

The Second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday)
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 5:12-16
<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, 22-2
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 1:9-11A, 12-13, 17-19
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You believe in me, Thomas, because you have seen me, says the Lord; blessed are those who have not seen me, but still believe!
<i>Gospel</i>	John 20:19-31

The 2nd Sunday of Easter, every year, is the celebration of Divine Mercy. People often call it “Divine Mercy Sunday”. And on this Sunday of every year, we always read the same gospel. It’s from John 20, the famous story of Doubting Thomas and of the institution of the power of reconciliation, of confession of sin, and forgiveness of sins in that sacrament. However, each year the first reading in the Acts of the Apostles changes. So what we’re going to do today is we’re going to look at the gospel reading and I’ll try to hit a couple of points on that, highlight a few elements that might be somewhat fresh, and then we’ll go back and we’ll look at the Acts of the Apostles. Before I do that though, just a quick reminder: one of the differences in the Easter season is that unlike the rest of the year, where the first reading on the Sunday is from the Old Testament, usually some kind of typology (Old Testament prefiguring the New), throughout the Easter season we’re going to be reading from the Acts of the Apostles, because we’re going to focus (the Church wants us to focus) on the mission and the evangelistic activity of the Apostles in the wake of the Resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit, as we prepare for the great feast of Pentecost. So that’s what we’re doing during the Easter season. So without any further ado, let’s dive in to the gospel reading for Divine Mercy Sunday. Very famous, very well-known gospel (not least because we read it every year), is John 20:19-31. So let’s look at what it 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

Ok, so, lots of things we can say about this gospel. First one that I want to highlight (and I tried to highlight as I was reading) was the refrain, “Peace be with you, peace be with you, peace be with you.” Notice, Jesus says that three times in the account of these two different appearances. So, why the emphasis on that? Well, a couple of things. First, on the one hand, the traditional Hebrew greeting, *Shalom*, to this day, that word simply means “Peace”. So to say *shalom* (or in Greek, *Eirene*), to say “Peace”, was just a standard Jewish greeting. On one level, this is an ordinary greeting. The context is anything but ordinary here, with the risen Je-

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.

Jesus appearing to his disciples. So obviously there's something more going on here. And I think it's important (just on a human level) to recognize that the gospel of John depicts the Apostles in the wake of Jesus' death and Resurrection as afraid. They're afraid. And you see that in the line, "For fear of the Jews, they were hiding out."

Now remember, it's important to keep in mind that in John's gospel, whenever you see the term "The Jews", we need to think about it correctly. The Apostles themselves are Jews. Jesus is Jewish, he's a Jew as well. So this is not so much a religious identification here as it is primarily a geographical identification. So remember, the Apostles are all from Galilee; they're from the North. And if you read through the gospel of John carefully, what you're going to see is there's this conflict between North and South, between the Galileans and the Judeans (*Ioudaioi* in Greek). So the actual word that gets translated as "Jew", more literally means Judeans. Now, Pagans can use the word "Judean" to refer to all of the descendants of Israel, all who practice the religion of Judaism (who circumcise), but within Judaism itself, the term "Jew" or "Judean" could be used with more specific reference. So that a Galilean might speak of the "Jews" or the "Judeans" with reference to the southerners, and that's how the term is used throughout the Gospel of John. There's this conflict between north and south, and a prejudice against the Galileans (I know that might be hard to imagine, in an American context; conflict between north and south, and prejudices between north and south, but that's how it was in the 1st Century A.D.). And so the Judeans mount an opposition to Jesus, and it's in Judea that Jesus is eventually executed. And so the Apostles who are pilgrims to Judea and Jerusalem, after the execution of their teacher, they're afraid, because they don't have any certainty that they're not going to be caught up in the dragnet of the Roman armies or in the Sanhedrin's soldiers and scribes who might send out soldiers after them to pick them up and arrest them and do to them what had happened to Jesus. So they're afraid. They're filled with fear.

And in the midst of that fear, Jesus, the risen Jesus, steps into the situation (literally), steps into the room (the doors' being shut; which shows the glorified nature of his body). It's not an ordinary body that Jesus has anymore. He is risen from the dead, it is his body, but this body in its new state is able to pass through walls. Which, Jesus before the Resurrection, didn't do. He didn't walk through a wall. So this is in a new and glorified state. So he passes through the walls, the doors being shut for fear of the Jews, and he says "Peace be with you. Don't be afraid." Why might they be afraid, as well? Well, when they encounter Jesus, remember, they've

all abandoned him at this point. So just (again) on a human and psychological level, think about how they might have felt. Put yourself in their place. If you had a dear friend who you also considered to be the Messiah and your Lord, and he had been executed three days before, and you had abandoned him. You had betrayed him. Maybe you had even denied him like Peter did. What would you feel if he appeared to you again? Shame? Humiliation? Fear? Jesus speaks into that and says, “Peace be with you” (three times). Now I’m kind of getting ahead of myself here, but I might as well point this out while it’s occurring to me, those very words are taken up into the Liturgy in two ways: first, every single Sunday, at mass. What are the words of the priest? “The Lord be with you.” So you see a similar phraseology there, a similar form. The priests, on behalf of Christ, in the person of Christ, greets us at the beginning of the mass. So every mass (in a sense) echoes the words of Jesus on that first Easter Sunday. But second, and even more explicitly, you might have noticed this, whenever a Bishop says the mass, whenever a successor of the Apostles says the mass, he doesn’t say “The Lord be with you”, he says “Peace be with you”. So he makes the words of Christ his own, because as the successor of the Apostles, the fullness of the priesthood resides in the Bishop. So, every time a Bishop says mass, especially at a Solemn Easter Vigil, when he says the words “Peace be with you”, I want you to think about that, mystagogically. In a sense, you’re going back in time to that first Easter Sunday when the risen Christ appears to the Apostles and wants to speak a word of peace into their fearful hearts.

The second thing that stands out from this account of Luke’s gospel (or should I say, John’s gospel; sorry, we’re in year C here, so I keep going back to Luke, but because it’s Divine Mercy Sunday, the Church has chosen every year to read this particular text on mercy), is in this case we see Jesus shows the Disciples his hands and his feet. And this is just one more sign that the resurrected body of Jesus is both a real body (he’s not a ghost, he’s not an apparition, he’s not a vision) and it’s the same body that was crucified. That’s really important. This is not the transmigration of souls (the moving of a spirit from one body to another) or reincarnation (coming back in a different body). It’s the same body that was crucified on Good Friday. And so the wounds of Christ are motives of credibility for the continuity of his glorified body with his crucified body, and so he shows the Disciples and they’re glad because they recognize “This is the Lord”, this is Jesus. After saying “Peace be with you” again to them, he says these very important words: “As the father has sent me, so I send you.” Now why are those words important? Well, when Jesus says, “As the father has sent me”, he uses the Greek word *apostellō* (which means “to send”), and we get the word “Apostle” from that Greek verb. So

this is so crucial for us to see that part of the Good News of the Resurrection isn't just that Jesus is back from the dead, but that the power, the authority, and the mission that Jesus himself had from his heavenly father, he is now bestowing on the Apostles (bestowing on the twelve).

Why are they called "Apostles"? Because they are "sent" by Christ. They have (this is so crucial) the authority from Jesus himself. And you'll see this elsewhere (like in the gospel of Luke) where Jesus will say, "He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me." That's really serious. That shows the fullness of the authority that Christ is giving to the Apostles, so that as he sends them out into the world to bring the Good News to the ends of the earth, he sends them out with authority. In fact, the same authority (so-to-speak) that he himself had as the one sent by the Father. In other words, according to the Gospel of John then, Jesus is the original Apostle, because he's the one sent from the Father. And so when he sends out his Apostles, we can't treat their authority and their teaching as if, "Well, that's different than Jesus. It's not as if Jesus said that, Peter said that" or "It's not as if Jesus said that, only Matthew said that" – no, no, no, no, no. They have the same authority to come preach the Good News, same power that Christ has from the Father. In fact, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the Apostles, "Greater works than I have done, so will you do." Of course, which must have bowled them over. I mean, what were they thinking when they heard those words (that they would do greater works than Jesus)? So, the Gospel of John here is very clear about the authority of the Apostles.

And in that context (of being sent out), Jesus says these words to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. And if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Now, what is this about? This is the foundational text for the power of the sacrament of reconciliation. Notice I said the "power" of the sacrament of reconciliation. While it's absolutely true here that Jesus does not say, "Here's how you're going to hear confession. Now first I want you to sit down, then I want you to tell the person to say 'Bless me father for I have sinned, it's been these many days since my last confession'". He doesn't give the details of the rite. That's not in the text. But what he does give is the power that's in the sacrament, because he says to them, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven," and conversely, "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained". Now, in a 1st Century Jewish setting, this is a staggering bestowal of authority, because as we see from elsewhere in the gospels (like in the gospel of Mark), when Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic, they say, "This man speaks blasphemy. Who can forgive

sins but God alone?” It’s a divine power. It’s a divine prerogative to forgive sins. And amazingly, now Jesus gives that divine authority and that divine power to the Apostles. And so, it’s very crucial here to stress that in order for them to both forgive and to retain someone’s sins, the implication is that they would somehow know what those sins are. So again, although the act of confessing sin isn’t explicit in the text, it’s implied by the very command given by Jesus to the Apostles, because otherwise, how are they going to know what sins to bind or what sins to forgive? And you’ll see this is going to develop in the early Church (the implications of this power), but is a very, very, very important text. So, that’s the first appearance of the risen Jesus.

Now, it says here that Thomas, the twin, wasn’t with them when this happened. And here we get the segue into the famous account of Doubting Thomas. And where was Thomas? Who knows. Maybe he was getting groceries, I don’t know what he was doing, but he’s not there on that first Easter Sunday. So it says eight days later, it skips ahead (a week later), the disciples are again in the house but this time Thomas is with them, and when Jesus comes to them, once again what does he say? “*Shalom*. Peace be with you.” And then he turns to Thomas, and he answers Thomas’ objection by saying, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Put out your hand, place it in my side, don’t be faithless, but believing.” Pause there for a second. I may have said this elsewhere but it’s at least worth re-iterating. It’s this text (along with the gospel of Luke), that leads to the tradition that when Jesus was crucified, his hands were pierced. We sometimes hear today people get into debates about, “Was it his hand? Or was it his wrist? Or whether the hands could hold up the body or what not.” A lot of people have talked about this in recent times. We have no evidence from the gospels that the wrists of Jesus were pierced in the crucifixion. Both Luke’s gospel and the Gospel of John bear witness to the marks actually being in his hands. Now where exactly, that’s up for debate, but it’s very clear here that his hands and his feet and his side are the parts of his body that were pierced in the crucifixion. And so what he’s doing here is the same thing as he did with the Apostles a week earlier. He’s showing to Thomas the continuity between his crucified and his resurrected bodies.

It’s striking here when he says, “Put your hand in my side.” That gives you a good sense of the size of the wound with which Jesus would have been pierced. I mean, he was pierced with a Roman lance. This is not just a pike or a small sword, it would have cut a massive wound in his side, large enough for Thomas to stick his hand into. So it’s a pretty graphic image and a striking testimony to the reality of

the Resurrection. And of course Thomas' famous reply is not one of doubt (why we call him Doubting Thomas), but one of a confession of Jesus' divinity. "My Lord and My God", *Kurios* and *Theos*. The two words most frequently used for "God" in the Old Testament, Thomas applies here to the risen Christ. And again, although we call him "Doubting Thomas", we could call him "Confessing Thomas", because he has (in a sense) the most exalted confession of the divinity of Jesus that we find in the Gospel of John. He kind of brings the whole story to its climax here, and you can see that because Jesus utters not just a beatitude over those who had not seen (but also believe), but because John himself brings the gospel to a preliminary close. In the last verses of the reading it says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples that aren't 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."

Now notice, that feels like an ending, doesn't it? It sounds like the kind of thing you'd say at the end of a book. And that's because...well some scholars have actually suggested that this is where the Gospel of John originally ended, and that chapter 21 was added on later. Now, there's debate about that, it's possible (additions can be made to biblical books), it's also possible though that John 21 is supposed to function as an epilogue. To this day, books will come to an end, and then they'll have a short epilogue at the end that resumes after the climactic ending proper. In any case, for our purposes what matters here is that Thomas' confession of the divinity of Jesus is climactic. It functions as a kind of summit to which the gospel is leading us and revealing to us that Jesus isn't just the *Christos* (the Messiah), he's not even just the Son of God, but he is the Lord himself, he is the God who has come in the flesh. If you go all the way back to the beginning of John's gospel, he is the "Word who became flesh and dwelt among us", the mystery of the incarnation. It kind of acts as a bookend to both the beginning to John's gospel and to the ending here in the famous confession of Thomas. And so that's how the gospel comes to a close. So that by believing in this truth, we might have life in his name. What does that mean? "Life"? I mean, Don't I already have life? Don't you have to be alive to be reading the book of the gospel of John? Well clearly John here doesn't just mean biological life. And in fact that word there for life, *Zoe*, gets used throughout the Gospel of John with reference to eternal life, everlasting life, the supernatural life of the Resurrection. So if you want to have the same Resurrected life that we see Jesus himself displaying in the verses we just read, then you have to believe in him so you can have life in his name. We don't have the power to raise ourselves from the dead. Try it sometime, see how it goes. In order to have

the kind of life we see exemplified in the risen Christ, we have to believe in him. He has that power and he can share it with us.

Okay, so that's the gospel reading for Divine Mercy Sunday. What about the Acts of the Apostles? What about the 1st reading? Let's go back to Acts 5. And as I pointed out earlier, throughout the Easter season, one of the unique things is that we journey through the life of the early Church. What happened in the first decades of Christianity? What was the first generation of Christianity like? What would it have been like to be an Apostle in the early Church in Jerusalem? How did the gospel spread so fast, so quickly? Well, in Acts 5:12-16, we get a story of the spread of the gospel in the city of Jerusalem, after the Resurrection of Jesus. And this is what it says:

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high honor. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Pause there. Have you ever wondered why the gospel spread so quickly? Well, here's one reason: because the Apostles didn't just bring a message of Good News, they also performed signs and wonders that were motives of credibility for believing that Jesus was in fact risen and that he had in fact given the Apostles the same power that he manifested during his public ministry. So, when it says that they were in Solomon's Portico, that's a reference to a place within the Jerusalem Temple, a colonnaded place, that was a shady place, that was actually a very popular place for Scribes and Elders and teachers to discuss, to debate the law, to discuss the scriptures, to teach one another. And so the Apostles have made Solomon's Portico one of their places of evangelization. So if Jews come together there, naturally, in order to hear about the law, to hear about the scriptures, that's where the Apostles go in order to preach the Good News. They begin preaching the Good News in the Temple, in Jerusalem, where they can get an audience. But they're not just preaching the Good News, they are healing people. They're healing the sick. They're casting out demons, and they are doing so very successfully. Notice it says

that “all of them were healed.” It’s not just “some”, it’s not intermittent, but “all” of them are healed. And so what happens is the signs and wonders of the Apostles are motives for credibility, and they lead to the conversion of not just some, but of multitudes of men and women.

Now, please note this and note it well, if the Apostles are converting multitudes of men and women in the Jerusalem Temple, then who are those men and women? They’re not pagans. They’re Jews. So often I’ve had students over the years tell me, “Dr. Pitre, why didn’t any of the Jews accept the gospel? Why didn’t they accept the good news of Jesus’ Messiah-ship?” And I always have to stress to them, “Many, many Jews did accept it. What gave you the idea that none of them accepted it?” All you have to do is read the Acts of the Apostles and you’ll see very clearly that not only do multitudes of the men and women accept, you even have conversions of priests. And within the early years of the Church, by the first few chapters of Acts, thousands of Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Judea have come to accept Jesus as the Messiah and come to accept “The Way”. In other words, to join the Church (it was called “The Way” in the book of Acts). So the idea that none of the Jews accepted the gospel is a myth, basically. It’s a caricature, an exaggeration. It is true that many of the Jewish leaders (like the Sanhedrin, or the chief priests) rejected the gospel (that goes without saying). We’re going to see the Apostles come on trial before the chief priest and elders. But that doesn’t mean everyone rejected the gospel. Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin. He accepted the gospel. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. He accepted the gospel. And then also multitudes of Jewish men and women, just ordinary people, who were living in Jerusalem, who saw the signs and the wonders of the Apostles, they accepted the gospel.

And I want you to notice here (look at that), it says that, “they would lay the sick on beds and pallets so that if Peter came by, at least his shadow would fall on some of them.” Now why does that matter? Well, remember, Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke. And so if you go back to the Gospel of Luke, you might recall that there were similar miracles of just proximity that took place. The most famous one being the woman with a hemorrhage. So if we look at Luke 8, she says, “If I could just touch the hem of his garment, I’ll be healed.” And sure enough, she is. Power goes forth from Jesus and heals the woman. Well that’s a pretty stupendous miracle. Jesus doesn’t have to say anything. He doesn’t have to rub soil, rub mud in your eyes, or do any kind of rite or ritual. It’s almost like an involuntary miracle. Just touching him with faith allows power to flow out from him and to heal her.

Well, Peter doesn't even have to touch the sick. His shadow alone is so powerful and so filled with holiness and so charged (so to speak) with the power of the Holy Spirit that it has this power to heal. I bring this up both because it illustrates the principle I mentioned earlier, which is not from Luke (it's from the gospel of John but it's still important). When Jesus says to the Apostles, "Greater works than these will you do." In other words, You are going to perform greater miracles than I performed during my public ministry. So we already see that truth being brought about here in the book of Acts.

But also, I think it's important for us as Catholics that it kind of lays the foundation for the notion of the holiness of saints being able to perform miracles. So for example, since ancient times, you can read St. John Chrysostom in the 4th Century Bishop of Constantinople, he has a whole series of essays on the power of the relics of the saints. Whether it be their bones or their clothing. And people (let's be frank) get a little weirded out by that, like it seems strange to believe that the bones or the bodies of the saints would be so holy as to communicate healings or other kinds of miracles. But the notion that not just Jesus himself ("the hem of his garment" – that's his clothing), but the bodies of his Apostles, that their bodies can perform miracles, that they're able to perform miracles, that goes back to the book of Acts. Because in Acts 5, Peter's shadow is able to heal, and then later on in the Book of Acts (I can't remember which chapter off the top of my head, I think it's Acts 19, but I'm Catholic. I can't remember where things are in the Bible) they take handkerchiefs and they touch them to Paul's body and then they bring the sick and the sick are healed. That's what Catholics would call a second-class relic, some material object that has touched the body of a saint and then through that touch is itself, it becomes holy, it becomes sanctified and it can be charged with the power to heal. That's not a medieval notion, that's an ancient Jewish notion. The Jews actually believe the same thing about priestly vestments. Josephus talks about that, that the vestments of the priests in the Temple were regarded as holy and able to communicate power. The idea that holiness and blessing can be attached to material objects, and communicate through material objects, that's not a pagan idea, that's a Jewish idea. It's a biblical idea. And so, in this case, it's not even an object, it's just Peter's shadow that is able to heal the sick and bring about miracles. So, a powerful testimony to the power of the Church in the first decades of Christianity.

And so it's fitting then that the responsorial psalm for today (Psalm 118), in response to the Good News of the Resurrection, to the mercy of Jesus in reconciliation and to the power of the signs and wonders, the healings brought about by the

Apostles, that our response to that would be thanksgiving. Give thanks to the Lord for he is kind, give thanks to the Lord for he is merciful. Give thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love endures forever. That's going to be the refrain every year on Divine Mercy Sunday. That phrase, "steadfast love", can be also translated, "his mercy endures forever", his *Chesed* in Hebrew; a very powerful term.

So in closing, two points from the living tradition of the Church: first, Divine Mercy Sunday is Divine Mercy Sunday because it's on this Sunday that we celebrate the institution of the sacrament of reconciliation. The power of reconciliation being given to the Apostles. And the Council of Trent actually defined this as something as Catholics that we are bound to believe. In session 14 in the Council of Trent, in the 16th Century, the fathers of the council said this:

*[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

It's a very clear authoritative interpretation of that verse linking it to the sacrament of what we call today, "confession". And then finally, Pope Gregory the Great (a pope I've been studying lately and fascinated by. A beautiful pope with some beautiful and powerful writings. He said this in some of his homilies on the gospel about why Thomas was absent. So I mentioned earlier, "Where is he? What's he up to?" This is what Pope St. Gregory the Great said:

It was not an accident that that particular disciple was not present. The divine mercy ordained that a doubting disciple should, by feeling in his Master the wounds of the flesh, heal in us the wounds of unbelief. The unbelief of Thomas is more profitable to our faith than the belief of the other disciples. For the touch by which he is brought to believe confirms our minds in belief, beyond all question.³

I think that's one reason a lot of people like Doubting Thomas. Because if we're honest with ourselves, most of us have had doubts or questions about the truth of the Resurrection at some point or another. If not doubts, then at least questions,

² Council of Trent, Session 14; DS 1670

³ Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies* 26; trans. J. C. Elowsky, ACCS, p. 367

wrestling with it. “Is this true? Did this happen? Why do I believe? How do I share that belief with someone else? What reasons would I give for my faith in the Resurrection?” And so what Gregory says is that it was providence, it was Divine Mercy, that allowed Thomas to be absent during the first appearance of Jesus so that when he came the second time, we would all be able to see in him ourselves, and that through his transition from unbelief to belief, from doubt to faith, we too might have our faith strengthened in the Resurrection of Christ.