

The Great Paschal Vigil
Incarnation Santa Rosa—Stay at Home/Zoom
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Alleluia. Christ is risen.

(Perhaps this is a moment, if you've been hunched over your screen since 8pm, to stand and stretch. Stand, stretch, move your body and say: Alleluia. Christ is risen. And feel free, please, to get up and move a bit if you feel like it while I speak, especially if you can still hear me—though if all your faces disappear, I might start to worry).

Gaze now into the light of the candles you have lit in your homes tonight, the light of Christ.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.

This is the night. Let there be light.

I've been thinking a lot about a movie I just saw recently—at home, of course!—though it came out a few years ago. It's called "The Lobster." Anybody see it? It's not for children, and maybe not for everyone, but it's a beautifully made film, a dark, rather dark comedy filled with remarkable moments, most of which I won't mention, so even if I spoil the plot for you a bit, I think it's still very much worth seeing.

The story is set in a what seems to be a not-too-distant future. We come upon a man—we never learn his name—who's marriage has just fallen apart. His wife, apparently, has found another man. Next thing we see is that this man, along with his adorable dog, is boarding a bus that takes him to a posh-looking resort hotel. As we watch him go

through a remarkably thorough check in process, we begin to understand that this is no ordinary resort.

He has had to come to this place because in this society, being single is simply not permitted. It's illegal. That's why he, and many others, have been isolated to this hotel. He will have forty-five days at the resort to find a mate. And here's the thing: "guests" who do not find a mate in that time, will be turned into an animal of their choice. The receptionist asks him: which animal?

A lobster, he says. Clearly, he has thought this through already. Lobsters have a very long life span, he says, and mentions other reasons, too. It's at around this point that we learn that his adorable dog is, in fact, his brother, who... well, no prizes for figuring out how *that* happened.

The resort is filled with identically dressed men and identically dressed women, and there are many activities and presentations, day after day, impressing on everyone how wonderful it is to be coupled, and how sad and terrible, and dangerous to be single.

Also, we see quite soon that everyone is talking about their "defining characteristic." In this world, everybody just seems to understand and accept that every person has one "defining characteristic", and that *that's* the key to having a relationship, to being a couple: you have to have the *same* defining characteristic as your mate.

So, our "hero" checks into his room, and hanging on the wall we see a gun, like a rifle, which we learn is a tranquilizer gun, and each day the maid brings each guest an allotment of tranquilizer darts. Because, you see, one of the main daily activities

for all guests is “the hunt.” Out there in the woods beyond the resort live roving bands of illegal “loners”, single people who have rejected the coupled way of life.

The resort guests go out each day hunting loners with their tranquilizer guns, and for each comatose loner they haul back, they get an additional day in their search for a mate, before they’re turned into an animal.

Now, one thing that happens is that in their anxiety to find a mate, a guest sometimes *fakes* having the same defining characteristic as another guest. Which is exactly what our hero does. This does not turn out well. One thing leads to another, and he ends up fleeing the resort into the woods, and is soon welcomed into a band of loners. There is a sense of liberation in having escaped the tyranny of the resort and of his society, and he finds a certain camaraderie and freedom among the loners.

On the other hand, we soon find out that, among the loners, *couples* are strictly forbidden. Even flirting is severely punished.

And, of course, this is exactly when our hero meets a woman among the loners—played by Rachel Weisz—and—you guessed it—they fall in deeply in love. They soon discover that they are both near-sighted, so they conclude that this, obviously, must be the defining characteristic at the root of their love and compatibility.

Our couple come up with elaborate ways to hide their relationship, communicating in signals and code. But the woman keeps a journal, and in it, of course, she writes about the affair. The journal is discovered, and handed over to the leader, who takes the woman to an eye doctor. The woman is told that the doctor will operate on her to correct her near-sightedness—to render her and her man incompatible—but in fact, instructed by the loner leader, the doctor renders her blind, a more punitive solution.

Soon, though, our couple—one seeing, one blind—manage to flee the woods and the loners. As a couple, they can now “pass” back in ordinary

society. Again, there’s a sense of liberation. But here’s the sad thing: somehow, they don’t seem to notice that, despite no longer having their “defining characteristic” in common, they are still together and still in love. Instead, they are anxious to re-establish a shared defining characteristic, so our hero prepares to blind himself so that they can truly be together. Yeah, funny, I know.

This movie, this story, has stuck with me. Because, of course, it’s not really about coupled-ness or singleness.

It’s more about how we are frightened by our own uniqueness; about how we human beings oppress one another, and how we turn that oppression against ourselves; about the power we give to conformity, and how when we rebel against conformity, we easily do so in ways that are just as conformist; about how easily we define ourselves or define others in very oppressive and limiting ways; and how, even after attaining a degree of healing or liberation, we often still carry within us, still hold on, to attitudes, beliefs, behaviors that are shaped by abuse and oppression, branded into us by fear, or by violence, keeping parts of us in the darkness.

As the movie is coming to an end, our couple have escaped the shackles of both enforced coupled-ness and enforced singleness. They’ve been led along the way toward the light by the authenticity of the love they have found, but: will they or will they not be able to escape or shed this idea that reduces *who a person is* to one characteristic, and the conviction that they must be the same? Can they, will they, shed this fear of uniqueness?

What do you think?

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

Tonight we’ve heard from Paul:

If we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if

we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

We are living right now in a time of great suffering, great human suffering, and much death, unlike anything most of us have seen in our lifetimes. It's a time of crucifixion. Most of us are suffering in less drastic ways than we may be seeing and hearing about on the news. But even if we are only suffering the annoyance of staying at home and the challenges it brings, that is still linked to the greater suffering around us.

But I imagine, too, there may well be some of you listening to me right now who have lost your jobs, with all the anxiety that brings. There is great financial anxiety for many. And none of us know how long this will go on or how it will play out, on so many levels.

I think Paul would invite us to identify all of this as suffering, as crucifixion, and that he'd invite us not to deny or minimize this suffering, but to *experience* it, and to *experience it in union with Christ*, in union with Jesus, to recognize that Jesus suffers with us, and in us; to recognize in the suffering and death in our world today the suffering and death of Christ, and to be *with him* in that suffering and death, to be crucified with Christ, and to know that he is with us.

Take a moment to breathe deep into your body, and know and feel that you are connected. You are connected to Christ, you are connected to everyone and everything. You are connected to the living God.

You are not alone. We are not alone.

As Paul reminds us, to be in union with Christ right now—as always—is to be in union with the suffering of this world. We live now with this pain, but all of this suffering, all of this death, will in God's time be swallowed up in the light of Christ, the love of Christ, the healing of Christ.

Tonight, even as this crisis continues, even in the midst of so much suffering, Christ pours this light, this healing upon us. We can know and feel and

absorb into ourselves *now*, tonight, the light, the victory that will only be fully revealed in the future, in the age to come. We can be transformed by that light *now*, and we can share it.

Perhaps you've heard a story, from the desert monks of Egypt, long ago. These were mostly solitary monks—men and women—who lived mostly alone, but would visit each other, seeking wisdom and guidance. So, Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph, and he said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my regular prayers, I fast a little, I pray, I meditate, I live in peace, and I struggle to purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” The old man stood up, the story goes, and stretched out his hands to heaven. As he did so, his fingers become like ten lamps of fire. And he said to Abba Lot, “If you will, you can become all flame.”

And that is our destiny: to *become* the light of Christ.

And, these last days, thinking about tonight, I keep remembering the First Letter of John. “God is light”, he says, “and in him there is no darkness at all.” John is writing to people who have experienced the light of Christ. And yet, he warns them not to say “I have come to know him.” He warns them not to say, “I am in the light”. If you have any hatred for anyone, he says, if your love is not complete, you are still in the darkness, *especially* if you think you're in the light.

Can any of us say that we have no hatred within us, or that our behavior shows complete love for everyone?

How well do we really know ourselves?

What do you think?

Are we really in the light?

I think of the woman and the man in “The Lobster.” I feel that love is leading them out of the darkness. They are moving in the direction of freedom, toward healing, toward the light. But are they fully in the light? Not yet.

But *this*, says John, *this* is what we can say: “The darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.”

The darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

As we gaze into the light of Christ, we are finding our way to freedom, to healing, to the fullness of God’s light and life. We too, all of us I dare say, still bear marks of oppression, of sin, of darkness; we still think and act in ways that do not reflect the light of Christ.

And yet: the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. Unlike the characters in *The Lobster*, we can gaze into the light of Christ tonight, and feel and know that this light is freeing us, is healing us, is transforming us, is leading us out of darkness, out of and away from slavery, from oppression, from violence, from addiction, leading us out of and away from whatever hinders us from life, joy, love, peace.

The darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

Do not forget this light.

This is the light that shows us that God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all. No darkness. No violence. No coercion. No manipulation. No deceit. No shame. No rejection. No fear. And nothing *to* fear, nothing to lose, except the cramped, brittle, frightened selves that we mistook for who we really are. Nothing to fear, except our hearts being transformed from stone into the living, tender, radiant flesh of Christ, crucified and risen.

The darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.