

**2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER (Cycle B)**  
**Divine Mercy Sunday**  
**April 15, 2012 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.**

The Gospel we hear today is a story in two parts. The setting for both is a locked room where the Apostles are meeting in fear and uncertainty, with the door locked for fear of their own people.

The first part of the story takes place on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. No doubt the Apostles were afraid and bewildered. They had followed Jesus for two or three years, they had witnessed the miraculous healings and mighty deeds He had done. They were there for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the hope for the future . . . then came the betrayal, the fear, the denial, the abandonment, the terror, the torture, the horror of the crucifixion, the death and burial of all their hopes.

Then, that evening, this unconfirmed report of what must have seemed impossible – Jesus was risen from the dead. He had spoken with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus – Cleopas and his unnamed companion – but none of the Apostles now present had seen Him.

Now He is in their midst, though the door is locked. And He offers them His peace.

This is not the peace of inaction, or inactivity, or passivity, or relaxation, or the dead peace of the grave. This is not the peace of the absence of responsibility. It's not the kind of peace that's the lack of anything, the absence of anything. It's the peace of the fullness of the kingdom of God, the peace of knowing who they are and where they are and what they are about. It's the peace that comes from knowing that

everything He had told them is true. It's the peace of knowing – **knowing** – that everything He had promised will be fulfilled. It's the peace of knowing that He's back with them, and that He will be with them forever. No more fear of ever losing Him again.

It is here that Jesus sends his disciples forth to bear witness to His resurrection, gives them the mission, and gives them the power to carry it out. He gives them faith and love to share with the world.

We weren't there at the time. We can only grasp the reality of the resurrection through faith. But that seems so difficult for so many people.

I read somewhere that until very recently, there was not one single artefact in existence that could be conclusively linked personally with Alexander the Great. Sure, there were statues, mosaics, descriptions, contemporaneous items – but nothing associated with the actual person of Alexander until the discovery of what is “possibly” his half-brother's tomb just a few years ago, which contained items “possibly” associated with Alexander.

And yet, I daresay that no one here doubts that Alexander was a real person who lived, that we know what he probably looked like, and we know quite a lot about him. But history and reason and science simply cannot reach far enough back to provide a physical link.

But for some reason, there are those who doubt Jesus, even though there's about as much recorded about Him as there is about Alexander, perhaps even more. And certainly more evidence of Him in the intervening centuries.

Faith has to fill in the gaps. Faith goes beyond what we can reach with unaided human knowledge. Faith cannot contradict reason, but faith is supported by a lot of evidence that what the apostles claimed about Jesus is true. We believe in Alexander the Great in a historical sense; we believe in Jesus in the same way, but we also believe in Him in a spiritual sense because we have the gift of faith through grace.

Peace was His other gift to the Apostles that day. The Jews saluted one another at that time by wishing each other peace, Shalom, health and prosperity both in the material and spiritual sense. Here Christ is not only wishing "well-being," especially the spiritual well-being, but He is giving it.

The peace of Christ is different from every other kind of peace. Every kind of peace that is based on human foundations is fragile. Human affections, financial security, health, psychological well-being, success, absence of problems – all can be shattered in an instant. Only the peace of Christ never fails. If we have any sense – and sometimes I wonder if we do – we will make it our business to buy into this peace, even if it means giving up other forms of peace that comes from human beings.

The peace of Christ is Christ Himself – living with the risen Christ in friendship and grace. If we really do this, we become powerful witnesses to the peace of Christ to those around us.

Then there's the matter of love. Jesus Himself said that His followers would be recognized by the love they had for one another, and for others. The early Christian community in our reading from Acts shows us how they became "of one heart and one mind."

We're all part of a Christian community of some kind or we wouldn't be here today – a family, a parish, maybe a school, or another group of some kind. Would people look at our Christian communities and see how we love one another?

When I started this, I said that the Gospel was a story in two parts. The second part was for us. The first part was on that first Easter Sunday. The second part was a week later. The second part was about Thomas – about us. Although Thomas was one of the twelve, he refused to believe the word of the other ten Apostles and perhaps of disciples also who may have been with them. He wanted personal evidence. And Jesus gave it to him.

Thomas wasn't there for the first part of the story. Neither were we. But now Thomas speaks for us when he says, "My Lord and my God." We don't know whether Thomas touched the sacred wounds or not. But he believed. Our faith is the faith of all those who did not have the privilege of seeing the risen Christ with our own eyes, but yet have believed in Him on reliable testimony.

It may be surprising that the Apostles were so reluctant to believe that Christ had risen from the dead, to live forever in glory with His Father in heaven. But we should remember that during their two or three years with Him they saw nothing but a mere man – one with divine powers, but yet a man. Some of the prophets of the Old Covenant had powers like that as well.

Christ had "emptied Himself" of his divine nature, and He had foretold His resurrection many times. But the idea that He could be really God, God Himself as well as man, was

something they could not then grasp. If he was a mere man death had to be the end.

This is an interesting point for the Church and for all of us. If they had been expecting the resurrection, and had been anxiously awaiting it, looking forward to it, it would be easy to say that they imagined it, that they persuaded themselves it had happened, that they were somehow victims of mass hallucination. But hallucinations arise in a mind already expecting and hoping for what the hallucination represents.

No, this was no hallucination. Today's Gospel proves it. What they were experiencing simply could not happen. And yet it did. Their firm belief that it was impossible could only be overcome by strong evidence that it was indeed not only possible but a reality.

We can thank the Apostles and especially Thomas, that our faith in the resurrection and glorification of Christ is just that much stronger. If Christ had not risen in glory, and if word of Him had not spread throughout the world, our Christianity would have ended before the first Easter week had passed, even without all those who tried to prevent it.

In another place in Acts, the Sanhedrin is trying to prevent the Apostles from preaching the new Christian faith. But Gamaliel tells them, "If this plan or work is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it."

Today is also Divine Mercy Sunday. This tradition focuses on the boundless mercy of God, seen through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There are a couple of Divine Mercy celebrations at other parishes – St. Anne Bartlett, and (I

think) at OLPH. Take a few minutes to pray the Divine Mercy chaplet prayer – “For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.”

## READINGS

### Reading 1 Acts 4:32-35

The community of believers was of one heart and mind,  
and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own,  
but they had everything in common.  
With great power the apostles bore witness  
to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,  
and great favor was accorded them all.  
There was no needy person among them,  
for those who owned property or houses would sell them,  
bring the proceeds of the sale,  
and put them at the feet of the apostles,  
and they were distributed to each according to need.

### 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 2 1 Jn 5:1-6

Beloved:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God,  
and everyone who loves the Father

loves also the one begotten by him.

In this way we know that we love the children of God  
when we love God and obey his commandments.

For the love of God is this,  
that we keep his commandments.

And his commandments are not burdensome,  
for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world.

And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.

Who indeed is the victor over the world  
but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ,

not by water alone, but by water and blood.  
The Spirit is the one that testifies,  
and the Spirit is truth.

**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.

## NOTES:

### THEME OF THE READINGS

Throughout this time the Church cannot speak of anything else but must prolong the preaching of the apostles, bearing witness “with power” to the resurrection of the Lord (First Reading). He confirmed their nascent faith by showing himself to them all, even returning for the absent Thomas (Gospel). The faith and love that is apparent in the first community of disciples (First Reading) is the sign that they are living “in Christ” and becomes the power by which they will overcome the world (Second Reading). Blessed indeed are those who, though they have not seen, have believed.

### DOCTRINAL MESSAGE

The peace of Christ. It is the first thing Jesus gives his disciples when he appears to them. This is not the dead peace of inaction, or passivity, or the immature peace of absence of responsibility. God’s peace can never be a “lack of” something, only the rich fullness of the kingdom. It is the extraordinary, exultant peace that flows into the souls of the disciples when their wild, dawning hope is confirmed: “He is alive!”. Everything he had told them is true, and everything he had promised, is already on the way to fulfillment. And he is with them forever. They need never fear losing him again.

Witnesses to the resurrection. This is not a “private benefit appearance” for his followers. Jesus presents himself to his apostles (“the sent ones”) precisely in order to send them out as witnesses to his resurrection. It is a mission the apostles –finally!- set themselves to carrying out faithfully and in powerful fashion. That “power” ultimately came from the Holy Spirit who was given to them; but insofar as it resided in them, it can be located in two virtues endowed with divine power: unwavering faith in the Lord and his resurrection – such that they were literally willing to bet their lives on it - and a witness of fraternal love that they and the growing community of believers around them gave to all who saw them and that surpassed anything ever known to human imperfection. It was this faith and love that would conquer the world.

Faith. It is only possible to accept the reality of the resurrection, and have contact with the risen Christ, by means of faith. This is not to say that reason or historical science would be compelled to deny the resurrection; they simply cannot reach far enough to say whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. Faith goes beyond what we can reach with unaided human knowledge, but it can only exist, by definition, where it does not contradict reason, because it is a (free) act of human reason, elevated by the grace of God to a new plane of possibility. There are indeed persuasive indications that what the apostles claimed about Jesus is in fact true, but our reason remains free to accept or reject them. Ultimately we believe because God moves our will and gives light to our intelligence to do so. “Blest are they who have not seen and have believed”: because they are graced by God with this gift of faith, and because at the same time it remains a free act and therefore meritorious.

Catechesis: The interplay of divine grace, human understanding and free will in the act of faith (CCC 153-60).

### PASTORAL APPLICATIONS

Shalom: the peace of Christ. Every kind of peace based on human foundations –human affections, financial security, health, psychological well-being, success, absence of difficulties... - is ultimately fragile and exposed to being shattered in an instant. Only the peace that Christ gives is guaranteed to be beyond fail – no one will take it from his disciples (John 14:27 and 16:22). If we have any sense we will make it our business to buy into this peace –even if it were necessary to sell all the other forms of ‘peace’ we have acquired or aspire to, in order to obtain this one precious pearl (Matthew 13:46).

In fact, the peace of Christ is Christ himself: it is the possession of Christ, the living with the risen Christ in the intimacy of friendship, rooted in grace, that is its essence. Such closeness to him, if we understand it properly and respond to it, will inevitably lead us to become powerful witnesses of the resurrection for those around us. If in all we do we act under the profound conviction that Christ, by virtue of his new, risen, life, is by our side, then the way we do things and the joy and selflessness we do them with will become the best advertisement for the resurrection there could possibly be.

Love: the sign of Christ. Jesus himself had said that his followers would be recognized by the love they had for one another. The first Christian community made this a reality, to the point of being “of one heart and one mind”. Each one of us belongs to the Christian community of a family, a parish, perhaps a school, or a movement, or a workplace community where at least a large number of our coworkers are Christian. Does it happen, or at least, could it happen, in our Christian communities, that people say as they said of the early Christians, “Look how they love one another”? Look how they are always willing to help anyone in need. Look how you never hear an unkind word about anyone, present or absent, from them. Look how they treat everyone with respect. Look how they don’t show dislike for anyone. Look how they always seem to think of others before themselves. I suppose such a picture sounds unlikely. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons it has such an impact. The main reason, of course, is that the presence of Christ makes itself felt in such a community.

During the Easter Season we will be hearing from the Acts of the apostles, the First Letter of John and the Gospel according to John.

Today’s Gospel passage recounts the initial appearance of the Risen Lord to the apostles on Easter evening along with an appearance one week later. Jesus’ special attention to Thomas (absent the Sunday before) evokes the theological apex of the New Testament: My Lord and my God. What a hopeful story for us! Though Thomas cannot at first believe in Jesus’ resurrection, and seems on the fringe of the apostolic community, he becomes the voice of the church’s fullest insight into His identity. There is always hope for us!

Today is also Divine Mercy Sunday. We focus our attention on the boundless mercy of our God, made visible in the death and resurrection of Christ. If you cannot attend the special Divine Mercy celebrations at OLPH (Chris, make sure this will happen) or St. Anne (Bartlett), use your Rosary to pray several decades of the DM Chaplet prayer: For the sake of his sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

GOSPEL: John 20: 19-31. (rsv) On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus

said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Now Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

EXPLANATION: (exegesis) Last Sunday's gospel, also taken from St. John, described the first hint at the resurrection which the Apostles received. Peter and John, convinced that the body had not been taken away, because the winding sheets were left behind, were beginning to believe. But the others were skeptical, the two disciples on the way to Emmaus paid no heed to the women's story, and Thomas refused to believe the testimony of the other ten, even when this present appearance of our Lord had convinced them.

evening of . . . first day: The evening of the Sunday.

the doors being shut . . . : He came through the closed door, which shows the spiritual qualities of the resurrected body (see 1 Cor. 15: 44-48).

came and stood among them: To prove that he was the Christ who had been crucified and who was now alive once more.

Peace be with you: Jews saluted one another by wishing peace, that is, health and prosperity both in the material and spiritual sense. Here Christ is not only wishing "well-being," especially the spiritual well-being, but he is giving it (see 14: 27).

so I send you: He is now conferring on them the mission he had promised them before his death (see Mt. 4: 19; Jn. 17: 18 etc.), which was the continuation of the work of divine salvation inaugurated by himself.

Receive the Holy Spirit: He breathed on them and said these words—the sacramental action. He had promised them the Holy Spirit when he had returned to his Father in glory (7: 39; 16: 7). This condition had been fulfilled that Easter morning.

If you forgive . . . sins: Catholic tradition has rightly seen in this act the institution of the Sacrament of Penance.

Thomas one of the twelve, . . . : He stubbornly refused to believe the word of the other ten Apostles and perhaps of disciples also who may have been with them. He needed personal evidence and the merciful Savior gave him that evidence.

eight days later: For Thomas's sake the risen Jesus appeared again in the very same place and circumstances. He asked Thomas to prove for himself that his body bore the marks of the crucifixion.

Thomas answered: Whether Thomas did touch the sacred wounds we are not told but his statement:

My Lord and my God: Proves how convinced he now was. And his statement goes further in expressing the divine nature of Christ than that of any other person in the four Gospels. "Lord and God" were the words used in the Old Testament to stress the true God "Yahweh Elohim."

Blessed . . . who have not seen: Christ is not belittling Thomas's expression of faith, but rather his slowness in accepting it on the testimony of others. Far greater, therefore, and more meritorious, Christ says, is the faith of all those, including ourselves, who have not had the privilege of seeing the risen Christ with our bodily eyes, but yet have believed in him on reliable testimony.

Many other things: These last two verses were the original ending of John's gospel. Chapter 21 was added later. His reason for writing his gospel was that men might believe that the Jesus who lived and died in Palestine was the promised Messiah and the true Son of God. He who believes this and lives up to his belief will have everlasting life because of what this Jesus has done for all men.

**APPLICATION:** It may surprise and amaze us that the Apostles were so reluctant to believe that Christ had risen from the dead, to live forever in glory with his Father in heaven. But we must remember that during their two or three years with him they saw nothing in him but a mere man, one with divine powers, but yet a man; certain prophets of the old covenant had some such powers also. Christ had "emptied himself" of his divine nature, and he had foretold his resurrection many times. But that he could be really God, as well as man, was something they could not then grasp, and if he was a mere man death had to be the end.

Their slowness of faith had its value for the future Church and for all of us. If they had been expecting the resurrection, and anxiously looking forward to it, people could say that they imagined it, that they persuaded themselves it had happened. Indeed, there have been men proud of their acuteness of judgment, who have said that the story of the resurrection is a story of mass hallucination, although all the evidence proves the opposite. Their conviction that it could not happen, could not be removed from their minds except by impressive evidence that it had. Hallucination is born in a mind already expecting and hoping for the imagined fact.

We can thank the Apostles and especially Thomas, the last to give in, that our faith in the resurrection and divine glorification of Christ is that much the stronger. Our Christianity which would have ended before the first Easter week had passed, if Christ had not risen in glory, spread rapidly to the then known world and is still spreading, because its author was none other than Christ "our Lord and our God." How prophetic were the words of Gamaliel at the meeting of the Sanhedrin which tried to prevent the Apostles from preaching the new Christian faith: "If this plan or work is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it" (Acts 5: 38-167)