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April 28, 2019

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When the risen Jesus made himself present in the midst of the disciples who were hiding in the upper room, his words and actions recapitulated everything he had done with and been for them, especially at their last supper together. He greeted them saying, “Peace be with you.”

That greeting summarized everything. Jesus’ greeting was not a wish, but an announcement, we could call it a revelation. That word of blessing fulfilled his pledge that he would never leave them orphans and would give them his own peace. In using the word peace, Jesus reiterated a promise: “I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (John 16:33).

Jesus then showed them his hands and side. Those hands were the ones into which the Father had handed over everything, the shepherd’s hands out of which no one could snatch his sheep. Jesus’ hands and side bore the marks of his passion, they were the concrete signs that he had definitively overcome the world and all its death-dealing powers. The peace Jesus proffered was the peace he knew from union with the Father.

As they rejoiced, he said it again: "Peace." This second proclamation of peace announced their missioning. Continuing what he had begun at the Last Supper when he prayed that they would be one in him and the Father, Jesus gave them the mission he had received from the Father. John the Baptist had proclaimed that Jesus was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and said that he had seen the Spirit come down and remain on Jesus (John 1:29). Now, on this first day of the new creation, just as the Creator had blown the breath of life into Adam, Jesus breathed his own Spirit over them and asked them to receive it.

Forgiveness of sin is the primary work of God's Spirit. Those who received Jesus' Spirit and peace received the power to carry on his mission of forgiveness. It was the constant of Jesus' ministry, the driving force of his mission. Forgiveness brings people into union with God and one another. Forgiveness generates the peace Jesus proclaimed. If his mission were to continue, forgiveness would be the centerpiece out of which everything else would flow.

Having received the Spirit, the disciples were commissioned to make forgiveness of sin the purpose of their lives. They would discover that forgiving and announcing God's forgiveness became the activity that brought them into union with God as well as with their sisters and brothers. Forgiveness, the sharing of peace, would be the answer to Jesus' prayer that all would be one.

John could have ended his Gospel with this appearance of Jesus. But that could have made it appear that the Gospel closed with the women and men who were present in that room. Composing this Gospel more than 60 years after the Resurrection, John was writing for Christians, some of whom had never seen Jesus or any of the original disciples. He was writing for us and wanted to include us in the story. Thus, he introduced us to Thomas, the twin brother of everyone who was absent on that first night.

Like the disciples who couldn't believe that Mary and the women had encountered the risen Lord, Thomas was not convinced that Jesus had been among the disciples. Was it his pragmatism? If it was lack of faith, in whom did he lack faith, in the Lord or his fellow disciples? Thomas explained only that he needed certainty.

Thomas wanted to see and touch Jesus. He wanted to rely on the experience that Jesus had denied Mary Magdalene when he told her that she couldn't cling to physical evidence of what is transcendent. No physical expression proves love. At

best, the physical is a sign of what exists on a much deeper level. In the same way, Jesus' appearances were signs, but not the essence of his resurrection or his ongoing presence.

Thus, when the risen Lord appeared to Thomas and greeted him with peace, the disciple who had said he needed to put his hands on Jesus' body was instead so touched by Christ's love that all he could do was proclaim his faith.

Jesus' last beatitude was, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Blessed are we when we believe that sin and death have been conquered. Blessed are we when forgiveness makes us one. Blessed too when the Spirit impels us into the mission that allows us to share the very life of God.

ACTS 5:12-16

Luke is tripping all over himself as he writes this enthusiastic report about the wonders wrought by the apostles. He describes the awe people had for them and assures us that great numbers of people joined the community of believers. Underneath all his enthusiasm and the miraculous stories, Luke is consistently careful to give the credit to the Holy Spirit.

Luke begins with a description of the ways people viewed the apostles with holy wonder. Seeing them with something akin to the fear of the Lord, people even hesitated to enter their holy presence. They seemed to put Jesus' disciples on a pedestal. Those unrealistic expectations could have created impediments to bringing people to genuine conversion. It is a wonder that Luke emphasized this when Jesus had never sought special treatment, nor put up with disciples who did.

In a similar vein, Luke says that people brought their sick out when Peter was passing by, believing that if even his shadow crossed them, they would be healed. Again, this description could lead to a sense of magic rather than the sort of healing that Jesus performed. Jesus continually told people that it was their faith that healed and saved them.

Luke's basic point here is that the church was growing prodigiously and God was working wonders through the disciples. The previously inept disciples were doing what Jesus had done, and even more. Many people recognized that and wanted to be a part of their movement.

There have been periods throughout Christian history when multitudes flocked to the faith. Luke is telling us that this was a work of the Spirit. The proof, of course, comes with seeing who remained faithful in times of difficulty and martyrdom. But even as some fell away due to persecution or loss of enthusiasm, Christians who had to flee their homeland became evangelizers in new lands, thus transforming their exile into mission.

Today, this reading may seem like a fantasy or a blast from an unrepeatable past. As we look at the church in the United States, we see it suffering from the polar opposite of holy esteem in the public eye. When we think about enthusiasm and commitment in the church, we know that 426,309 Catholic couples were married in the church in 1970; yet, in 2014, that number had dropped to 144,148. Where we once attracted great numbers to service of others through full-time ministry, the number of priests and religious has diminished by about 60 percent in the past 50 years and in 2017, there were only 504 priestly ordinations in the U.S. The most positive signs are that in that same year, there were nearly 20,000 students in lay ecclesial ministry formation programs, and over 102,000 adults baptized or received into full communion with the church.

Luke would be the first to remind us that the church must rely on the Holy Spirit for its future and its growth. At the same time, Luke wrote to show future Christians how to continue Jesus' mission in the world. We will have no future if we do not believe that we are the ones called to carry forth Christ's mission. We will have no worthwhile future if we do not learn how to rely more fully on the Holy Spirit to guide us.

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

This is the quintessential Easter psalm. We prayed it at the Vigil and on Easter Sunday; we pray it today and during Year B. Benedictine Sr. Irene Nowell in her book, *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary*, comments that this psalm is "an individual thanksgiving that has been shaped into a liturgy." What better sort of prayer for the Easter season than one that touches the deepest dimensions of our personal lives even as it shows us what we hold in common with our brothers and sisters in Christ?

The psalm refrain keeps us singing our gratitude for God's gracious love. The love we sing of here, *hesed*, might be better translated as loving kindness. It refers to

God's covenant love. Heseḏ is God's free, immeasurable gift to humanity; heseḏ also calls us to respond with all the faithfulness that God's grace and our free will can muster.

The verses we sing begin with a call to the whole people of Israel, the priests, and all who fear the Lord to proclaim God's loving kindness. We might think of this as a liturgical cheer in which all the believers in the universe are invited to voice their part.

The second verse brings us to the intensely personal level. Almost every person who has reached the age of reason has felt a moment of great need for God. Those who have enjoyed the grace of feeling God's help will sing with enthusiasm: "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting."

The third verse gives us a condensed version of Jesus' place in salvation history: God chose the one whom the experts rejected. We have come to understand how wonderful this is.

We end our joyful prayer as we started it, remembering, proclaiming and rejoicing in God's heseḏ love.

REVELATION 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19

From now until Pentecost, our Sunday readings will include a selection from the Book of Revelation. It is undoubtedly the most difficult book to interpret within the Christian Scriptures. Fundamentalist explanations have led people down erroneous, sometimes disastrous, paths for almost 2,000 years.

As the editors of the New American Bible point out, Revelation cannot be read as an astrological chart or a secret code for deciphering the hidden trajectory of history. Revelation is apocalyptic literature, a genre developed by oppressed people who use the conventions of symbols, dreams and visions to do what we might call reading the signs of the times. The purpose of their fantastic imagery is to assure people that God is indeed watching over them and saving them, even, and perhaps especially, when everything seems to be going wrong.

Today's reading comes from the opening of the book. John, the author, introduces himself as an exile, a brother who shares the anguish of others who are suffering for the faith. While he identifies as a fellow sufferer, he is really writing as a prophet and

a pastor: a prophet who was caught up in the spirit and heard the Lord's voice, a pastor whose motive for writing is to comfort his fellow Christians.

John hears a voice and when he turns to see whose voice it is, instead of a speaker, he sees seven lampstands. These represent the churches about whom he will eventually say much more. Then he sees the speaker.

Describing the speaker as "like a son of man" calls to mind the earthly Jesus and the apocalyptic Book of Daniel. This Son of Man, Christ, is dressed in kingly, priestly robes. His appearance, not unlike that of Christ at his transfiguration, was overwhelming. But his presence was that of a loving shepherd whose first words were, "Do not be afraid."

In order to appreciate Christ's self-description, we should put ourselves in the place of John's audience. They are people undergoing persecution, people who expected Christ's death and resurrection to usher in the end times, not more persecution. They are people facing an imperial enemy bigger than their nation has ever dreamed of being, a power greater than the Egyptians who enslaved their ancestors. These people thought of themselves as God's own but were facing ruthless persecution.

When Christ appears to John with a message for that persecuted people, he identifies himself as the victor over every manifestation of evil. In what could be a circumlocution for the ancient name of God, Christ says I am the first and last, the one who lives. Christ's self-description as eternal and the conqueror of death is a high Christology for those times.

This is only the beginning of the book, but it encapsulates the entire apocalyptic message. Christ was once dead but now lives forever. That is what John is to write down and tell his people. As the rabbis say of the command to love: This is the whole message, all the rest is commentary.

JOHN 20:19-31

Today's Gospel sounds like at least two separate stories, each of which is more than enough for one Sunday, even a Sunday of Easter. The first reveals God as the missionary who sends the Son who then shares the divine mission with all believers. The second, the story of Thomas, is written for Christians who never met Jesus or the first witnesses. John wants to help us understand the difference between faith and

knowledge through the prism of Thomas' experience.

John situates the first part of this story "on the evening of the first day of the week." That phrase tells anyone with a Hebrew mindset that John is operating in a new time zone. According to the Jewish reckoning, a day began with sunset, a concept that goes back to Genesis 1, which counted the days saying, "Evening came and morning followed, the first day..." When John calls the evening of the day of Christ's resurrection the "first day," he is speaking about the first day of the new creation, a symbolic day that will never end.

At the time of the first creation, God gave humanity the vocation to be fruitful and multiply, to continue the work of creation. When Jesus became present to the disciples on that evening, he shared his mission much more specifically; he sent the disciples as the Father had sent him. This is an invitation and a command. The risen Lord commissions the disciples to share the very life of God the Father, Son and Spirit by taking on the divine mission. Their promulgation of forgiveness is the mission of the Father, given to them through the Son, and empowered by the Spirit. This mission will bring all into one.

The second story in today's Gospel ties together the whole day of the Resurrection. In the early morning, Mary of Magdala had sought Jesus. When the living Lord found her, he said, "Stop holding on to me ... but go to my brothers [and sisters] and tell them." Jesus explained to Mary that the way to remain with him was through sharing his mission, not through the limitations of physical presence.

When Thomas heard of Jesus' appearances, testimony was not enough to give him peace. He wanted the kind of knowledge that would come from touching the risen Lord for himself. When the risen Lord encountered him in the community, Jesus invited him to see and to touch him. John does not tell us that Thomas did so. John simply indicates that when Thomas received Jesus' greeting of peace and the mission implied with it, he understood more than physical touch could ever demonstrate. That is the experience Christ offers disciples through the ages. Blessed are those who believe.

Planning: Second Sunday of Easter

By Lawrence Mick

This Sunday has a variety of names. It has been called Whitsunday, a reference to the old custom of the newly baptized wearing their white garments to worship today. It is, of course, the Second Sunday of Easter, but it used to be called the First Sunday after Easter. It is Divine Mercy Sunday, so designated by Pope John Paul II. And it is the Octave (eighth) Day of Easter.

The Octave is celebrated almost as though it is a repeat of Easter Sunday itself. We use the first preface of Easter, including the words “on this day above all,” just as we did last Sunday. We sing the double “Alleluia” at the dismissal, just as we did last week (and will do again on Pentecost to end the season). So the liturgy is suggesting that the joy of Easter Sunday should be so strong that we just can’t let it go.

But what is the source of that joy? Surely something more important than chocolate bunnies and colored eggs! Our readings offer us reminders. The psalm response proclaims, “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.” That love is revealed through healing (first reading) and forgiveness (Gospel).

The newness of the Christian Gospel revolves around the love of God revealed in Jesus. Our God is not a condemning or threatening deity. Our God is love! That’s the good news that was revealed through Jesus. And that is what makes the Christian message attractive to people. Whether God’s love was revealed through the healing miracles of Jesus and his disciples or through the constancy of God’s forgiveness of our sins and failures, it is love that draws people into the church. That’s why Pope Francis keeps reminding us of the mercy of God that we are called to share.

The first reading says that “great numbers of men and women” were added to the church. That might remind us of our own responsibility to share the joy of God’s love with others so that they might come to share in the life of Christ today.

Look for Easter hymns today that support the continued joy of this Octave Day of Easter. See if you know any that also speak of freedom from sin through God’s mercy. This is not a day to focus on our sinfulness or threats of condemnation. It is a day to rejoice in God’s mercy that forgives and heals.

Petitions today might take a cue from Francis and pray that we will carry out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Remember that he added care for creation as an eighth work in each listing. (See www.catholicnewsagency.com for details.) Consider doing several petitions based on the different works of mercy (but not 16 petitions, instead combine or select).

Prayers: Second Sunday of Easter

By Sue Robb_

Introduction

Today, we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday. The church teaches that St. Faustina, a 20th-century Polish nun, recorded revelations that she received from Jesus who, as she wrote in her diary, desired that “a Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls.” The readings tell the story of God’s abundant mercy and love for us. We ask for the grace to more clearly respond to these great signs and wonders of mercy and love that God continues to bestow on us and our world.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, forgive us when we fail to see the signs and wonders you place before us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, forgive us when we do not trust in you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, forgive us when we choose not to show mercy to others: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider God of mercy and redemption, hear the prayers we place before you. We trust that you will answer them and provide us with the resources and courage to act for justice.

Minister For a resurgence of faith for spiritual and civic leaders; for just laws and actions that promote healing and mercy, for reconciliation and peace in war-torn countries, we pray:

- For all who are afraid and suffer due to violence, poverty, discrimination and other forms of oppression; form hearts of mercy to those who hold power over others; give courage and compassion to first responders, and those who work for justice, we pray:
- For the unbeliever and those with hardened hearts; for signs and wonders that capture our attention and soften our hearts, we pray:
- For all who feel unforgiven and unforgivable, for fractured families and relationships, for healing and reconciliation wherever it is needed, we pray:

- For those in need of our prayers and works of mercy, the sick and suffering, the dying and forgotten, we pray:

Presider Divine Healer, you are a God of infinite mercy, justice, compassion and love. Transform us so completely so that we may share your divine mercy with our broken world. We ask all this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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