

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 20:19–31. The Church provides this same reading for us each year on this Sunday and so we have ample opportunities to reflect on the many rich aspects of this passage. For additional insights into this Gospel account that are not discussed in this reflection, please refer to the volumes of *Come Follow Me* for Liturgical Year A and Liturgical Year B. Let's take a look at this well-known account of Thomas who doubts the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

In this Gospel passage, we are told that the disciples were living in fear behind locked doors. Specifically we are informed that they were afraid of the Jews who had put Jesus to death. Perhaps their reason for fear changed when Jesus stood in their midst. Just imagine what they must have thought! After all, here's their friend whom they had abandoned and denied and left to die alone on the cross.

Now the disciples were probably more nervous than ever and wondered if Jesus would be angry with them. Rather than being vindictive towards the disciples, Jesus assures them that He seeks only their good and wishes them peace. Our Lord does not want them, or us, to live in fear of condemnation because of our failures but in restored relationship. Jesus sought them out like the Good Shepherd going after the lost sheep. The disciples were embarrassed, afraid, isolated, and sorrowful. Jesus came to let them know that He still loved them despite their sin.

There are times in our lives when we can feel like the disciples in that upper room. These are times when we hide from the Lord and others out of our fear, shame, sorrow, and sin. Jesus wants to break into those locked rooms of our hearts and bring His peace and healing reconciliation to us as well.

When do you identify with the disciples behind the locked door and living in fear?

How have you experienced the truth that Jesus wants nothing more than to restore a lost or damaged relationship with you?

How can fear, shame, or sorrow keep someone from experiencing God's mercy in the presence of the Church today?

When have you been surprised by someone who took the initiative to reconcile with you despite the fact that you were the one who offended them?

It's important that Thomas chose to remain with the other disciples even though he did not have the same experience of the risen Jesus as they had. Thomas' lack of experience was the cause of his disbelief. He stayed with the other disciples not because he shared the same belief as they did but because he saw that their lives were authentically changed and that attracted him. Thomas wanted what they had — joy, peace, and faith — but he didn't have it. Nonetheless, he persevered in their company and, because he remained with the other disciples, he did eventually come to share their experience the Risen Christ for himself and come to faith.

This is a great reflection for us as disciples because sometimes we don't fully understand the truths of faith that others do. Rather than walking away in disbelief, Thomas gives us an

example of faithful perseverance when we struggle with matters of belief. Sometimes we only come to believe because we choose to remain a part of a community that believes.

Thomas acknowledged that his failure to believe was his issue. He did not try to convince the other disciples that they were mistaken. Rather, Thomas just acknowledged his own limitation and remained in their company praying that one day he, too, would experience Jesus as they had.

What characteristics mark the faithful lives of people whom you respect and make you want to have what they have?

How has perseverance in the believing community benefited you while you were searching in your faith life?

Had Thomas walked away in his unbelief then he might never have experienced the risen Jesus. How can a faith community help people persevere in the Church even when they experience doubt?

Thomas was the one disciple who was singled out for his unbelief. However, he ended up making the most profound profession of faith found in the entire Gospel of John when he exclaimed: "My Lord and my God." Sometimes the most unlikely people become heroic in their witness of faith as they move from a situation of unbelief to a manifestation of exemplary faith. Even great Saints like Augustine and others had to mature in their faith lives so as to become heroic examples of holiness.

The example of Thomas teaches us that discipleship is a process from which no one should be excluded. Everyone has the real possibility of becoming a heroic witness of faith and a committed disciple of Jesus. That insight provides both encouragement for individual disciples in their own faith lives and well as hope for the faith lives of others. Thomas remained with the community of disciples because they welcomed him and continued to manifest lives that were transformed by resurrection faith. Little did they know that one day Thomas would surpass them by his confession of faith!

How have you seen the transformation from little or no faith to great faith take place in people you have known?

Sometimes people say that converts make the best Christians. Why do you think that statement is often times true and how does the experience of Thomas shed light on their journey of faith?

The story of Thomas reminds us that we are all one family of God and that the experience of faith is both personal and communal. How has your experience of being a member of the Church helped you in your faith life and how has your personal faith life made you a better member of the Church?

The proclamation of Thomas “My Lord and My God” is worth pursuing in greater detail. It is important for us to remember that Thomas did not invent this greeting. Rather, the pagan Emperor Domitian previously preferred this greeting for himself. Thomas now repeats it in reference to Jesus instead of the emperor. That was a very subversive and politically charged statement!

By using these words, Thomas was saying that Jesus alone has the power to direct our lives and not the emperor in Rome. That profession of faith in Jesus is exactly what Christians died for during the age of persecution because they refused to worship false gods, including the emperor. Thomas was not only acknowledging the presence of God in Jesus. He was also acknowledging the supreme authority of Jesus over all creation.

Disciples answer to a higher authority when it comes to receiving direction and influence in their lives. In Acts 4:19 and 5:29 we see Peter, John, and the other apostles making a similar great statement of faith that no one on earth has the right to ultimately govern our lives but only Jesus who is the Lord of heaven and earth. The Roman Empire considered anyone who did not worship Roman gods, including the emperor, to be a traitor.

Today, people in our world are sometimes ostracized and regarded as un-American for not embracing and worshipping the values of a secular society. The proclamation of Thomas reminds us that no agenda, no cause, no political party, no possession, no elected official and no person ever has ultimate claim on our lives but only Jesus Christ.

What forces or influences try to control your life, your values, and your decisions today?

How do you think people would respond if we, like Thomas, made the same proclamation of Christian faith in our workplaces, families and social lives (namely, that God alone has the power and authority to tell us who we are, give us our eternal worth, and to guide us in our decisions)?

How can Christians today be perceived as subversive?

One final comment should be made regarding the greeting Jesus uses when He addresses the disciples and says, “Peace be with you”. Most of our daily thoughts about peace probably have to do with situations of distress. We might be reading the newspaper about nations at war or people suffering turmoil. We can also be thinking about tense and hostile exchanges in our civic discourse or even individuals who are distressed with anxieties of all sorts. In response to these troubling moments, we often wish and pray for “Peace”. This is true of all people regardless of their faith confession or cultural background. This type of peace really just means the absence of violence and turmoil.

As disciples of Jesus we are called to be instruments of God’s justice and healing for all who suffer the distressful injury of violence. That is the peace which the world seeks and Jesus told us that He has come not to bring peace as the world gives it, but as God gives it (see Jn 14:27). For that reason, we pray for a very different peace as Christians.

The peace that Christ brings us is not the absence of violence; it is the fruit of justice and love¹ or as Pope Paul VI put it, “If you want peace, work for justice”². In the Jewish world of Jesus, people believed that peace was the result of living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the world around us. To be in right relationship was to be in a state of justice by treating others with respect for their God-given dignity. Such a state of justice brought harmony to individuals and nations.

While the world may have hoped for this peace born of right relationship, such justice was not possible due to the alienating effects of sin. That is why it was only with the birth of Jesus that angelic choirs could finally proclaim, “Peace on earth.” Jesus is the only one who can overcome the alienating effects of sin that divide us from God and one another.

Our Lord accomplished this great reconciliation through His death on the cross in which He conquered once and for all the power of sin and death. It is this great reconciliation that restores the lost friendship between God and humanity. The cross of Christ is the source of our peace because it is the source of our restored right relationship, our justification, with God. Saint Paul echoes this truth when he wrote, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace...and in one body he reconciled us to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (see Eph. 2:13-14.16). This is one of the great graces Jesus accomplished for us through the cross of Calvary yet it is a grace that we must choose to accept and live.

Our Lord’s first words to the disciples in the upper room were not words of reprimand for having denied and abandoned Him but of reconciliation and forgiveness. He said, “Peace be with you.” These are words of healing, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In that moment, they knew that our Lord’s mercy is indeed greater than their sin. Jesus then shared the gift of the Holy Spirit with them and empowered them to continue His mission of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world when He said, “As the Father sent me, so I send you. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven” (see Jn 20:21-23).

We can experience the peace of Christ even in the most distressful situations of life. It is a peace that comes from knowing and experiencing the presence of God with us, forgiving us, and loving us. It is the peace that allowed the great Martyrs to go to their deaths with confident trust and praying for their persecutors. It is the peace that guided the great saints to faithfully persevere even when they faced great resistance and rejection. As Dante reminds us, “*For in His will is our peace. It is the sea to which all things existing flow, both those His will creates and those that nature makes.*”³

When we exchange the sign of peace at Mass, we are doing so with exactly the same words that Jesus spoke when He appeared to the disciples and said, “Peace be with you.” We repeat these words of Jesus because in our Baptism we became members of the Body of Christ and in the Eucharist we are formed even more so into His mystical body in the Church.

¹ *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, 78.*

² Pope Paul VI. *Message on the Day for Peace*, Jan. 1, 1972.

³ Dante, *Divine Comedy*. Canto III, 85

The exchange of peace at Mass, then, is more than just a casual greeting or even wishing people to be free of violence and distress. It is even more than wishing them right relationship. Our exchange of peace is our willing response as members of the Body of Christ to become ministers to one another of the reconciliation Jesus won for us on the cross. We are literally being Christ to Christ. It is also a time when we encourage one another to know and trust God's presence, love, and mercy while encouraging them to persevere in doing the Lord's will.

This is a sacred moment when divisions in the Body of Christ are healed through the grace of God passing through us. This healing is meant to bring about a real communion among us as we prepare to receive and share our deepest Communion with God in the Eucharist. The Exchange of Peace is not intermission; it is inter-personal ministry within the Body of Christ to unite us as the Body of Christ so as to prepare us to fully receive the Body of Christ.

How does it change your experience of the Sign of Peace to realize that you are repeating the very words of Jesus?

The Sign of Peace is meant to heal the divisions in the Body of Christ. With whom do you most need to authentically and faithfully exchange the Sign of Peace when you attend Mass?

What can you do to enter more deeply into the Sign of Peace as a sacred moment when Christ ministers to Christ?

How does the above reflection better help you appreciate the significance of exchanging the sign of peace immediately before receiving Communion?