In 1996, I celebrated the Triduum, our three holiest days, at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle near Columbus Circle in New York City. Towards the end of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, the whole congregation processed from the sanctuary to the altar of repose, which was lit with dozens of votive candles. I remember thinking suddenly of the lights on Broadway, shining just blocks down the street. I remember feeling how hidden what we were doing at St. Paul’s was from the world outside.

Easter feels even more hidden this year. We haven’t been together for the familiar rituals of Holy Week. Something that theologian Karl Rahner wrote a half century ago seems especially apt: “It is difficult, in well-worn human words to do justice to the joy of Easter.” Without the well-worn words and familiar rituals of these holy days, can we still proclaim the joy of the resurrection?

It seems to me that Rahner’s observation applies not only to preaching the resurrection, but also to scripture itself. As we read the passion narratives from Matthew on Palm Sunday and John on Good Friday, I was struck by how long they were, how much detail each evangelist packed in about Jesus’ betrayal and suffering. The weight of words themselves seemed to testify to the reality of Jesus’ death.

That has been a particular comfort in these pandemic days. Whatever suffering we are going through, God has been there, and remains there with us.

I also couldn’t help but notice as I re-read the gospels this week that they are remarkably quiet about exactly what happened on the third day after Jesus death.

The scriptures don’t describe Jesus pushing away the stone and stepping into the dawning day. In the passage from the John that we read on Easter, there is only a dark morning, an empty tomb, and disciples that do not yet understand.

I also find a peculiar comfort in knowing that even the ones who knew Jesus best took a while to grasp what was happening right in front of them.

On this hidden Easter, then, perhaps we can linger for a while in that quiet moment when God drew Jesus from death to life. Like the evangelists, we may not be able to put it into well-worn human words, but it is here that we find the love that draws us, too, from death to life. Here is the first step from despair to hope. It is here, to return to the words of Karl Rahner, that “everything has already become different in the true and decisive depth of all things.”

Of course, the next verses and chapters of all the gospels go on to tell us how experiencing the risen
Jesus radically changed the lives of people who had, in only the previous chapter of the story, fled in fear. The once-despairing disciples now go out to proclaim the joy of the resurrection to their entire world.

In the midst of this pandemic of fear, suffering and death, we too must proclaim resurrection, in whatever ways are available to us. Some in our parish community do this through their faithfulness to their work as health care providers, on the frontlines of pandemic care. Some continue to teach young minds or provide the essential services that we all depend on. Others still feed the homeless and look out for those forgotten at the margins of our city. For some of us, it is simply our patience and tenderness toward the people in our closest circles that proclaims the joy of the gospel.

It hardly needs saying that the fullness of the resurrection remains hidden from us just now. But our faith in the true and decisive difference already made in the quiet of the tomb so long ago sustains our hope—and even joy—this Easter season.

—BJ Brown

The passages from Karl Rahner were found in “A Faith that Loves the Earth,” a chapter in Everyday Faith: Herder and Herder, 1968. Many thanks to Mary Freedman for sharing this book.


In your prayers,
please remember our sick and homebound brothers and sisters and our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital.

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To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
The Sacrament of Anointing (the sacrament of the sick) is offered during the 12:05 PM Mass on the first Saturday of each month. Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

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