

There were a lot of conversations back then about how, when we got through this pandemic, life wouldn't be the same. We wouldn't be the same. The church wouldn't be the same. We might not have known exactly what that meant, but we knew that the experience of this pandemic would change us.

We began to see that some of the ways we had been doing things weren't working anymore—and, in fact, some things had never worked for a whole lot of people—vast economic inequities, a broken health care system, racism embedded so deeply we don't even see it, and the harm we are inflicting on our planet. But even in the midst of all that, on Easter in 2020 there was a sense that maybe something new was happening, that transformation was happening, and that maybe we would begin to allow some of those old ways to die to make room for new growth. Because, you see, the great story of Easter is that death is not the end, and that we have to be willing to let some things die to make room for resurrection.

I don't know about you, but for me that Easter Sunday in 2020 felt an awful lot like the scene we heard about in today's Gospel, with the disciples huddled behind locked doors, afraid to go out, in fear for their lives.

On that first Easter night, the disciples were justifiably terrified. Their beloved teacher was dead, and now their lives were in jeopardy, too. Everything they had worked for and hoped for in Jesus was destroyed. Sure, there was that strange report from Mary Magdalene that she had seen the Lord, but no one really believed her. And a couple of them had laid eyes on the empty tomb, but no one really knew what to make of it. So they went into hiding, waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for the locked door to be busted in by the authorities who were hunting them down.

But it wasn't the authorities who broke through the door that night. It was the risen Christ who came into that place of fear. He stood among them speaking peace. He showed them his wounds, as if he needed to prove himself, as if he needed to give evidence of his suffering. And then he sent them out, breathing into them with the same breath of life that God breathed into Adam at creation, the one that God made from the dust of the ground.

In this deepest darkness, out of their unfathomable fear and utter hopelessness, the risen Christ brought forth a new creation. The disciples, who had thought their lives were over, were renewed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. With God's very breath inside them, they were empowered to go out into the world, and the paralyzing fear that had gripped them was gone.

Thomas wasn't there when all this happened. He had missed out on this experience; and, just like when the disciples heard the same report from Mary that she had seen the Lord, he wouldn't believe what they told him. Thomas needed to see Jesus for himself. And not only that, he wanted to see the mark of the nails in his hands and put his finger in the wounds.

Writer and minister Katherine Willis Pershey has called Thomas the "patron saint of the secular age."<sup>1</sup> He's the kind of guy we can relate to, and his demand for physical proof sounds totally reasonable to our 21st century ears. Thomas seems to have been a pretty literal-minded fellow. Remember when Jesus told his disciples, "You know the way to the place where I am going," Thomas was the one who asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:4-5). Thomas wants proof. And he wants a map.

We all know that feeling of needing to see something with our own eyes before we'll believe it. Frankly, a little healthy skepticism is probably a good thing these days, in this era of fake news and conspiracy theories. Physical proof. Hard evidence. Peer-reviewed data. These things keep us from falling down the rabbit hole of falsehoods and rumors. And they are essential for good science, good government, and equal justice.

But what about faith? What about believing in things for which there is no physical evidence? What's a modern-day Thomas to do?

The writer of John's Gospel must have had just that kind of person in mind—people like us—when he included this story of Thomas in his account. Thomas the skeptic, the one who questions, and the one to whom Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Thomas did want proof of Jesus' resurrection. But he also wanted what the other disciples had, something he had missed out on, something he saw in them that, perhaps, he felt lacking in himself. He wanted a direct experience with the risen Christ. Maybe it wasn't so much Thomas' desire for proof, but his desire to believe that Jesus responded to, to give him exactly what he asked for, offering his wounds for Thomas to touch. Thomas' desire to believe made room for resurrection to happen right before his eyes.

From a tangle of missed opportunities, doubts, and uncertainties, Thomas' belief bursts out when he proclaims, "My Lord and My God." In a locked room, a new creation is born.

We will witness a piece of that new creation in just a moment, when we will baptize two beautiful little boys, Theodore and Benjamin. Through the waters of baptism, Theodore and Benjamin will also share in Christ's resurrection and be welcomed into the Body of Christ. All of us here will promise to support them in their life in Christ. We will pray that God gives them inquiring and discerning hearts and a spirit to know and love God, not unlike Thomas, whose knowledge and love of Jesus emerged from his own inquiring and discerning heart.

Now we are beginning to emerge from the locked room of the pandemic—or at least into a new phase of it—into that place of transformation and resurrection that we imagined when all this began two years ago. Does it look like what you expected? What new thing is God doing in you? What new thing is God doing in this church?

We may not yet have the answers to these questions. We may not know where we're going. We may not even have proof that anything new is happening. But this Easter season, we've heard a rumor that some people have seen the Lord, and we want to see him, too. So let's keep walking by faith. Let's make room for resurrection.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Katherine Willis Pershey, "Thomas might be the patron saint of a secular age." *Christian Century*, vol. 139 no. 7, April 6, 2022, p. 21.