"She had no sooner said this than she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there. But she did not know him. ‘Woman,’ he asked her, ‘why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for?’ She supposed he was the gardener…” (John 20:14-15)
Dear Friends:

Happy Easter! My hope and prayer for you is that you discover the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in your life!

One of my favorites images of Easter is this beautiful painting by Rembrandt that is part of the Buckingham Palace Royal Collection in London.

In the early morning light, Mary Magdalene confuses Jesus with a gardener. The details of the 17th century Dutch farmer’s hat along with the spade certainly may have served as good disguises.

Yet St. Paul’s words to the early Christian community at Corinth might serve as the best way to grasp the unusual and history-making event of His resurrection. Although we have never seen a soul, we all intuitively know when we witness the death of a loved that a sudden absence occurs when the soul leaves the body. That animating life-force disappears and the body begins to decay.

St. Paul speaks of God’s very spirit raising Christ up into His resurrected body. This event is so unusual that the evangelists carefully note the various reactions by the followers of Jesus as they write the Gospels. The women think he’s a gardener, the men think he’s a fisherman by the seashore. The travelers to Emmaus think he’s a wayfarer on the road. This resurrected body has a physicality that is visible but it passes through locked doors at Pentecost. It has an appearance similar to the Jesus they knew before the crucifixion but the appearance also is not immediately recognizable.

St. Thomas gives us the biggest clue of how this risen body can be recognized: through the wounds. This resurrected body bears the mark of those earthly wounds. It is only when St. Thomas gazes on the wounds that he, then, begins to recognize the rest of the body of Christ.

Might there be a great truth for us too? We ought not shrink down the power of the Easter message to a felt sense of renewal, the cycle of new life that comes each spring, or a deepening of our interior spiritual life as important as these may seem. The resurrection of Christ in all of its power and uniqueness points to our own hope of eternal life.

No wonder that the fourth century Jerusalem catechism attributed to St. Cyril specifically cites St. Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-11).

Attributed to St. Cyril of Jerusalem this early catechism puts laser-like focus on the factual realness of this history-changing event – the resurrection. As followers of Jesus, we view our entire existence – life and death – through this lens. It’s why Easter is the feast of all feasts and the great celebration. In Christ we see our hope and our future. In Christ we see how we can live our lives now in his love, his joy, his mercy and his forgiveness. Like St. Thomas we recognize Christ when we start by gazing upon his wounds. Those wounds are still visible
today in those around us both far and near who are wounded by warfare, violence, loneliness and alienation.

The Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental provider of social services here in Washington State because we want to gaze on Jesus. We are the largest provider of health care because we want to see Jesus. We are the world’s largest school educator, the largest provider of refugee services and often the most visible charitable presence in war-torn places precisely because of our ministry’s alignment back to this powerful Easter message of Christ’s resurrection. As believers it is the way, today, that we catch a glimpse of Jesus in his Risen presence.

Returning to that famous Rembrandt photo, allow me to close with the words of the Dutch poet Jeremias de Decker – a friend of Rembrandt – who penned these lines to accompany this famous painting:

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When I read the story describe by St. John,
And next to it see this artistic scene,
I think, where has a painter ever followed the writer so closely,
Or dead paint brought so much to life?
It seems that Christ is saying: Mary do not tremble.
It is I. Death has not taken your Lord.
She believes this, but not entirely,
And seems to hover between joy and sorrow, fear and hope.
The rock dominating the grave soars high up in the air in this painting.
That rock and the shadow it casts
Create beauty and majesty in the rest of the work.
Your masterly strokes of the brush,
Friend Rembrandt, I first saw on this panel.
Therefore my pen will write an ode to your gift brush
And my ink will praise your brush.
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Circling back to my initial hope and prayer for you – to discover the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in your life – it is this resurrection that can motivate us to see our daily lives as more than a collection of random events. Perhaps the seemingly random activities of our daily life might become those of brush strokes by God the master painter. When we surrender to him and become the great person God created us to be, we become most ourselves and beautiful instruments of his beauty through our prayer, our worship, our care for creation, the gift of our children, our concern for the poor and our outreach to both friends and enemies. This is the power of the resurrection of Christ! My hope and prayer is that this resurrection become – for you – a source of hope for this life and the next!

May you have a happy and blessed Easter season!

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson
Bishop of Yakima