

2nd Sunday in Easter + 7 April 2024 + Act 4:32-35 + I Jn 5:1-6 + Jn 20:19-31

As we continue to celebrate the 8-day-long feast of the Resurrection of the Lord, we are given the beautiful Gospel of St. John to meditate on today. So first, I'd like to start at the very end of the Gospel, where John sums up the whole of his Gospel: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciple 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.*

This was a sort of epiphany that I had when I was in the seminary. And that is, the Gospels were not primarily written to tell us how to be decent and moral people—although they do that. First and foremost, the Gospels were written as a proof-text, as a very persuasive argument (in my mind at least), that Jesus is truly who He claimed to be: *the Christ, the Son of God*. And once a person comes to that belief, it changes everything. Namely, *through this belief you may have life in his name*. And this “life” that John speaks of is not just what we traditionally call heaven, even though it includes that. This life is everything: it is forgiveness of sins, a reason to live in this life, a meaning and purpose, and finally, above all, hope in eternal life.

Maybe that's nothing new to you, but it really was enlightening for me, I think largely because of the historical moment that we find ourselves in. Broadly speaking, since the moment of the resurrection, human history has been a story of the growth of Christianity throughout the world. And once whole nations were converted, it was largely, though perhaps wrongly, assumed that everyone believed, so now the goal was to make the people decent and moral. But now we find ourselves in a situation where many of the oldest Christian societies no longer believe. Even our own parish is only 2/3 the size it was just 20 years ago, in terms of Mass attendance—which is a very good barometer of belief.

And so for the last 25 years or so, the Church has embarked upon what St. John Paul II coined “the new evangelization;” that is, trying to propose to the postmodern world that there are indeed good reasons to believe once again. This is no easy task, and honestly, we can't say that we have had a lot of success, at least numbers-wise. But it's also a very exciting endeavor that all of us are called to, as we will see in just a moment.

So now, let's go back to the beginning of today's Gospel, where we consider that Jesus appears in the midst of a room without coming through the entrance, for *the doors were locked*. There is something very unique about the resurrected body of the Lord: it is no longer bound by physical limitations. And yet it is still a true body, His body, for immediately we hear that *he showed them his hands and his side*. That is, His resurrected body still bears the wounds of the crucifixion. The fact that Lord carries His wounds, willingly chosen on our behalf, for all eternity, should give us a lifetime of meditation.

As should the next detail: He says, *Peace be with you*. Not once, but 3 times in our Gospel! That's no small thing. Because let's face it, if we had suffered as much as the Lord did for those who by and large ran away from Him, or even denied knowing Him, we probably wouldn't be so merciful. We would probably have a few choice words for our so-called friends. But that's not the way of the Lord. We might recall here His own teaching in His sermon on the mount: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*. Jesus is the preeminent child of God, because He is truly the very Son of God.

Even more, we should think back to Jesus' long prayer recorded by John, the beloved disciple, on the eve of His passion, where Jesus tells His disciples: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (14:27)*. They had no reason to fear what was to come—even though they were very afraid—because Jesus knew He was in control. And even now, after all that had happened, His message is the same: *they should not be afraid*. And this is important, because what He is about to do likely would have caused fear among them once again: He sends them out on the most important mission of their lives.

This detail too is surprising. After all, the disciples had not shown themselves very trustworthy in the moments that really mattered. They slept in the garden of Gethsemane. Peter denied even knowing the Lord. None of them stayed by Him at the Cross, except for John. And yet Jesus sends them anyway. And He does this because He is not sending them out on their own; He will be with them: *when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit*. They likely didn't know what this meant, but Jesus did. As the next chapter of the God's story reveals—that is, the Acts of the Apostles, which are our 1st readings during the Easter season—with the power of the Holy Spirit, the once timid and unfaithful disciples become bold and faithful Apostles (Apostle meaning, 'to be sent').

And that brings us back to today. We too are being sent, each in our own way, to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Like Thomas in our Gospel, the world today has a predisposition against faith. Most people will only believe what they see. The Lord Jesus is not physically present today as He was to Thomas, but He is still present: in the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Eucharist. Both of these are real presences, and they are just as powerful as if Jesus was still walking the earth—after all, He is still the same God.

And so our call is to be docile to the power of the risen Lord that we have received, alive in our hearts, so that He may shine through us. How? Through the spiritual and corporal mercy we have for others, like the 1st Christians had in our 1st reading today. Or through the mercy we receive from the successors of the Apostles, in the Sacrament of Penance, which changes our hearts, making us more loving and humble. And in the faith in Christ that we cling to, come what may; faith which John tells us in our 2nd reading *conquers the world*, just as Jesus conquered sin and death by the power of His resurrection.