One of the most famous paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is a huge canvas by Paul Gaugin painted during his time in Tahiti, and one of its memorable features is a yellow panel in the upper left hand corner inscribed with three questions: D’ou sommes nous? Que sommes nous? Ou allons nous? Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

The painter doesn’t give any answer to the questions in this enigmatic painting and the impassive blue idol he includes alongside the human figures gives nothing away, but we are in Gaugin’s debt for expressing so succinctly these three questions that haunt the human heart. And it is these three questions that might give us a clue to the meaning of joy.

Joy is a very mysterious emotion. Joy is not the same as a feeling of pleasurable contentment. It isn’t relief that all is well or a complacent sense that we are cocooned in satisfaction and spared from unpleasant realities. Joy is the dawning of awareness that we are actually being given real answers to these deep human questions. That is why joy is something we can experience even when we are in pain, or are struggling, or dealing with brokenness in ourselves and others. Joy is what people experience when they find themselves saying in their heart of hearts, “Now I have a sense where I come from. I know who I am. I know where I am going.”

Today’s gospel about the encounter between the Risen Christ and the disciples in the upper room on two successive Sundays is about joy. “Then they rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” But the joy this gospel proclaims is joy strictly speaking. We can’t say, “Then they were amused and happy when they saw the Lord.” We can’t substitute, “Then they were content and carefree when they saw the Lord.” Because it is obvious that their uncanny encounter with the Risen One was also horrifying and excruciating. This is the one they had abandoned! They had fled from the garden leaving him alone to his fate! This is the one that Peter had denied three times! They were deserters, they were cowards, and now the one they had betrayed and abandoned returns to them, alive in an utterly unheard of way. And instead of pulling his sleeves over the wounds that made plain the violence of his execution on the Roman cross, he reaches out to them with hands pierced with the wounds from the nails, and he shows them the gaping wound in his side where the soldier’s spear entered his chest. What else could the experience be but an overwhelmingly painful reminder of their own cowardice? Yet the gospel writer insists, “Then they rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

The gospel is telling us that in spite of the initial shock of painful recognition, they were filled with a strange joy. God had done something that only the Creator could do—God had brought Jesus from the nothingness of death into a new glorious life that enabled him to appear to them to forgive them, revive them and give them their life’s mission. And the joy that flooded them was the joy flowing from the sense that now they knew where they were coming from, they knew who they were, and they knew where they were going.

John the Evangelist goes out of his way to make clear that this was the source of Jesus’ own joy. Do you remember the comment he makes just before Jesus washed his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper? “And during supper, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself…” (13:2-4) What made Jesus joyful was his faith that God was the source of his life, God gave him his life and sent him into the world to give that life to others. And Jesus believed that he was going to return to God, to share God’s eternity and glory.

What makes us Christian is the experience that this faith of Jesus has proved to be contagious. Jesus did not believe that only he had come from God, only he was the divine Godsend, only he was God’s gift to the world, and that only he was going back to God. Jesus believed that this faith and this experience and this joy was meant for all of us to share. And this is what the Resurrection triggered off—a chain reaction by which more and more people found themselves
able to say, “We are having the very same experience as the Lord Jesus! There’s no real difference. We come from God, we are God’s gift to the world as healers while we walk on the earth, and beyond death we are going to God to share in his eternity”.

If the tomb had not been found empty, if Jesus had been reduced to nothing but another rotting corpse, his failure and atrocious death could only have made a mockery of his confidence as the one sent from God, the gift of God to the world, and the one destined to share God’s glory. If there had been no validation, no unique sign from God, Jesus’ mission would have been exposed as a disillusioning fiasco, a miserable debacle, and we would be back where we started, pitying him as a deluded dreamer, and left to struggle on our own with the enigma, What is being human for? Where do we come from, what are we, where are going? But with the resurrection—something only the Creator could make happen—Jesus’ faith in himself as coming from God and going to God is vindicated and validated. And now that Jesus was alive in a new way, he could ignite his faith in the hearts of his disciples, and send them out to ignite it in others.

Today’s gospel is a story about joy being ignited in the disciples, as they receive this contagious assurance of the answer that God gives to the three fundamental life questions: Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Jesus transmits to the frightened and dispirited disciples the answer: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” From now the disciples will realize that they are sent by God to be healers in the world. They come from God, and they represent God as his daughters and sons. Like mother like daughter, like father like Son, we are the progeny of a God of love, and we do what God does in the world as agents of healing and restoration. We know where we are coming from, and we know who we are, children of God and participants in God’s mission and activity. And we know where we are going—not that we can picture our future in the heart of God after bodily death, not that our imagination can flesh it out—but we know that whatever that future is, it means we will be home in the heart of God as his beloved, cherished and transformed by love, the very same place Jesus entered through the resurrection.

This is what is meant by “receiving the Holy Spirit.” It isn’t some esoteric religious experience, it is the dawning of a deep intuition that we are actually in the same place as Jesus, and share the relationship he had with the mystery we call God. We are like him in this, sensing in our own small way, that we have a source, a mission and a goal, in tandem with Jesus, in union with him, swimming the same current. “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” Jesus insists we dare to believe that we are the same; the pattern and meaning of our life is the same as his.