

2nd Sunday in Easter (Divine Mercy)

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 2:42-47
<i>Response</i>	Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 1:3-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You believe in me, Thomas, because you have seen me, says the Lord; blessed are they who have not seen me, but still believe!
<i>Gospel</i>	John 20:19-31

Last Sunday we celebrated the great feast of Easter, the feast of the Paschal Mystery of Christ's passion, death and, above all, his resurrection. With that Sunday, we entered into a new season of the Church's life. We entered into the Easter season. So kind of like with Christmas, where people often think that Christmas is just one day when in fact it is a season within the Church's liturgical calendar, the same thing is even more true of Easter. Easter is not just one day, it's actually seven weeks, a season in the life of the Church where we are going to be focusing on several themes over the course of the next few weeks.

First, obviously the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the heart and the center of the Easter season. But we also are going to be looking at the birth of the early Church and the preaching of the good news of the Gospel of Jesus's resurrection, and ultimately his ascension into heaven and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which will bring the Easter season to its close. So you're going to notice over the course of the next few weeks that there is going to be a shift in the way the readings are arranged. So before we look at them I just want to make a couple of quick points. First, today we are going to continue to look at passages, several of them, from the Gospels that are focused on the resurrection, because the resurrection doesn't just take place on Easter Sunday. Jesus continues to appear to

his disciples in his risen body over the course of several weeks and so the Church is going to give us the accounts of those resurrection appearances for us to meditate on and ponder as we are in the Easter season.

You will also notice a different aspect of the Easter season, one that is different from the whole rest of the year, which is this, there is no Old Testament reading during the Easter season. The first reading for every Sunday of Easter is actually going to be from the Acts of the Apostles. Why? Because the other mystery that we are pondering during the Easter season is the resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the Church and the spread of the Gospel. So we will be hearing a lot from the book of Acts. So in the videos to come you'll notice I am going to be focusing primarily on the Gospel reading, which will often, at least for the first couple weeks, focus on his resurrection appearances, and then on the readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the birth of the early Church. So that's the scheme that we are going to be looking at.

One quick other note. During this season, although it won't be my focus, the second reading from the letters, you'll notice a difference here. Most of the year we read from St. Paul, almost exclusively. During the Easter season we read what are called the Catholic epistles. In particular, the letters of Peter, James and John. So in this Year A we are going to be focusing on the readings from St. Peter, in a sense replicating in the life of the Church, the preaching of the early Apostles, those pillars of the early Jerusalem Church: Peter, James and John, with Peter obviously being the head. So that is kind of a little overview of the season. Let us begin with the Gospel as we usually do. In this case for the Second Sunday of Easter we are looking at the Gospel of John 20:19-31, the very famous story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples without Thomas and then his appearance with Thomas — the famous story of Doubting Thomas. So let's look at this for a moment. John 20:19 says:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among

them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.¹

Alright. Let's stop there. Why does the Church pick this Gospel for the Second Sunday after Easter and what is John saying to us in this Gospel? What is the significance of this event? Well the first thing I would highlight here is that there are really two appearances being described on the second Sunday of Easter and

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

they both are tied to this particular day. That's why the Church actually uses the same gospel every year; Year A, B and C for the second Sunday of Easter. And the two reasons are this. First, if you look there, the appearance to Thomas, it says it was "eight days later." So that would be basically the second Sunday after the resurrection. So, in a sense, the reason we are celebrating this particular appearance to Thomas is because it happens the week after Easter, just like we are in now. So it's an attempt in a sense to correlate Jesus' appearance to Thomas with our own experience of the Church coming together to encounter the risen Lord in the Mass.

The second reason this is important though is because the first appearance of Jesus, although it would have been on Easter Sunday itself, is significant as the origin and the institution of the power of the Sacrament of Confession. And so this second Sunday of Easter is also Divine Mercy Sunday. So as you are going to see in a minute as we walk through this, Confession is very much the Sacrament of Divine Mercy. So it's fitting that on this day we will both recall the appearance to Thomas that took place eight days after the resurrection and the institution of Confession which is the Sacrament of Divine Mercy.

So with those two thoughts in mind let's look at the passage here and just break down a couple of points. First and foremost, with regard to Jesus' first appearance to the Apostles and giving them the power to forgive sins, a couple of elements stand out. Number one, notice how Jesus appears to the disciples and how he greets them. When he comes to them he is able to walk through the walls and the doors which are shut for the fear the Jews and he says "peace be with you." This is a standard Jewish greeting, *shalom*. And you can imagine that Jesus would need to say this to the Apostles because they all have just abandoned him in the passion narrative. During the passion just a few days before, they all betrayed him, they all fled. And you can imagine that the first emotion they might have in seeing him would be fear, would be guilt, would be shame. Whatever it might be, Jesus speaks a word of peace into that. "Peace be with you."

Secondly, then notice he takes the Apostles and he commissions them. He says “as the Father sent me, so do I send you.” And that's really what the word apostle means. *Apostolos* means one who is sent. So Jesus here is commissioning the disciples to go out into the world and to continue his ministry.

And then number three, and most important of all, notice what Jesus does here. He does something very strange. He breathes on the disciples and says “receive the Holy Spirit.” Just put yourself in that position for just a minute and imagine you're one of the eleven. Jesus comes up to each one of you — well in this case it would actually be ten because Judas has just committed suicide and Thomas is gone. Imagine you are one of the ten, one of the disciples, and Jesus comes up to each one of you and breathes on you after appearing to you in his risen body. That's a memorable act and it is a deliberate act on his part. It's kind of like him making mud out of spit with the man born blind. When Jesus does this it recalls the book of Genesis when it says that “God breathed into the clay,” “breathed into the nostrils of Adam and he became a living being.” So what Jesus is doing here is, in a sense, inaugurating once again the new creation. But in this case the power that is being revealed through that action is not the Sacrament of Baptism as with the man born blind, but here it is the power to forgive and retain sin that will be passed down in the Church through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, through the Sacrament of Confession.

So this is a powerful, powerful act on Jesus' part and you might be thinking “wait, it doesn't say the word confession there, what makes you think that this is tied to the sacrament?” Well look at that line. He says “whoever's sins you forgive are forgiven, and whoever's sins you retain are retained.” Now some at the time of the Protestant Reformation, like John Calvin, said that all Jesus was doing here was giving the Apostles the power to preach so that when people would hear their words they would repent and be forgiven. But that's clearly not what Jesus means here because he doesn't just give the disciples the power to preach, he gives them the power to forgive and to retain someone's sins, which presupposes that somehow a confession of sins would take place so that the apostle would know the

sins of the person. And if they are repentant they can forgive them, they can dispense forgiveness, and if they're not penitent, if they're not repentant, the disciples have the power to bind them in their sins, to retain those sins. So this is in essence the power of the Sacrament of Confession. I can't stress enough how significant this particular episode is, especially since one of the most common questions that people get today is “why do I have to go to a priest to confess my sins? Why can't I just confess my sins directly to God?” I am sure you have probably heard this. Maybe you have wondered it yourself. And the answer is simple. It is because Jesus willed it to be so. He wanted to make his apostles and their successors personal representatives of himself because he knew that we need to hear the words of absolution. We need to receive that special grace of knowing that when we confess our sins to one of his authorized representatives, that they have the power to forgive and to retain, so that we can know our sins are forgiven or it can call us to repentance if we are not penitent and we need further time to ponder and to reflect and to come to that repentance. So this text is extremely important. It's one of the few passages in which the Church in her living tradition has actually defined the meaning of the text. At the Council of Trent, session 14 — this was in the year 1551 — the Catholic Church had a Council. It was right around the time of the Protestant Reformation, where some of the Protestant groups were denying that there was any Sacrament of Confession. They were basically abolishing that and saying “there wasn't a ministerial priesthood and there was no need for sacramental confession, you could just go directly to God.” And the Catholic Church formally taught as follows:

[T]he Lord instituted the sacrament of penance, principally when after his Resurrection he breathed upon his disciples and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” [John 20:22f.]²

² Council of Trent, , Session 14; DS 1670.

More recent Church teaching has affirmed the same thing. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 1441-1442, makes clear that God alone can forgive sin. However, Jesus as the God man, as God incarnate, gave that power, he delegated that power to forgive and retain sins to the Apostles after the resurrection. So this is an extremely important passage because it shows us that one of Jesus's, in a sense one of his deepest desires, one of his most urgent missions after the resurrection, the first thing he wants to do on Easter Sunday, is give the Apostles the power to begin reconciling people to himself in the Sacrament of Confession. Because before that point during his public ministry, Jesus could forgive sins. Like he told the paralytic, "my son, your sins are forgiven." But now the Apostles are going to have that same power and they are going to be able to bring that reconciliation and bring that forgiveness to the whole world. I just think that for us as Catholics, it is very significant that the Church wants us to hear this passage every year on the first Sunday after Easter, because this is the good news of the resurrection that leads to reconciliation. That Christ, through the power of his passion, death and resurrection, has reconciled the world to himself and his given men, given human beings, the power to bring that reconciliation to others through this particular sacrament. So it's very, very significant.

Also I would just highlight quickly here that you will notice that when it comes to non-Catholic interpretations of this particular passage, if you ask most non-Catholic ministers "do you have the power to forgive people sins?" They might say "well of course I can forgive my brother. Like Jesus said to Peter, 'if your brother sins against you don't just forgive him seven times, forgive him 70 x 7 times.'" But it is only really in the Catholic Church that we would say that the minister, that the priest, the ordained priest, not only has the power to forgive sins, but also the power to retain. In other words, if the person is not repentant then they are not forgiven. That is a divine power that Christ alone has and Christ alone can give. And so only one someone authorized to exercise that power, like in this case

the Apostles and then their successors, can engage in that kind of an act, what we call the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Okay. So that's the first part of the episode there. The second part, the famous story of doubting Thomas, is one my favorite stories in Gospels and it too has some similarities but some differences as well. So notice that when Jesus appears to Thomas eight days later, he says the same thing, “peace be with you [*shalom*].” And then he says to Thomas, he invites him to, in a sense, test the physical proof of the resurrection. “Put your finger here. See my hands. Put out your hands and put them in my side. Don't be faithless but believing.” Now most of us I think when we think of this story call it the story of doubting Thomas because we identify with Thomas's struggle, his struggle to believe in this amazing truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. But you could have as easily called this story the confession of believing Thomas because it really climaxes not with Thomas touching Jesus, but with his confession of faith. Where once he encounters the risen Christ, what does he say? “My Lord and my God.” And this is the first time in John's Gospel, since chapter 1, where anyone ever calls Jesus God. So the two words Thomas uses here, “my Lord [*kyrios* in Greek] and my God [*theos* in Greek, we get the word Theology from that],” are both the words that were used to do to describe God himself in the Jewish Old Testament, in the Greek Old Testament. *Kyrios* was the Greek word for “the Lord” and then *theos* was the Greek word for God, Elohim. So this is a full confession of the divinity of Jesus Christ by Thomas and it kind of brings the Gospel to a climactic end — although there is going to be an epilogue in Chapter 21. You get the sense there that after Thomas says this, John kind of wraps it up and he says that “there are many other things that Jesus did, but I told you about these so that you might believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God.” So Thomas's confession of faith is extremely important because it shows us the importance of the divinity of Jesus, that the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth isn't just a vindication of the fact that he really was the Messiah, the resurrection of Jesus is a vindication of his claims to be divine, of his claims to be God, and Thomas recognizes that. When he encounters the risen Christ, he realizes he isn't

just the Messiah, he is “my Lord and my God” come in the flesh, crucified, died and risen again. And this verifies the truth of everything else that Jesus has said and everything else that Jesus has done throughout his entire public ministry. And it really is the heart of the Christian claim that Jesus is the divine son of God, risen in his body forever.

Although you might say “well, it would be nice to have been there”... many people will say that “if I had been there it would be easier for me to believe. If I could have seen Jesus, if I could have touched Jesus, if I could have seen him perform miracles, it would be easier for me and I wouldn’t have these struggles with my doubts.” But notice that last word of Jesus. He gives a kind of beatitude, a blessing for all those who, unlike Thomas, didn't get to see him. He says “have you believed because you have seen me? Well blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” So in a sense I would just say that Jesus imparts a special blessing for all those of us who weren't born at the time he was walking the earth. And he gives us a special grace to be able to come to the same faith that Thomas had through seeing and believing.

Alright, with that in mind what about the first reading for the Second Sunday of Easter, for Divine Mercy Sunday? In this case what we get is a little glimpse of the birth of the Church, of the life of the early Church after Pentecost and after Peter gives his first homily on the day of Pentecost. It's a description of what took place after that homily as people began to convert and the Church began to spread. This is what it says in Acts 2:42 and following —speaking of the people who converted to the way (to Christianity), it says this:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes,

they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Alright, so there are lots of things we could talk about here in this particular passage, but I want to highlight that opening verse for you. Notice when we get this first description of what the early Church was like, there are four elements that are highlighted here. It says they devoted themselves (1) to the apostles' teaching, (2) to fellowship, (3) to the breaking of bread and (4) to the prayers. So what are those things referring to? Well it's fascinating to me as I look at that, that those four elements being described here, which are really:

1. The doctrine of the Church with the teaching of the apostles.
2. The fellowship. The Greek word there is *koinonia*, which means something like lived communion with one another within the community of believers
3. The breaking of the bread. Ever since ancient times and all the way up to today, most scholars think that that isn't just a statement that they would eat lunch together or have supper together at night, but the breaking of the bread was the breaking of the Eucharistic bread. It was the sharing of what Paul calls "the Lord's supper." And you can see that because if you go back to the Gospel of Luke 24, which I think we will be looking at next week, you'll see that Jesus is known to them in the breaking of the bread. It is a term in the early Church for the Eucharist, for the Eucharistic Communion.
4. So we have the doctrine of the apostles, we have the life of the community — fellowship with one another, we have the Eucharistic breaking of the bread and then finally we have the celebration of the prayer. This would be them gathering together in common to pray with one another.

One of the reasons I think that that's fascinating is that you can kind of correlate that with the four parts of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. So if you have the Catechism of the Catholic Church — I have used it before, it's the official

compendium of the Church's teaching on matters of faith and morals — what is interesting is it is broken up into four parts. The first part is on the apostles' teaching, it is on the doctrine, the creed. The second part is on the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, the breaking of the bread. The third part is on life in Christ, on fellowship with one another. How do we love God and how do we love our neighbor. How do we keep the Commandments and live with one another according to justice and mercy and love. And then the fourth part of Catechism is on prayer. It's on the Lord's Prayer in particular, but on the life of prayer in general. So it's kind of neat there that you see that those four pillars of the Church's teaching are already present in this initial description of the early Church. And for me I think that it's important to see that any authentic expression of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a member of the Apostolic Church, is always going to have all four of those.

In other words, if you are a member the Apostolic Church, if you're part of what goes on to be called the Catholic Church, you don't just believe the doctrines. It is important to believe the doctrines, but you also have to live the sacramental life of the Church. The same thing is true...you can't pick the sacramental life of the Church and say that "I am going to participate in the sacraments but I don't believe anything the Catholic Church teaches." No, you need the doctrines of the Church and you need the sacramental life of the Church. Or you can't say "well I am going to live the community life, I am going to be active in my parish, but I am not going to receive the sacraments and I am not going to believe what the Church teaches." No, activity in the parish or in community, the fellowship of the Church, isn't enough. That's an important part. It is necessary but it is not sufficient. You have to both participate in the life of the Church and believe what the Church teaches and receive the sacraments. And then finally, you can't just believe what the Church teaches, go to church and participate in it and receive the sacraments, you also have to live a life of prayer; your own personal prayer, prayer in the family, prayer in the home, and a life of daily prayer. So if you're part of the apostolic

Church, if you're in the Catholic Church, if you are living like the first Christians believed, then you should be praying every single day just like the early Christians did.

So I just think that it's really fantastic that the Church gives us this little glimpse of what the Christian life was like from the Acts of the Apostles, because it's always a helpful corrective to any inclination that we might have to just take a piece of the life of the Church and not take the whole. The word Catholic, although it frequently gets translated as universal — which is true — literally means according to the whole. That's what it means to be Catholic, we live according to the whole. We take the whole life of the Church, all the doctrine of the church, all the sacraments of the Church and all the prayers of the Church and we try to live those out. And that's what's happening here in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 2.

So what about the rest of the readings for this day. Well the Psalm for this day, Psalm 118, the refrain is:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

And it says over and over and over again “his mercy endures forever.” The Hebrew word there is *hesed*. You will sometimes see it translated as steadfast love, but mercy is an excellent translation. I actually think it is a better translation in some ways. And so what do we do? When we hear the good news of the resurrection, when we see the birth of the Church, She wants us to respond with praise. Praise to God for pouring out his mercy on us in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And of course the Church chooses that particular Psalm too because this is Divine Mercy Sunday. So we are thanking the Lord, praising the Lord for the mercy that he has shown to us in Jesus’ death, his resurrection and in a special way in the Sacrament of Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. St. John Paul II said this — he wrote a beautiful encyclical called *The Mercy of God* on Divine Mercy Sunday and on the whole theme of divine mercy in the Gospel — and he wrote these words:

[M]ercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of His mission.³

In other words, for John Paul mercy isn't like an add-on, mercy is fundamental to what Jesus Christ is all about. And nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In fact, when Pope Francis had the Year of Mercy, they put out a document referring to Confession as the Sacrament of Mercy. That's really what it is. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation that was given to us by Jesus on Easter Sunday, the love of God encounters our sinfulness and it encounters it in the form of mercy, of forgiveness. So what better time than this Sunday, than this time of year, than the Easter season, if you haven't been to Confession, to go back and receive that Sacrament of Divine Mercy.

³ John Paul II, The Mercy of God, no. 6