

2nd SUNDAY OF EASTER (Cycle A)

Divine Mercy Sunday

March 30, 2008 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

It was the evening of that first Easter Sunday. The disciples were disheartened, dejected, discouraged, stunned, scattered, bewildered, floundering. They were huddled together in a tight little group in a secret little room with the door locked, afraid to show their faces in public.

A lot had happened in the preceding three days. After all the miracles, all the preaching and teaching, the triumphal exuberant entry into Jerusalem – had come the Last Supper, the betrayal, the horror of the Crucifixion. And now this strange unconfirmed report that Jesus had risen from the dead. But as far as we know, none of those present that evening had actually seen Him. Just imagine how confusing it all must have been.

That's today's Gospel. The disciples are in a bad way. Everything they thought they believed has been shattered.

The phrase "for fear of the Jews" is particularly revealing. Remember that the disciples themselves were Jews. They were even afraid of their own people. They had nothing to hold onto. But there's still that glimmer of hope . . . that second-hand report that he is risen. They can't figure out what to make of that.

Then he's there. Right there in their presence. He gives them peace. He breathes the Holy Spirit on them and gives them the power to forgive and to retain sins.

MOVE

The thing is, they were discouraged and bewildered because they had it all wrong. They thought they had it figured out, who Jesus was and what it was all about. They were trying to make Jesus fit the mould that they had made for him in their own minds. It was necessary for their minds to be opened through faith, not just what they could take in through their senses.

Many of us go through life the same way – we try to intellectualize everything – if we can't see it, hear it, touch it, then it can't be real. If it doesn't conform to our preconceived notions, we have a problem with it. This can be especially hard for those of us who are in the "NT" category on the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Inventory.. "I ought to be able to figure that out. I should know how to do this. I shouldn't need any help with this."

Sometimes we go through life with reduced expectations. The Christian faith seems to be more theoretical and abstract than a real influence in our lives. We read the Gospel, we hear it proclaimed, and we believe it – at least on a certain level. But the connection to our everyday lives can sometimes seem really remote.

Oh, sure, I do it too. Sometimes the world can be really oppressive. We want to say, "Come on, God . . . just one teeny tiny little sign? Just one little whispering word in my ear? Couldn't you let me know you're there, just for a second? Then we can go back to the way it was, and I can hang on a little longer."

If you've ever felt that way, I think you're in good company. Mother Teresa wrote about how God seemed silent to her, closed to her, for long periods of her life. Even Mother Teresa longed for an experience of God that was more concrete.

I think Thomas gets a bum rap from this Gospel. He's not really a professional skeptic. He's probably about like most of us would have been if we had been in his place. He may even have been like many of us are today. He's having a hard time believing that it's all settled, that it's all fallen into place. He's one of us. It's even harder to see the truth because that would mean that he had it wrong before.

MOVE

There's a traditional Zen Buddhist koan that goes,

"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

What the Zen Master was saying is that if, during your contemplative practice, or your walk of faith, or whatever you want to call it, your thoughts tell you that you have arrived at a final stage of enlightenment – that you

have grasped the whole truth – then it is time to think again. Set those thoughts aside and get back to your meditation and practice.

St. John of the Cross said much the same thing. He told us not to rely on visions. If Jesus Christ himself seems to appear to you, personally, individually . . . then it's probably time to question what you see. Oh, sure, we'd all like to have that direct two-way communication with God, to be able to ask all those questions and get all the answers and explanations. Seems like that would really make things simple.

But that's not the way it works. We are called to faith, to belief without empirical proof. As Jesus tells Thomas, faith is better, nobler, surer and more pleasing to God than relying on personal visions or supposed revelations. "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

This morning's readings from the Acts of the Apostles shows us how the Christian community lived in the very earliest days – the simple elements of the Christian life . . . prayer . . . celebrating the Eucharist . . . instruction in the faith . . . sharing our lives and all that we have with others. The reading tells us that "Awe came upon everyone" at the simple sincerity and way of life of the early Christian community.

Sounds like quite the idyllic life, doesn't it? But I imagine some of us sort of squirm at the part about the communal life and having all things in common, and dividing everything according to need. I believe it was Thomas Merton who said that that sort of thing really does work in the monastery – but that's probably the only place it does work.

This wasn't the institution of some sort of economic doctrine – it was a spontaneous expression of Christian love, of Christian intimacy. In a sense, we continue it even today – in a small way – by the collection we'll take up in a few minutes, for the Church and for those who are in need.

I think we all want to achieve and sustain that kind of true intimacy with others, but we know how difficult it is to do that. We're not much different from our first-century counterparts in that. By the time Paul wrote his Second Letter to the Thessalonians – about fifteen years after that first Easter – he was already having to instruct the Christian community that "if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat." I guess the slacking off had started even then. In the "real world" we live in today, it's

hard to look back on that early Christian community and see that idyllic life as anything other than impractical, or naïve, or even impossible.

Yet we are gathered here today. Our gathering together here is inspired by our collective desire to “hold all things in common” at least in some sense, to live as Christian brothers and sisters, to share a common experience of Jesus Christ. Certainly, our day-to-day lives are much more complicated than those small, scattered first-century Christian communities – but we still keep alive that desire to live authentically as Christians in community. Maybe this would be a good time to re-examine the state of our Christian communion with others, starting with those nearest to us.

MOVE

Next Sunday, we’re going to hear about the disciples who saw the risen Jesus for the first time – on the road to Emmaus. They were out for a walk, so to speak. But more than a physical journey, it was a journey of faith, a journey from Friday to Monday. That’s sort of the same journey we’re all on. But before we can get anywhere, you know . . . we have to get up and actually start walking.

READINGS

Reading 1

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves
to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life,
to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.
Awe came upon everyone,
and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.
All who believed were together and had all things in common;
they would sell their property and possessions
and divide them among all according to each one's need.
Every day they devoted themselves
to meeting together in the temple area
and to breaking bread in their homes.
They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart,
praising God and enjoying favor with all the people.
And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

R. (1) **Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Let the house of Israel say,
"His mercy endures forever."

Let the house of Aaron say,
"His mercy endures forever."

Let those who fear the LORD say,
"His mercy endures forever."

R. **Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

I was hard pressed and was falling,
but the LORD helped me.
My strength and my courage is the LORD,
and he has been my savior.

The joyful shout of victory
in the tents of the just:

R. **Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.

By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.

This is the day the LORD has made;
let us be glad and rejoice in it.

R. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

or:

R. Alleluia.

Reading II

1 Pt 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading,
kept in heaven for you
who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith,
to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final time.
In this you rejoice, although now for a little while
you may have to suffer through various trials,
so that the genuineness of your faith,
more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire,
may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor
at the revelation of Jesus Christ.
Although you have not seen him you love him;
even though you do not see him now yet believe in him,
you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,
as you attain the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Gospel

Jn 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week,
when the doors were locked, where the disciples were,
for fear of the Jews,
Jesus came and stood in their midst
and said to them, "Peace be with you."
When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit.
Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained."

Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,
was not with them when Jesus came.
So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord."
But he said to them,
"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands
and put my finger into the nailmarks
and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Now a week later his disciples were again inside
and Thomas was with them.
Jesus came, although the doors were locked,
and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."
Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands,
and bring your hand and put it into my side,
and do not be unbelieving, but believe."
Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!"
Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples
that are not written in this book.
But these are written that you may come to believe
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,
and that through this belief you may have life in his name.