

Second Sunday of Easter/Divine Mercy Sunday (Livestreamed)

"Peace be with you!" Those are the words the Risen Jesus chose to greet His frightened and confused Apostles on that first Easter Sunday night. St. John tells us why they were frightened----they were afraid that the same violence that was done to their beloved Jesus just hours before---that He was arrested, beaten and tortured, humiliated and treated like the scum of the earth, crucified, killed and then buried----what if they were next? So, they were in hiding; fearing for their lives.

Suddenly, on the Third Day, without a word---without a knock---without any warning----there was Jesus standing in front of them. Somehow He had passed right through the locked doors, and He calmly and lovingly said: *"Peace be with you!"*. But St. John tells us not only what He said; it's what he tells us He did next that was really amazing: *"He showed them His hands and His side."* That's when the Apostles rejoiced, because then they knew for sure that this wasn't a Ghost; it wasn't their imaginations playing tricks on them; they all were seeing the same thing, and those holes in Jesus' hands, and the gaping wound in His side were the only "I-D"s that they needed. It was truly Jesus, risen from the dead. That's when Jesus said a second time: *"Peace be with you!"*

Those are powerful words---they communicate fellowship, love, and mercy. That's the greeting that the Risen Jesus used so frequently in those early Easter days, reassuring Mary Magdalene, the Holy Women, and the Two Disciples on the Road to Emmaus. And on this Easter Sunday evening, the Risen Jesus now comes to be with His beloved Apostles. He is very aware that they had run away from Him in His hour of need out of fear; He also knew that they were ashamed of what they had done. And when Jesus offered them that powerful greeting---- *"Peace be with you!"*----He was really saying: "I forgive you"; He was letting them know that He wasn't holding that sin against them; He, Who IS "Mercy Itself", was absolving them.

As soon as Jesus extended that great act of reconciliation and forgiveness, He immediately gave them an incredible Mission, when He said: *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* And then Jesus specified what that mission was to be. He instituted the Sacrament of Penance by breathing on them the Breath of His Holy Spirit, and saying: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."*

First He forgave the Apostles; then He immediately He commissioned them to be His Priests---His "Agents" of Mercy and Forgiveness; He sent them forth to continue His mission of reconciling the world in the Name of the Risen Jesus. "Those who were forgiven" became in turn "those who would also forgive". Before the Apostles could be "agents of Mercy", they had to have personally experienced Jesus' Divine Mercy.

Today, dear friends, the great Easter Octave comes to an end. In the Liturgical life of the Church, each day of this past week since Easter Sunday has been as though this was one very long Day. And throughout this "week-long day", we have heard about Jesus' Resurrection from the different Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; and we've heard the various emotional responses that Jesus' Resurrection brought about by those who were eye-witnesses: fear, confusion, joy, excitement. And on each of those occasions, the Risen Jesus consistently encouraged those He encountered: "*Peace be with you!*", "*Do not be afraid!*"; "*Go and tell My brothers!*"; "*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*"

From our vantage point, 2,000 years later, do you think that we might take the Easter Event for granted? We can't allow that to happen. We can never lose sight of the incredible reality of what happened on Easter: Jesus, the Word of God made Flesh, Who was dead, was now gloriously raised to New Life. And because of that Event, His Resurrection has changed the world forever.

Easter is the central Dogma of our Faith; it's what makes us Christians---Catholics; it's what makes the difference in our lives as believers. It's what gives us the ability to live with the Peace of the Risen Christ in our hearts even in the midst of the greatest trials, worries, anxieties, or fears brought about by the circumstances of our world. That's what St. Peter meant in today's Second Reading when he said: "*Blessed be God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who in His great mercy, gave us a new birth to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in Heaven for you.*" Jesus' Resurrection has given us that "*new birth to a living Hope*"----Jesus is our "living Hope". Jesus' Resurrection has given us an "inheritance---to know with confidence that after our life in this world comes to an end, that "inheritance" is waiting for us "in Heaven". And Jesus' Resurrection gives us confidence in knowing that His Victory over sin and death means that we too benefit from that Victory. We are not power-less; in fact, with Jesus' Grace, we have the Power of Jesus' Love to overcome all our fears; we have Jesus' Mercy thru the Sacrament of Penance to forgive all our sins.

I love today's Gospel for another reason. It takes place over a week's time; it's almost like a "two-Act" Play. We've already talked about the first half, which all took place on Easter Sunday night. However, Thomas, one of the Apostles, for some reason wasn't there. So, He missed Jesus' Easter appearance. When he did return, and his brother Apostles excitedly told him about what he missed, he stubbornly dug in his heels, and very famously said: "*Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands, and put my finger into the nailmarks, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.*" Then comes Act II, so to speak. St. John tells us: "*Now a week later*" (which, of course, would chronologically have been today), all the Apostles, including Thomas, were still there, and still behind locked doors. Jesus once more passes thru the locked doors and said: "*Peace be with you!*". But immediately, he turns his attention to Thomas. Jesus invites Thomas to do whatever it takes for him to move from "unbelief" to "belief". Jesus says in effect: "If you want to put your fingers here in my nail marks, and put your hand into My side, go right ahead---just believe." And that's when Thomas, whose nickname down thru the centuries has been "the Doubter", but should really be "the Believer", makes the most profound Act of Faith in Jesus that any of the Apostles ever made, when he said to Jesus: "*You are my Lord, and my God!*"

At that point, Thomas and all the Apostles, were able to put their fears aside, and live in the Peace that Jesus wanted them to have. Peace was what Jesus wanted ALL His Apostles, His Disciples, the holy women----everyone---to experience. Jesus wanted them to replace those feelings of doubt, fear, confusion, pain, suffering, anger, mistrust, discouragement with His Peace and with His Mercy.

As the beautiful "*Exultet*" at the celebration of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday just last week so powerfully exclaimed: Jesus' Light and Peace takes away all fear, dispels all doubt, drives out hatred, eliminates all guilt and shame, frees us from past mistakes, and restores innocence. That's the message of Easter. That's why Jesus gift of Peace is so integrally connected to Jesus' gift of Mercy.

And that's why for the past 20 years we have observed the Second Sunday of Easter as "Divine Mercy Sunday", declared by Pope St. John Paul II in the year 2000 when he canonized St. Faustina. She regularly had visions of the Risen Jesus who revealed Himself to her as "Divine Mercy". St. Faustina's words, which make up the beautiful Divine Mercy Chaplet, sum up that message: "*Jesus I trust in You; have mercy upon us and upon the whole world.*"

As hard as it is to believe, we are in our fifth week of being isolated to “stay home and stay safe” in our homes, maintaining “social distancing” from those with whom we normally interact on a daily basis, and restricted from even being able to come to Church---to practice our Faith as a united Body of Christ, unable to receive the Gift of the Eucharist, and only able to celebrate the beautiful Prayer of the Holy Mass through the technology of livestreaming via our diocesan website or Facebook.

In some ways, it's a lot like the account of the Apostles. They were living in fear behind locked doors, trying to protect themselves from the dangers of those who might kill them lurking outside. We're “isolating” from others, trying to protect ourselves from being contaminated by the deadly coronavirus, while also trying to keep from inadvertently spreading it to others ourselves. But just as Jesus did with the Apostles, so too does He do with us----He passes right thru the locked doors of our homes, and even our closed up hearts; He stands before us, saying “*Peace be with you!*”

And if, for some reason, our fears have led us to question our Faith, or to doubt in God's Love, or to question God about why He allows these kinds of worldwide pandemics to happen, causing so much death, such great suffering, and tremendous amounts of fear, anxiety, and discouragement----Jesus stands before us, and shows us the same nailprints in His Glorified Body's Hands, and the gaping hole in His pierced side---out of which flowed blood and water, the Source of the Sacramental life of the Church, primarily Baptism and the Holy Eucharist----as the evidence of His incredible Act of Love for us and all the world, and the reminder that He has definitively won the Victory over sin and death. Just as He did with Thomas, Jesus gently coaxes us to put aside our doubts and fears, and to do whatever it takes to profess our Faith in Him.

While we don't know how much longer these restrictions will be in place, or when we'll be able to come back to celebrate our Faith together and to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, we DO know that Jesus is with us---here in this Mass, but also there----in your homes; even more intimately, Jesus is in your hearts and even in your doubts.

This is Easter! It's the celebration of New Life. It's the perfect time to start over---to unlock your hearts and let Jesus' Peace enter in. It's the time to turn from sin, and to embrace the Divine Mercy of Jesus' forgiving Love. It's the time to say with all your heart: “*Jesus, I trust in*

You. Have mercy on me, and on the whole world.” It’s time to say with Thomas: *“Jesus, You are my Lord and my God!”* And to the very best of our ability, even with the restrictions placed upon us, we too are called to embrace the Mission that Jesus gives to us and all His followers: to feel Jesus’ Breath of the Holy Spirit that He breathes upon us, to seek after His forgiveness for our sins, and in turn for us to be Jesus’ “agents of mercy” to all we meet in our lives, starting with those who offend us.

As St. John told us at the conclusion of today’s beautiful “two-act” Gospel passage, the Gospel is written *“so 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.”* That’s what Easter is all about: *“The Lord is Risen---Peace be with you---Alleluia!”*

God bless you, now and always!