

About twenty years ago while serving as the Chair of the Worship Commission of the archdiocese, I was invited by the pastor and parishioners of a small rural parish to assist them in some planned changes to their worship space. Arriving at the church my attention was immediately drawn to a beautiful brass hanging lamp located directly above the altar which held the red-glass globe in which the candle kept perpetually burning before the reserved Eucharist in the tabernacle is kept. Its placement was in keeping with custom prior to the changes in the liturgy in the 1960s. It hung precariously low above the altar with only a little more than three feet of clearance. Other churches which had similar arrangements had moved their lamps to the side or hung them higher and I wondered if this parish had considered either idea. Knowing that every parish has its “stories” before asking my question; I asked about the lamp. Indeed, there was a story, a story that touches the mystery of resurrection life we celebrate tonight (today).

The church building had been built in the mid-1940s. A couple of years after completion a spring storm spawned a tornado which passed through the area wiping out everything in its path. The church was no exception. The tornado collapsed the exterior walls into a pile of rubble in the basement. All that was left of the church was the front entrance which contained the bell tower and on the opposite end, the small altar area of the building. Hanging at the juncture of the altar area and the main seating section was the sanctuary lamp. The building had been sheared off on at this point. Miraculously, not only had the lamp not been damaged, it’s red globe, and the glass-encased candle within it were also unharmed, the flame of the candle still burning! One of the older parishioner’s, with tears in his eyes told me, “That night we had no electricity. In that darkness after the tornado when all of us had lost everything, the only light we could see here in town and for some of the folks living a mile or so away was that little red flame burning in our church. It gave us comfort and hope. We knew despite all that had happened to us, God had not abandoned us. God was still with us. We would rise again. Since then every time we come to church, that lamp reminds us of that terrible day and of God’s presence with us then and still with us now.”

While liturgical and esthetic guidelines might suggest a more optimal place for the lamp, after hearing this story I was not about to suggest any changes. To this day, that lamp hangs where it always has in that little rural church.

Easter proclaims God's definitive victory over sin, evil and death through the raising of Jesus from the dead. However, Easter does not compel belief, but rather invites faith. No one personally saw Jesus rise from the dead. Easter's invitation, I believe, is best experienced in St. John's Gospel account of Easter morning. The disciples, Peter and John, arrive at the empty tomb. We're told that Peter entered the tomb. He simply saw an empty grave. Faith, for Peter, would come later. The Beloved Disciple, on the other hand, we are told entered the same tomb and, "He saw and believed"; in the face of destruction and darkness, he saw light. What was the difference? The difference is that the Beloved Disciple had already made a conscious decision, a deliberate choice, to open his mind, heart and will, his whole life, to relationship with Jesus. He risked allowing Jesus to penetrate every aspect of his life, placed all his trust in Jesus, allowed Jesus to live in him even before the events of his passion and death. And now, seeing the physical evidence before him, he saw clearly with the light and eyes of faith, that all that Jesus had said and promised had been fulfilled, and that now it was in him, into his life, that the Spirit of Jesus had passed. Jesus had not only returned to his Father, he now in the Spirit also lived within his life. No matter what might befall him from here on, he would never be alone, for he carried within him the life of Jesus. This is Easter's gift and invitation to us. This is the truth that allowed a devastated small rural community to see in a small, fragile flame shining in their night of death and destruction the power and promise of God.

"May the light of Christ rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds" (*The Easter Vigil: Rite of the Blessing of Fire and Preparation of the Candle*).

A Blessed Easter to all of you!