

When, therefore, it was early evening of that first day of the Sabbath-week, and where the disciples were the doors had been sealed for fear of the Judeans, Jesus came and stood in their midst and says to them, "Peace to you." And, saying this, he showed them both his hands and his side. Thus, on seeing the LORD, the disciples were overjoyed. So [Jesus] again said to them, "Peace to you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you." And, saying this, he breathed on them and says, "Receive a Holy Spirit. For those sins you let go, they are let go; those you hold fast, they have been held fast." But one of the Twelve, Thomas (which meant "Twin"), was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the LORD." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my hand in his side, I most certainly will not have faith."

And eight days later, his disciples his disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. The doors being sealed, Jesus comes in and stood in their midst and said, "Peace to you." Then he says to Thomas, "Bring your finger here and look at my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and cease to be faithless, but be faithful instead." Thomas answered and said to him, "My LORD and my God!" Jesus says to him, "You have faith because you have seen me? How blissful are those who do not see and who have faith."

Of course, Jesus performed many other signs as well before the disciples, which have not been recorded in this book; But these ones have been recorded so that you might have faith that Jesus is the Anointed, the Son of God, and that in having faith you might have life in his name.

The genius Jesuit theologian Fr. Karl Rahner opened his doctoral dissertation titled "Spirit in the World" with a German phrase, "*Man fragt*." In English, the phrase means "a person asks a question." His point was that the desire to learn about mysteries – the pursuit of knowledge – is definitively human.

Our curiosity begins when we are tiny babies working out just what that object is that passes in front of our face from time to time. That's how we discover our own hand. As we get older, our curiosity might involve oddities outside our bodies: How does the moon follow us when we walk? Where did my goldfish go when it died?

New observations, new situations, stimulate more intangible questions: Should I be an artist or go to law school? Who am I attracted to and why? Our curiosities signal that we do know at least a little about what we are noticing. They are evidence both of our desire to know more and our trust that there is more to know.

In adulthood, life changes prompt or provoke us to notice and to be curious about the life we have lived and what may come next: Was I

a good parent, a good friend, a good spouse? What legacy am I leaving behind me? What is it, God, that you would have me do now?

At any stage of life, our minds can discern fruitful answers and once we have them, before long we are restless again. These new insights blend with memories and explanations that we have collected, tested and refined, forming the background from which we can begin to notice new frontiers, new mysteries.

Or a new vantage point on a timeless mystery.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the liturgy of the Great Vigil of Pascha – the ritual that has ancient roots in the Armenian Orthodox Church. It was in the dark of a Paschal Vigil that I first saw a thurible pouring smoke into the darkness of a church nave lit only by a pot holding the newly blessed fire.

From there, my interest was only intensified by priests asking me to read and then teaching me to serve at the altar in various roles. As an ordained deacon, I was drawn still deeper into participating in the Paschal mystery and finally, I could preside at the ritual that refuels the energy of every Mass for the rest of the church year: the return of the Light of Christ that never really leaves.

In years past, at other churches, the sanctuary was draped in the deep darkness of an early Sunday morning. At St. Elizabeth, we gather as the light dims on the evening of Holy Saturday. Either way, in the stillness of Holy Saturday, we bless the new fire and the new Paschal candle. Then we light the new candle and I walk the newly blessed flame slowly toward the altar, stopping to chant one of the names of the mystery: “The Light of Christ.” Voices from the shapes in the gray respond: “Thanks be to God.”

Two acolytes offer flames from the new fire to those in the pews who pass that same flame around until a single candle flame has been multiplied sometimes a hundred-fold. The nave takes on a warm orange glimmer – a gentle reminder that the candle is only making visible the Uncreated Light that is always present. We welcome Christ to renew us through a portal in the mystery by chanting the Exultet and then we begin the readings.

Now, what you probably don’t know, is that while the readings are underway, I often watch the moving, flickering light that we have just

spread across the entire sanctuary. And then I imagine that light moving out into the gardens just outside the walls of the nave.

From there, I like to imagine it spreading across 152nd and flowing over 10th Avenue. Filling Old Burien and picking up momentum until it is lighting up all of greater Seattle, then King County and, well, you get the idea. Thousands of Paschal flames being passed from friend to friend, stranger to stranger, until every heart is lit with God's love for every person, every creature, every living entity.

This year, the Paschal Vigil came. Resurrection Sunday came. Nothing can ever stop that. Even the vision of light spreading from the sanctuary out past the walls came.

But this time, it was different. I couldn't see the people of St. Elizabeth sitting in the pews.

Now, I have come to expect to notice the congregation as a manifestation of the body of Christ – an embodiment that I can see, especially during the movements of the Great Vigil. This year, there were no people in the sanctuary and no one would actually see this Paschal Mass for at least another day.

And so, there was something new, some challenge to shift my awareness. Like Thomas, I became curious as I was confronted by the confounding. John's Risen Christ asked Thomas: "You have faith because you have *seen* me?" And the Light of Christ put the same question and challenge to me: "You have faith because you have seen me? How blissful are those who do *not* see and who have faith."

This is the point that John's Gospel makes, literally, "in the beginning" and throughout the entire Gospel. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was present with God and the Word was God.

What John's Gospel consistently points to is that which we apprehend beyond what we can see with our eyes. To witness with the eye of spirit, seeing just who Jesus the Anointed, the Risen Christ, really is. That's why John directs the last paragraph of this Gospel reading at *us* – at you and at me and all those who have not seen Jesus of Nazareth with our naked eyeballs and yet have faith.

John's Gospel has recorded these signs so that we might have faith that Jesus is the Anointed, the Son of God, and that in having faith we might have the life that is in Christ.

So that instead of becoming cynical, we might become trusting. So that instead of becoming certain, we might become curious. So that instead of becoming unfaithful to the love of God and the light of Christ, we might become more faithful.

And, so that, as Peter wrote, the proof of our faithfulness might be found, leading to praise and glory and honor at the revelation. And then Peter beautifully names the purpose of our faithfulness: the salvation of souls.

We are in the midst of a new experience that challenges our ability to notice the body of Christ, to apprehend without understanding fully the Light of Christ in our midst. Fortunately, we have explanations that will still serve us on this new frontier. Think about it: Love, loneliness, confusion, compassion, loyalty – none of these have visible physical presence of their own.

We notice only the consequences of their existence. We see love and compassion when they show up as people choosing to serve others knowing that they are exposed to risk. We see trust and loyalty as people choose to stay separated as much as possible to protect others.

Makes no sense to ask how much another person's loneliness *weighs*. But we can check in with each other. Ridiculous to wonder how many cubic inches a person's suffering measures. But we can offer to be with them, even if only by phone or email or Zoom for now.

In just the same way, once we have noticed and embraced the light of the Anointed, we begin to see the influence of that presence around us. Maybe Thomas doubted, maybe not. Regardless, he moved toward the unknown and went on to wake other people up to that presence in their own lives.

Because the Light of Christ, do you see, is not for us. It is given to us to be given away. In time, we come to see that God, whom we love without seeing, is loving other people *through* us. The outcome of our faith is God's exulting "with ineffable and glorious joy" radiating through our actions for a world in need of love; in need of light; in need of life in the name of the Anointed One.

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