

2nd Sunday of Easter – C

I never saw Pope (now also St.) John Paul II, even though it would have been great to have done so, but I came very close. I think it was 1999 and I visited Rome with one of my brothers; it was the first time I had ever been there. One night we went to St. Peter's Square, and as I was gazing at the beauty and majesty of the basilica, my brother tapped me on the shoulder and said it looked like the pope was driving by in a car. And I did not turn to look; maybe I was too busy trying to get just the right camera shot of the basilica, an immobile object I might add, which still hasn't gone anywhere, and I said something like, "There's no way that's the pope; he doesn't just drive by!" My brother was pretty insistent though that he had just seen the pope, so afterwards, we approached a nearby Swiss guard to ask him, and he said that yes, that was Pope John Paul II, returning from some event at the Colosseum. So my brother of course was quite pleased with himself and I was very frustrated with myself for being so obstinate.

Perhaps that is a very pale version of how Thomas may have felt when, as we heard in our Gospel reading today, the other 10 apostles told him that Jesus had appeared to them. Maybe after Jesus' death on the cross, Thomas had decided to go back to his village; maybe he had thought that it was unsafe to stay in Jerusalem and better to clear out. But then while he was away, the Risen Jesus appeared to the other apostles. But of course, we have heard that none of the apostles at first believed that Jesus had risen from the dead when someone else told them about it. So, like Thomas, they had also doubted.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead was unprecedented and of course is an event that has not been repeated in human history. We have heard in the Gospels how Jesus raised several people from the dead. But he restored them to their earthly lives. They were still subject to all the laws of time and space and nature, and all of them later died again. What Jesus did in his resurrection was altogether

different. First, no one raised Him from the dead. Or one could say that God the Father raised him from the dead, but Jesus and his Heavenly Father are one. The apostles were so astonished at Jesus' resurrection partly because the One who had raised others from the dead had appeared to have been vanquished by death himself.

And another reason why Jesus' resurrection was unique compared to the people he had raised from the dead: after his resurrection, Jesus was no longer bound by the laws of time and space and nature. He made it clear to his apostles that he was not a ghost or just a spirit, but that his body too had risen from the dead. He was able to eat food; they touched him and felt that he was indeed real; Thomas was even able to put his fingers into the holes left by the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. Jesus was able to appear when and where he willed, regardless of distance. Although he had a physical body, he was able somehow to pass through walls and enter locked rooms. Clearly, this was no ghost, but rather, a

miraculous transformation had occurred at his resurrection. Jesus, now risen, cannot die again, but rather lives forever.

So today, a week after Easter Sunday, we hear how Jesus appeared to Thomas and the other apostles a week after he rose from the dead. And today is also known as Divine Mercy Sunday. And our readings today reflect the vastness of God's mercy and how He is still at work in the world. Throughout the Easter season, our first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles, which parallels Jesus' own ministry. We hear how, after having been commissioned by Jesus and given the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus' apostles and other disciples carry on the work that Jesus began in the world, continuing the acts of mercy that Jesus had performed. One of the many ways God manifests his mercy is through healing, and in today's Gospel we hear how Peter and the other apostles are now themselves healing the sick, bringing physical relief to others. And they performed many miraculous healings; as the Gospel says,

“A large number of people from... [Jerusalem and the nearby towns] gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.”

Not only are they healing people of physical infirmities, they are also healing them of spiritual infirmities, because they are able to cast out unclean spirits as well. Certainly, this is an even greater expression of God’s mercy. And in our Gospel reading, when Jesus appeared to the apostles, we hear how he commissioned them, or gave them his authority to go and carry on his work in the world. He said to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And then the Gospel says that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” Thus, Jesus gave them the power to forgive sins. And the forgiveness of sins is the greatest expression of God’s mercy.

Through this action, Jesus ordains his apostles as priests. The Jewish priests of the Old Covenant offered sacrifice again and again for the forgiveness of sins. And now, Jesus makes his apostles priests who are able to forgive sins – not through their own power, but through the power that God has given them – through the one, perfect sacrifice of Himself that Jesus had also given them, beginning at the Last Supper and concluding with his death on the Cross.

And so the Eucharist – the Sacrament of Holy Communion – is another expression of God's infinite mercy. As I said, it is the perfect sacrifice to offer to our Heavenly Father; as the Scriptures tells us, Jesus' Body and Blood, offered to the Father, alone can atone for sin. The flesh and blood of animals sacrificed in the Old Covenant could not; they could only act as symbols of the atonement for sin.

But Jesus did not intend His works – His acts of mercy in the world – to end with the apostles. He intended for His merciful

action in the world to continue until He comes again at the end of time. That is why he conferred the priesthood on his apostles and likewise gave them the power to ordain successors. And these successors of the apostles continue to share God's mercy through the sacraments. Jesus knew that his apostles would not remain on earth until He would come again. He knew that other generations would follow: generations who would not see the Risen Jesus in the same way that the apostles did. And that is why he said to them, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

These words of blessing that Jesus spoke are for all the generations that have followed since the time of Christ, and that includes us. Most people do not receive visions of Jesus. Nor do we see the Risen Jesus standing before us in flesh and blood. And so Jesus asks us to exercise our faith, and to grow in faith, so that

although we do not see him now as the apostles saw him then, we might still say, as Thomas did, “My Lord and my God!”

Although Jesus is not present to us now as he was when he appeared to his disciples throughout the 40 days from his resurrection to his ascension into heaven, he is still with us, and most especially in the Eucharist. Hidden under the appearance of bread and wine, our faith tells us that it is truly Jesus: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

Let us approach the Eucharist with faith that Jesus is still with us, and that he continues to offer us his infinite mercy.

- **April 27, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**