Columns
Spirituality
Religious Life



A sculpture of the risen Jesus is pictured in the Church of the Immaculate Conception at St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. The author calls the work by Harry Breen "unlike any depiction of the Resurrection that I had ever seen." (Sue Paweski)



by Sue Paweski

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I love to dance. Anyone who knows me will tell you that I am up on my feet when the music starts. My father was a musician, though an optometrist by profession, so our house was always filled with music. While I was a disaster learning to play the piano, I excelled at dancing.

If my poor bones were not racked with arthritis now, I would dance for a couple of hours each day as I used to. But I still have the "moves" and very occasionally can get through a couple of Golden Oldie tunes. When I am dancing, I am almost in a trance. The rhythm of the music takes me out of myself into another plane. I am enveloped by the beat and the flow. Every fiber of my body is in sync; it's a Zen experience. I am outside of my body, yet I am completely attuned to my body. I lose my identity to an extent too. Whether I am dancing alone or in a group of other dancers, I "see" and hear only the music.

And that brings me to the sculpture of the risen Jesus in our conventual Church of the Immaculate Conception at St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana.

When I first visited our motherhouse, I was intrigued by the sculpture of Jesus leaping from the white sepulcher. I burst into a full throated aha moment, "Oh! It's Jesus!" and he is dancing a dance of triumph. The work by Harry Breen is unlike any depiction of the Resurrection that I had ever seen. Jesus is free! He is alive! He is in motion!

The image confirmed my sense of the congregation I desired to join. Yes, this is where I could bring my gifts and talents and where my heart could thrive and grow. I longed for a community of sisters who moved the Divine out of narrow patriarchal understandings of God to an expansive God of the Cosmos.

This depiction of the risen Jesus says so much to me: "Come! Move! Leap forward! Leave the pew and follow Jesus' message of love, mercy and justice. Lose yourself to the graces that flow from a life dedicated to sharing the message of Jesus the Christ."

The congregation would give me the opportunity to blossom and be the energetic and enthusiastic person I wanted to be. However, it wasn't as instantaneous a transformation as I expected. The euphoria of the moment had to be tempered with the reality of spiritual maturity.

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I see the image with new eyes now. When I first contemplated the work, it was about *me*. I would share the energy of the leap of Jesus with those with whom I would minister. And I cherish that grace-filled state. But, as I learned time and again, it wasn't about me alone. My life is about the movement of the Spirit — the dance if you will — that dwells through, with and in the body of Christ.

As a young sister in the congregation (and young in spiritual growth), I would think, *I am a sister now*. Be careful of what you say. Be careful of what you do. Careful not to offend anyone. It's a full-time job just running through all the shoulds, coulds and woulds. I had to be a student in the school of hard knocks more than a few times before there was a bit of a shift. My spiritual leaping and jumping needed training and practice. My spiritual muscles had to be stretched and strengthened just as "dancing" muscles had to be trained. And those spiritual muscles must stay in training all the time to remain flexible and open to learn new dance steps.

When I was nursing a wound from a serious misunderstanding with another sister, I looked intently at the resurrected Jesus again. Wait a minute. What do I see? Jesus' foot is touching the cross as leverage to propel himself into the glory of the Resurrection. The foot of Jesus pushes him from the cross. It's the cross: the cross that Jesus had to bear to bring forth the resurrection. There could be no leaping without some weeping!

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The balance of darkness and light is present in the sculpture. The wooden cross is in contrast to the dazzling image of Jesus bursting forth from the sepulcher. I had to own the Paschal Mystery in my life. The crosses I bore and still bear throughout my life brought me to where I am today. My "dark night of the soul" propels me to embrace the serenity that spiritual maturity offers. Just as my arthritic bones can still feel and keep the beat; so too can my spiritual muscles bring me a sense of joy and energy even in the most difficult and trying times. I can recapture my dancing days physically whenever I hear the rhythmic beat. And I can bring the "leaping Jesus'' of the resurrection into my life whenever I recall the image of Jesus the Christ.

The world tragedies call us to fix our eyes on the risen Christ. The message of living love has to permeate our beings to bring peaceful resolutions to our aching world. That is very difficult when there are no easy answers.

Dancing keeps me grounded. Even for a few hours, the music brings me comfort. Breen's sculpture awakens the energy of the Spirit within me. I relate to the movement because I can feel that movement in my muscle memory. As I gaze at the power of the Resurrection, I am grounded in the hope that is the foundation of our faith, the spiritual muscle memory of our relationship to the Divine.