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John's Gospel gives us two accounts in which Jesus becomes present in the midst of a group of his disciples, appearances neither Mark nor Matthew even mention and which Luke presents as a single incident. In reading the resurrection accounts we need to remember that the evangelists' purpose was not to write newspaper reports but to lead the readers to reflect on their own faith in the risen Lord.

Today's Gospel includes both of John's accounts of Jesus' appearance to the gathered disciples. All we know about the first group Jesus breaks in on is that it included some but not all of the disciples and they were afraid enough to have locked themselves in, leaving the distinct impression that they were in hiding.

Jesus appeared in their midst as the antithesis of everything represented by their current state of heart and mind. While they were shrouding themselves from reality, he, the supposedly missing one, sought them out. John says simply that Jesus greeted them with peace. While that is an ordinary greeting spoken today by both Jews and Muslims, it expresses profound blessings of wholeness and integrity, and undoubtedly in this instance, reconciliation. The disciples who thought they were safely locked away were suddenly confronted by the crucified one now fully alive. Although that would have been enough to undo them, they were also face to face with the friend and teacher they had abandoned and denied.

The risen Lord never appeared with flashy ostentation. Instead, he appeared to his beloved friends with a simplicity comparable to that of his birth in the stable. When he appeared on the inside of the locked doors, he showed the disciples his hands and feet, signs of all that had happened and also the definitive sign that evil and death had no power over him — not on the cross, not ever.

Jesus who had spoken at such length at the Last Supper makes only a few short statements when he appears among the disciples. The one word he repeats is “Peace.” When they hear that they surely recall his promise to give them peace unlike any in the world. After that greeting Jesus showed them the maimed hands and feet that identified him as exactly who he was: the crucified and risen one.

After speaking a second blessing of peace Jesus imparted on them the graced power to become who they were called to be. Breathing over them as the Creator had blown life into the first humans he incorporated them into his own relationship of being loved and commissioned to carry on the Father’s work. Jesus gave the disciples the one ministry that symbolized and included everything he had done and was handing on to them: “Forgive. You have the power. You have the necessary grace. Forgive.”

In her book, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders points out that we are accustomed to translations that misinterpret this verse by adding a word not found in the Greek text to the second part of Jesus’ command. Jesus commissioned his disciples to forgive sins, but when he talked about retaining or holding on, the word “sin” is not in the phrase. Jesus commissions them to forgive others’ sins but to “retain” or hold on to *people, not to their past sins*. As Schneiders suggests to retain the sin of another is to cling to the sin and reject the sinner — hardly the mission of Jesus.

Thomas is Jesus’ key dialogue partner in the second appearance story which begins just like the first: with peace. Except for his need to touch the risen Jesus, we don’t know the details of Thomas’ struggle to believe. Did he find the testimony of the first witnesses unconvincing? Was it doubt that death could really be overcome? Perhaps he couldn’t believe that they could all really be forgiven for their betrayals. Whatever blocked him, it was symbolized in what Jesus’ had suffered; Thomas had to see for himself that one so wounded could be living and loving. So Jesus acted out exactly what he had told the disciples to do: demonstrating how to be forgiving and hold fast to one who could be lost, Jesus invited Thomas to touch him and to take his

place in the believing community. Thomas needed no further evidence.

In this second week of Easter the early community and especially Thomas stand as witnesses to us. Their stories encourage us to allow Christ's word of peace and reconciliation to touch us and move us into mission. They remind us that locked doors are ineffective against the appearance of grace and that Christ approaches closed minds with love and often even a touch of friendly humor.

ACTS 2:42-47

Luke's idyllic description of the early Christian community comes immediately after he has presented Peter's Pentecost sermon explaining Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The people listening to Peter asked the same question as had those who heard John the Baptist at the beginning of the Gospel: "What are we to do?" Peter's response led 3,000 people to seek baptism that day. We can assume that what follows in Acts, Luke's explanation of communal life is a very idealistic description of the way those 3,000 plus Christians lived.

Luke depicts these Christians as intensely communal people whose life was marked by three characteristic activities: They attended to the teaching of the apostles, they lived in solidarity and they prayed together. This meant first that they attended to their own growth in faith by reflecting together on their Scriptures, their experience of the historical Jesus, and the signs and wonders happening in their midst. Members of the early Christian community found themselves in the unexpected position of having to thoroughly rethink their faith traditions in the light of what God had done through Jesus. It was, of course, a task that would continue for millennia, but their reflections became the organizing material for the narratives and teachings of what we call Christian Scriptures and all the theology that flows from it. Our earliest sisters and brothers in the faith played a crucial role in our communal history.

According to Luke, the second activity that characterized the community was life in solidarity. Some people describe this as the original Christian socialism, but that description falls short in that it seems to assign an ideology or a theory by which to regulate their communal life. Instead of following a philosophy, their way of being a community was a response to their experience of God among them. The more deeply they were aware of God's love, mercy and forgiveness, the more they created practices that gave concrete expressions and structures to prolong the experience of grace they felt among them. To the extent that they knew themselves

to be loved without measure and called into union with God and one another, rivalry and hoarding made no sense. The thought that some of them might lack what they needed would have been a source of pain and shame.

The third dimension of their communal life was shared prayer. They prayed in their traditional way at the temple area as well in their unique way by celebrating the Eucharist, the breaking of the bread. Their celebration of the breaking of the bread gave sacramental expression to their participation in Christ's self-giving. Saying that they ate their meals with exultation illustrates their basic attitude of gratitude, their awareness of God's grace in their life together.

Luke also says they shared with "sincerity" of heart, something that must have been quite special because the word he used to describe it is not found elsewhere in Christian Scriptures. Different translations try to convey the idea of sincerity of heart as "with glad and generous hearts" or "singleness of heart." It may well be that Luke was simply warming up here for what he would say in Acts 4:32 when he stated that the community was of one heart and mind. Whether understood as transparency, generosity or unity, sincerity of heart was an attitude based in the grace of feeling that they were called together for more than themselves. It described a way of living that Paul would talk about as forming the body of Christ.

1 PETER 1:3-9

Although this is titled the First Letter of Peter, it's highly unlikely that Peter, the fisherman apostle, wrote it. The attribution to Peter intends to lend a certain type of authority to the letter and as such it at least tells us what the author who lived near the time of St. Peter thought the apostle himself would say. This reading offers us a rich meditation on the effects of the Resurrection.

Our selection begins with a blessing which recognizes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the merciful Father. It then says that it is the Father who has given us new birth through resurrection.

Some scholars suggest that the word Peter uses for "new birth" refers more to begetting than to the act of being born. It's not new life or rejuvenation as if, like Lazarus, we were coming out of the tomb, having something added to life as we know it or repairing our frailty. Being begotten by God implies a new creation, a change so profound that every dimension of who we are is transformed. We might

describe birth as an event oriented toward a future that can be anticipated; if we are blessed, being born is the prelude to growth from infancy through old age. Being begotten anew speaks of an entirely new trajectory, a reorientation, a thoroughly transformed existence which is moving toward a fulfillment that we can expect even while we can't really imagine it.

A spirituality based on the belief that Christ's resurrection has this effect on us is one that, as last week's reading from the Letter to the Colossians says, understands life "from above." The person whose imagination is shaped by a destiny of union with God and neighbor evaluates everyone, every activity, even suffering, in the light of where it is leading.

On the Second Sunday of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday, Peter is dropping by to tell us that everything that happens can be incorporated into our salvation journey, our gradual incorporation into the fullness of God's life. Peter's intent is to encourage us to take the long view, because that will change how we perceive everything that is in plain sight.

JOHN 20:19-31

When we read John's accounts of the community and their experience of the risen Christ, we do well to remember that John wrote for a community that was already formed, a group of disciples who met regularly and were carrying on their mission. John tells the stories of the past to remind us of who we are and what we are called to do.

At the end of the first day of the new creation Jesus returned to his assembled disciples. They are depicted as a fearful group and Thomas' absence tells us that while some had gathered together, the group as a whole was still scattered as Jesus had said they would be. John doesn't tell us exactly where they were hiding out, but he does mention that the doors were securely locked. Jesus had promised that they would see him again and now he appears, returning to them and giving them the peace he promised.

As John presents the scene, the appearance of Christ, his gifts of peace and his Spirit, and the mission to forgive are all intimately bound together. We see God's initiative, the divine outreach, and the commission he gives. The disciples' experience begins with receiving Christ's peace, a peace so dynamic that they are

impelled to share it with others through the mission of forgiveness.

John has no interest in telling us what happened in the week between Christ's two appearances. He simply indicates that the disciples had gathered again, and this time Thomas was there, symbolizing that the group was complete. The previously dispersed disciples had heard enough to come together and for John it is significant that it was on another first day, the day when the community traditionally celebrated the Lord's Supper.

Although John neglects to tell us why the doors were still locked, Pope Francis said something in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of The Gospel" that may shed light on it. Addressing the danger of closing off our minds and/or our communities, Francis said: "More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: 'Give them something to eat' (Mk 6:37)" (#49).

People in our world are starving for food and for peace, needs that go together. Jesus appeared in the midst of his disciples to give them peace, a peace that would impel them to mission, a peace that would underpin a community of solidarity and mission. As Pope Francis pointed out, rigid structures, rules, habits and retribution can make us feel safe, but they do not bring Christ's peace. We know Christ's peace only when we get caught up in the dynamic of his ever-expanding forgiving love. That's the journey we are called to deepen in the 50 days of Easter.

Planning: 2nd Sunday of Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

This Sunday is the first of the Sundays traditionally designated for mystagogy for the newly baptized. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults reminds us that mystagogy occurs primarily within the liturgies of the Easter season, because it is important for *all* members of the assembly to reflect on how God has acted in their lives, especially through the initiatory sacraments.

Since yesterday was Earth Day, we might consider focusing mystagogy this year, at least in part, on the earth as God's gift and on the elements of nature that we use in the sacraments. It is important that Christians learn to see God in all creation, not just in "sacred" rituals. If you have not yet done so, take

time this week to read Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home." Within this document, you will find many insights linking care of creation with personal spirituality and Christian worship. It is also a clarion call to face the effects of human activity on the climate and on the destruction of the environment. He calls this issue an "urgent challenge to protect our common home" (*Laudato Si'* #13). Reports after the 2016 U.S. fall elections indicated that 70% of Catholics voted for a president who had denied the science of climate change and had not spoken in support of the protection of our natural resources. This indicates how much we need to help people recognize the urgency of the issue and the moral obligation we have to change our behavior.

There are various ways to link today's readings to this concern. In the Gospel, Thomas' insistence on "seeing" could trigger a challenge to those who continue to blindly deny that climate change is happening or that humans are responsible for much of it. The first reading describes the common life of the early church and calls us to a stronger commitment to the common good of all on this planet.

Focusing on the care of creation should not be only a matter of confronting our sins against God's handiwork. Just as important, perhaps, is growing in our appreciation for the mystery embedded in every part of creation. If you wished to focus directly on baptism, you might also study the first chapter of *Laudato Si'* which discusses the importance of clean water (#27-31). Can you help your people appreciate what a gift water is and how we might better protect water supplies?

Much will depend on the preacher, but planners can support this effort through targeted petitions as well as through the environment. Use the blessing with water in place of the penitential rite during the Easter season, highlight the font with lighting and flowers, and use images of flowing water and/or arid lands to help people link worship and care of water sources.

Prayers: 2nd Sunday of Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Believing was a challenge in the early church, just as it is now. The first Christians struggled with how to understand the ongoing presence of Jesus. They came to know that they needed to be signs to others — to witness to and demonstrate peace, forgiveness and mercy. We have not seen him, but we have seen signs of his presence in others. Perhaps more importantly, others must see signs of his presence in *us*. Presence is mysterious and profound. When we experience it, we are called to

pay it forward as we have received it.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you shared your peace with the disciples who were gathered in fear: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you bestowed the Holy Spirit upon them: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you did this so that others may have life in your name: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray, my friends, for all who seek or need the presence of Christ.

Minister That we and all Christians may be authentic signs of Christ's presence to others ... we pray,

- That Christ's peace may be experienced throughout the world, especially among refugees and victims of war ... we pray,
- That we may foster forgiveness and show mercy toward those who have harmed us ... we pray,
- That those who still experience sexism, racism, homophobia or any kind of hatred and prejudice may be touched by Christ's peace ... we pray,
- That peace and mercy may permeate families and foster families of every configuration ... we pray,
- That Christians may demonstrate Christ's peaceful and comforting presence to people of every faith tradition ... we pray,
- For the sick and the suffering in this community; and for those who have died ... *(names)* ... we pray,

Presider God of peace and mercy: Give us eyes to see the loving presence of your son, hearts to receive him, and courage to share signs of his presence with others. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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