



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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There is a Light...

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 17, 2022

Easter Day

Based on Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; 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

Many years ago, I heard a sermon delivered by an old Baptist preacher which had just two simple points. His first point was, "There is a darkness." And his second point was, "There is a light." On this glorious Easter Sunday morning in the year 2022, we gather together some 2,000 years after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to acknowledge these two equally verifiable truths.

There is a darkness. Do you have *any* doubt about it whatsoever?

- There is darkness when a pandemic kills nearly a million U.S. citizens and more than 6 million people worldwide. There is an even deeper darkness when vaccinations and public health precautions become politicized and when far too many of the victims of the virus are people of color, people who are poor, people for whom life was already unfairly difficult.
- There is sad darkness covering the planet when a sovereign nation is invaded, when its civilians are tortured, raped, and murdered; when their homes, places of business, and even their hospitals, are plundered and demolished, when their entire world is left completely shattered while the rest of the world watches in horror, wondering what might be coming next. There is a deep, deep darkness.
- There is darkness in the world when lies told for political purposes find such fertile ground that they grow into dangerous conspiracy theories that polarize and radicalize parts of our population. There is a darkness when these lies find their way into twisted minds and ultimately lead to violent acts.
- There is darkness in the world when kids are shot on a New York City subway on their way to school and when a single, heavily-armed person can effectively terrorize an entire city. There is darkness when the people of our nation are so attached to their right to bear arms that they cannot see the critical danger which gun violence presents.

I'll just say, parenthetically, that it's pretty amazing that while the clergy of the diocese were having our picture taken on the steps of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the Bishop of New

York was able to point out the bullet holes in the stone where a man firing a handgun was shot and killed by police at a Christmas concert last year. Please don't tell me that incidents of gun violence are "exaggerated." We have a lethal epidemic to address!

- A darkness sweeps over this nation whenever another young black man is killed while being taken into police custody. When will enough, be enough?

There is darkness in the world. A frightening fear-filled darkness. The only reason we don't talk about it more is that we are scared that our already fragile equilibrium will be further disturbed if we delve into it too deeply. If you want to know more about this parish, these are the things so many people at St. Bart's are concerned about.

You might be thinking the darkness is winning. You might be beginning to believe that the darkness and "all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God" cannot be overcome. If you've started to believe that, even just a little, then this day has not come a moment too soon.

Easter Day is the moment to proclaim that the night does not triumph over the day. Easter Day is the time to shout that God has the last word, and it is a word of impenetrable light and hope.

We would do well to remember that the miraculous often rises out of great difficulty. Bishop Deon Johnson observes, "I am convinced that the most transformative and most pervasive and most persistent character in the Bible is the wilderness. Not just the places of sand, rocks, and stones, but the people and the places that define and refine who we are."ⁱ I mean, if you think about it, "The exodus from slavery to freedom takes place in the desert."ⁱⁱ It does not take place with abundant water and an excess of food.

The Christ child is miraculously born, and yet, all the while, Herod is trying to find him in order to kill him. The darkness is never far from us. Even the Resurrection, as glorious as it turns out to be, begins while it is still dark. Hope, you see, always finds its beginnings before it has a solid reason to exist. Hope is awake while the cynical are still sleeping.

A number of years ago, an English newspaper published an Easter Day interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died just after Christmas last year. Tutu was a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace and served as a towering leader of the Anglican Church in South Africa during apartheid. The interviewer asked him about his thoughts on Easter.

"Tutu smiled, 'You have traveled to the Dark Continent (of Africa) for an Easter message for your readers? God has a great sense of humor. Who in their right mind would have imagined South Africa to be an example of anything but awfulness? We were destined for perdition and were plucked out of total annihilation. God intends that others might look at us and take courage.'

"He continued, 'At the end of their conflicts, the warring groups around the world in the Balkans and the Middle East, in Angola and the Congo, will sit down and work out how they will be able to live together amicably. They will. I know it. There will be peace on Earth. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ puts the issue beyond doubt; ultimately goodness and laughter and peace and compassion and gentleness and forgiveness will have the last word.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

I know. I know. It doesn't look like that could be even remotely possible. Still, there is a light that penetrates the darkness. Mary Magdalene saw it!

- There is a light that shines when researchers, doctors, nurses, chaplains, medical technicians (and even members of the hospital custodial staff) work tirelessly to care for Covid patients and their families.
- There is a powerful light when the nations of the world stand together to denounce military adventurism, authoritarianism, and any leader who would attempt to create a new world order by force.
- There is a light when political leaders speak truth to power and hold one another accountable for both their words and their deeds.
- There is a radiant light in the world when small groups of people organize and educate their communities about the threat which gun violence poses to us all.
- There is a shining light in the world when institutions begin to genuinely see the racism and sexism embedded in their policies and practices, when effective training makes everyone aware of the privileges offered freely to some and denied to others.

There is always a light, shining brilliantly through the darkness.

St. Symeon, a Christian monk and poet writing at the end of the 9th century, was known as “the New Theologian.” I have to say, this guy has written some things that just blow my mind! Now, in those days, the title “theologian” was designed not as an academic distinction, but as a recognition of someone who spoke about God from personal experience. In fact, one of St. Symeon’s principal teachings was that humans could (and should) experience *theoria*—literally meaning “contemplation,” or direct experience of God.

In St. Symeon’s reflection on the fruit of Jesus’ Resurrection, he captures the essence of the miracle of Easter as it envelops us all. He writes:

We awaken in Christ’s body
as Christ awakens our bodies
and my poor hand is Christ,
he enters my foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of him
(for God is indivisibly whole,
seamless in his Godhood.)

I move my foot, and at once
he appears like a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous?
Then, open your heart to him.

And let yourself receive the one
who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
we wake up inside Christ’s body

Where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as him,
and he makes us, utterly, real,

and everything that is hurt, everything
seemed to us dark, hard, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in him transformed...
and recognized as whole, as lovely, and radiant in his light.^{iv}

Transformed! Transformed!! Transformed!!!

Imagine a world, as Desmond Tutu dreamed, where “ultimately goodness and laughter and peace and compassion and gentleness and forgiveness will have the last word.” That’s what the resurrection is; that is what the resurrection does.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

ⁱ The Right Reverend Deon K. Johnson, *Sermon Preached at the House of Bishops*, Spring, 2022

ⁱⁱ Carlos Carretto, *Synthesis*, Year C, “Lent 5,” April 1, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ Gyles Bandreth interview of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *My Idea of Heaven*, *Telegraph*, April 27th, 2001, as quoted by The Reverend Samuel T. Lloyd III

^{iv} Andrew Harvey, *Son of Man*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam Press, 1999, (translated by Stephen Mitchell), as quoted in *Synthesis*, Yr. C, “Easter Day,” April 8, 2007

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