

April 24, 2022
Second Sunday of Easter

Acts of the Apostles 5:12-16
Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19
John 20:19-31

Holy Week and Easter Sunday now seem like ages past; yet these events took place just seven days ago. Nevertheless, it is interesting, even when not intentional, how soon we can forget. Life goes on, new projects, new responsibilities, and the importance of the past few days can slip away into the busyness of everyday life.

Hence the reason the Early Church Fathers designated the seven weeks of Easter Season on up to Pentecost as a time to reflect on what happened as a result of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So, for the next few moments I would like to focus our attention on the faith paradigm shift that radically changed the lives of the early disciples. From a place of paralyzing fear to a position of boldly proclaiming the Gospel, this same faith paradigm is a prototype for you and me as well.

Scripture records that “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked where the disciples were for *fear* of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you,” indeed a greeting and message no one would soon forget.

Years later while in exile St John would write in *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* that he was on the Isle of Patmos when nearing the end of his earthly life the Lord appeared to him and he subsequently fell at His feet as though dead. Note the detail here, the Lord touched him with His right hand and said, “Do not be afraid, I am the first and the last, the one who lives.”

Indeed, it was an identical type of encounter, and the same message. John, like you and me, needed reassurance. We all need reassurance of our Lord God's presence and forgiveness – especially during times of great need. If you recall, we mentioned a couple of weeks ago three basic soul cries we need to have addressed, the need to be known intimately, the need to be cherished, and the need to be blessed. Jesus met every one of those needs for the disciples.

Thus, the first thing we notice in today's gospel passage is the time and place of Jesus' first appearance to His gathered disciples. Time was and still is very important to Jewish people, and the early church.

But for now, it was still the first day of the week, just a few short hours since His resurrection, and therefore the time must have been somewhere before the evening twilight when the first two or three stars normally signal the beginning of a new day.

Next we notice that the disciples were hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. We can only imagine that after seeing what had happened to Jesus - they did not want to experience the same treatment. So we pick up the story with the disciples still hiding behind locked doors, fearful of the Jews when all of a sudden Jesus appeared and proclaimed these words, "Peace be with you."

How like Jesus to begin the first day in the New Kingdom by comforting the hearts of His chosen leaders. Having split and run when the guards arrested Jesus, the disciples later regrouped behind closed doors fearfully hiding from being identified as Jesus followers. But with God, first things must come first; He is the God of all comfort - and fear has no place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Here we need to pause for a moment for self-reflection and consider, in what ways do I remain fearful of others, and consequently remain ineffective, and behind closed doors with my Christianity fearfully kept in hiding?

In one way or another - we all have spiritual fear issues, especially when it comes to Jesus. Talking about God is safe, especially when He's held at a distance, but Jesus is up front and much more personal. He always asks for relationship, and relationships costs a personal investment; hence the reason why so many people would rather study about God, and talk about spirituality, than to follow the Master.

Yet, Jesus didn't seem to be too concerned about the disciples' fear. It's almost as if He anticipated it to be there. Think about it, although fear comes in many different forms, it remains a primary response common to human behavior under duress. After all, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, did not they too try to hide from God? Genesis 3:10 records, "And [Adam] said, I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Needless to say, on the part of Jesus there was no rejection of the disciples; no loss of their salvation, or no turning to another group of would-be supporters. On the contrary, they and we were the ones chosen by Him, and we are the ones He has ordained to live and proclaim His redemptive message.

The truth is, no matter what we have done, or how bad we have messed up, or how much fear we have stored away the Lord is always willing to restore us to full fellowship.

The point here is that the level of intimacy required to accomplish the mandates of the New Kingdom cannot be successfully completed

where fear prevails. Hence the very reason “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice [or fear] but rather of power and love and self-control [or a sound mind]” (2 Timothy 1:7 NAB).

St Paul also wrote to the Roman believers, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, *peace* and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

Here we will unequivocally notice that peace is one of the hallmark traits of the New Kingdom; there is no doubt, true peace cannot be had outside of the Kingdom of God. The world will try to offer you and me an expensive substitute for fear, but the peace that passes all understanding comes only from God. Subsequently, it would be reasonable to assume that where there is no peace, the Kingdom of God is not reigning.

Indeed, such was the story of one man named Thomas, of whom we shall speak more of in a moment. Indeed, on that first Easter Sunday evening Jesus’ appearance in the upper room rocked the disciple’s worldview, and it also changed their outlook on future ministry.

Indeed the peace of Christ forever changed the mission of the Church when He said,

“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” (John 20:21-23).

Christian denominational leaders differ in their understanding of this particular passage of scripture. Some would argue that it speaks in general terms concerning the topic of salvation while

others in the historical church hold more to a sacramental persuasion relative to ordained ministry. For me personally the qualifier for the latter is the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples at that very moment. Pentecost was yet to come some six weeks later in the Holy Spirit birthing of the Church.

Nevertheless and back to the main point, it is important to remember that in ancient Jewish tradition, the forgiveness of sin was relegated only to God. In fact, Jesus was crucified because He reportedly forgave men their sins. In doing so He was proclaiming that He was God. But if we carefully consider this passage, we will note that what Jesus was actually doing here was none other than passing the very same commission He had received from His Father on to His disciples.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . . Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20:19-23).

Here we can clearly identify the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the forgiveness of sin promised when on the night before He suffered, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessing it He broke it, and giving it to his disciples He said, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you, for *this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matthew 26:26-28) (emphasis mine).

So, believe it or not, Jesus did give the apostolic Church leaders the power to forgive sin. Again, the forgiveness of sin is the reason that our Old Catholic Liturgy includes a thorough penitential rite. It really is impossible to go through a whole week without getting one’s mind dirty.

At this point the Gospel fast-forwards ahead one week to the next Sunday following the first Easter encounter with Jesus, (like today) and here we note that the disciples are once again gathered together.

Interestingly this Sunday evening is hinged together with the first Sunday evening with a common thread, - the common thread being the Apostle Thomas. However a major difference in the second Sunday evening account as compared with the first is the fact that Thomas was now present.

Again, Jesus appeared in their midst, and once again He extended a gift of peace to the lot of them, but for Thomas – the Lord had a special gift to offer him. Showing them all His hands and His side He instructed Thomas to put his finger in His nail prints and his hand in His side, and then He told him to not doubt but believe. Thomas immediately responded, “My Lord and my God.

“My Lord and my God,” indeed Thomas made a remarkable statement for a man who has been labeled as a doubter. The other disciples recognized Jesus only in the sense that he was Jesus, but Thomas was moved to confess a life changing faith paradigm shift. And yet the Scriptures reveal that an even greater miracle will result in those who will believe without ever seeing or touching.

Indeed, one must believe, but as mentioned before believing just the historical facts will not do. More than believing just the historical facts, there must be a change in the inner heart. Thomas’ confession is one that we can imitate. To confess Jesus as both Lord and God indicates that he was radically changed from the inside out.

Indeed, believing the facts is the easy part. The hard part is to believe and then to do, which the alleged doubting Thomas eventually did. History records that he proclaimed the Gospel to those in Persia, and then later brought the Good News to India where he was eventually martyred for the faith.

Therefore in conclusion let us be mindful that even though the memory of St Thomas is often overshadowed with the stigma of fear and doubt, nevertheless, the end result of his life speaks for its self. Its not how we start the race that's important, but its how we finish the race that counts, begging the question, how will our story end?

No one really knows for sure, each of our stories is still a work in progress, but what I do know for sure is that no matter what circumstances we may find ourselves in; we can always count on God's gift of grace, forgiveness and peace to finish the journey; for He is indeed, the author and finisher of our faith.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.