

John La Farge

Revelation and Light

The John La Farge Windows
at Church of the Ascension





John La Farge, together with his contemporary and rival Louis Comfort Tiffany, revolutionized techniques of stained glass production in the late 19th century. Through developing methods for working glass while still in the molten state, they found it could be altered in a variety of unprecedented ways. One of the most innovative results they achieved was in using translucent rather than transparent glass, so the opacity could be varied within a single composition, creating dramatic chiaroscuro effects ranging from areas of deep shadow to passages of brilliant light.

In La Farge's window entitled *The Good Shepherd* (illustrated on the previous page), the infant shepherd slumbers while Saint Joseph holds him gently in his arms. The saint hands his foster son a pomegranate, said to contain 613 seeds, representing the 613 commandments in the Torah and alluding to the transmission of the Jewish tradition through Joseph to Jesus. La Farge shows the saint with his symbolic attribute, the flowering staff, but breaks with the long tradition of depicting Joseph as an elderly man, representing him instead as a handsome, beardless youth.

La Farge chose subjects from the New Testament that relate to themes of light and darkness in several of the windows at Ascension, embodied in the dramatic effects of brilliant illumination and smoldering shadows now made possible in the medium of stained glass by the new techniques.

In *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* (previous page), Mary brings Jesus into the Temple in Jerusalem. She is shown with Hannah and a figure that suggests both the High Priest and the elderly Simeon, who declares the child to be “A light to enlighten the Gentiles, and a glory for your people Israel.”

Similarly, in *Christ and Nicodemus* (below), the older Pharisee seeks out Jesus at night and Christ tells him that he must be born “from above” and “those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Nicodemus is symbolic of the entire Jewish heritage transmitted through Jesus to Christians, and the important links between emergent Christianity and its debt to the Jewish tradition (a theme that was also evident in the *Good Shepherd* window and in the *Presentation* as well).





The moment of the greatest darkness in the gospel narrative is the arrest, torture and death of Jesus. At this point all seems to have been lost, and the charismatic rabbi and wonder worker they had hoped to be the one to redeem Israel had been executed unjustly by the brutal Roman authorities occupying Judea.

The events took place so fast and were so unexpected that no arrangements had been made for burying the body of Jesus. And so another Pharisee and disciple of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea gave his own tomb as a place to bury their beloved teacher.

According to Jewish custom, the body was to be washed, anointed and prepared for burial before laying him in the tomb, but there was not time to do this before sunset ushered in the Sabbath that Friday evening (touching corpses was forbidden for observant Jews on the Sabbath.)

The gospels say three women returned to the tomb on Sunday morning, once the Sabbath had ended, in order to prepare the body. There they were greeted by two men dressed in white who asked them "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

La Farge shows us the moment when Mary Magdalene realizes the significance of both the empty tomb and of Jesus' death. Her red cape is dramatically lit on the rim of her garments by the rising sun, as the idea and the reality of the Resurrection dawns on her. This is the moment of enlightenment. Even the angels rejoicing in heaven above are illuminated from below by the radiant light of the rising sun and the Risen Lord.

-text by Dennis Raverty, Ph.D., Art Historian