

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

God's Footprints

Outside Jerusalem, there is a place where you can go to see the footprint of God. It is on the hill, Mt. Olivet, where tradition tells us Jesus ascended to heaven. There, inside a small domed shrine, not much larger than a suburban garage, you will find on the floor a yellowed, rough-hewn stone, encased in glass. And on that stone, so they say, if you look long enough and hard enough you can see the final imprint that Christ made on the earth: the outline of His foot as He touched the ground one last time and was lifted to the skies.

When my wife and I visited the site several years ago, you couldn't fail to sense you were seeing something mysterious. One of the tourists in our group was moved to tears. Others were speechless. The little shrine was hushed. A lone sentinel, an aging Israeli guide, stood along a wall, watching us. Beside the fabled stone, there was a plate, on which visitors had tossed dollars and coins. I bent over the rock and looked closely. I studied it. I looked at it from different angles. Finally, I stood up and sighed. I couldn't see a thing.

After a few moments, we shuffled out of the building and into the bright summer sun. Blinking, we headed back to our bus.

I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Why was something so plainly wondrous kept hidden from me? I wanted to see something incredible. I didn't. And I couldn't help but feel a little bit gypped. (I had dropped a dollar into the plate. Should I have left more? Would that have done it?)

I remember that shrine, and that stone, every year when we celebrate the Ascension. I can't help but place myself there again, when I hear the familiar reading from Acts. Jesus has ascended. His followers are staring at the skies in disbelief. Clouds are scurrying by. He vanishes from sight.

"While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?'"

Why, I wonder, have I been staring at a rock on the ground? I've come to realize that the most enduring footprints of Christ are not found on a pebbled hilltop in the Middle East. They are not on stone, or clay. No. They are the footprints He has left on lives. And they are everywhere.

You will find them in soup kitchens, where volunteers ladle food every day to dozens of homeless men and women. Christ's footprints are there, in the soup line.

You will find them in hospitals and hospices, in places like Baltimore and Uganda, where men, women and children are dying, and tender hands are there to wipe a brow, clean a sore or dry a tear. His footprints are in the halls and waiting rooms, on floors of linoleum or wood, left on bed sheets and slippers.

You will find His footprints on the marble floors of great cathedrals, and on the plain planks of roadside chapels, where believers of many faiths gather to sit and kneel, to listen and pray.

You will find them on the floors of nurseries, where mothers walk all night caring for their sick infants, and you will find them on dusty roads where lonely teenagers are walking until morning, looking for someone, anyone, who will understand.

His footprints are on the coffee-stained carpets of church basements, where weekly AA meetings are held; they are found in velvet-draped reconciliation rooms where burdens are emptied; they are in diners and laundries, bus stations and train platforms. He's traveled the world at least a million times. Is there anyplace He has left untouched?

We can only go forth from this mystery, just as the apostles did twenty centuries ago, heading toward our own unknowable destinies—each of us trudging from our own Olivet, setting out to follow the footprints of Christ.

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