

# The Second Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 4:32-35
<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 John 5:1-16
<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

With the Second Sunday of Easter we move into the Easter season proper, and you're going notice right away that the readings during the season of Easter, leading up to Pentecost, are going to be different from the rest of the liturgical year. So on most Sundays of the liturgical year you're going to begin with an Old Testament reading, then you'll have a psalm, and then a New Testament reading and then the gospel. During the season of Easter, however, that shifts a little because we don't read from the Old Testament during the Easter season. The first reading is going to be from the Book of Acts, because what the church is doing during the Easter season is recalling the birth of Christianity, in a sense bringing us back in time to the earliest days of the spread of the gospel after the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the First Century A.D. So keep your eye on that. So as I'm going to go through the next several weeks of the Easter season, I'm going to begin with the gospel as usual but then I'm going to go back not to the Old Testament, but to the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. And, so you can probably guess that there's not going to be any typological correlation because there isn't an Old Testament reading. What we're going to be doing more of during this Easter season is reflecting on the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the gospels, listening to some of the words of Jesus to his disciples about the age of the church from the Gospel of John in his discourse to the Last Supper, and then finally watching the church grow and emerge in the Acts of the Apostles. So that's going to be the kind of program of reading for

the next seven weeks until we get to the feast of Pentecost. So let's begin; the Gospel reading for this second Sunday of Easter is from John 20:19-31. So last week we looked at the discovery of the empty tomb on Sunday morning, but now we move to the next week after Jesus' resurrection and John's gospel says this:

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,

Here's the third time:

"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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Okay, so that's the gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter. And, I think you can see why the church chooses it for this day because it explicitly links it with the second week after the resurrection. Although it begins on the day of the resurrection, it then moves to eight days later, it tells a story of another appearance of Jesus to his disciples in the second week after Easter. So we're going to walk through it and just make a few key points here. First, I tried to emphasize as I was reading it the way Jesus greets his disciples. Over and over again he says "peace be with you"... "peace be with you"... "peace be with you." Now on the one hand, that's just a customary Jewish greeting. Even to this day, if you go to Israel, for example, Jews will say to one another *shalom*, which is the Hebrew word for peace, and that's a standard Jewish greeting. On the other hand though, I think there is a little more going on here given the context, because if you will recall, especially with the initial appearance here, this is taking place on Easter Sunday, which is three days after Jesus was betrayed by Judas, abandoned by all of his disciples, and then crucified in a situation in which only one of them returned to be by his side; and that was the beloved disciple, commonly identified as John the apostle. All the rest of them, the other 11, weren't witnesses to the crucifixion, precisely because they were afraid for their own lives and they had abandoned their Lord.

Now in that context, if you had abandoned someone who was your teacher for three years, if you had abandoned someone whom you had believed to be the Messiah, maybe someone whom you actually professed to be the Messiah, if you had abandoned someone you had worshiped before, when you saw him walk on the sea or what not — you know one of those amazing wonders — and left him to die on a cross, then when you encounter him again for the first time I suspect a very natural human emotion is going to be fear, is going to be shame, is going to be remorse and regret for the fact that you've abandoned him. And, so in that situation in which we can see John tells us that they were afraid, they were still afraid for their own lives because they're hiding "for fear of the Judeans," for fear of the Jews, for fear of those Southerners who had rejected Jesus and who had handed him over to the chief priests and the scribes and the elders, because of that fear Jesus speaks a word of peace into the situation. *Shalom*, peace be with you, and that's the first thing I want to highlight there; Jesus is in effect telling them not to be afraid.

The second thing Jesus does here is he gives them the power to forgive sins through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And, he does this by something very strange, he breathes on each one of them, right. It says that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," right, "As the father has sent me so I send you. If you forgive the sins of any, they're forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they're retained." Now on a very human level, having Jesus come up to you and breathe on you is going to be something you don't forget, that's not an ordinary human action. And, you can see that it's going to be a very powerful and solemn act. From a Jewish point of view, it would also be something more because if you go back to the Old Testament, God breathes into the dust of the Earth in order to give Adam the spirit of life, in order to make a man out of the clay of the ground. So it's a life-giving act, it's an act of creation. So when Jesus breathes on the 12 apostles — although actually it's not 12 of them there at this point — when Jesus breathes on the members of the 12 who were present, he is in a sense inaugurating a new creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. And, one of the first acts of this new creation that he wants them to carry out is the power that we see manifested in the sacrament of reconciliation, which we commonly call the sacrament of confession, by which those who are the successors to the apostles have the power not just to forgive sins of those who may have harmed them, but to forgive all sins: sins against them, sins against neighbor, sins against God and, here's the kicker, the power to retain those sins if the person confessing those sins is not actually penitent. So I think this is a really important and powerful episode because it shows that, in a real sense, Jesus is literally dying to institute the sacrament of confession, to institute the sacrament of reconciliation. One of the first things he wants to do after his resurrection is to give the power to forgive sins to the apostles so that they can go out and begin that ministry of reconciliation that Paul talks about in his letters.

A third element here that I want to highlight is just the whole question of Thomas' encounter with Jesus. And, I probably said this before, but I think it's worth saying again, we always talk about Thomas as doubting Thomas; and there is truth to that because Thomas here basically demands proof, he wants some kind of empirical proof before he will believe that Jesus is actually raised from the dead. On the one hand, he should believe that Jesus is going to be raised from the dead because Jesus has actually told them he would be raised from the dead; and he also performed miracles that verified his divine identity and his son-ship and all that. On the other

hand, there is a certain reasonableness in demanding some kind of evidence for belief. The church does this all the time with the miracles of the Saints. So the church will kind of withhold judgment until some verification has taken place with regard to the miracles that will be used to forward the cause of someone for canonization. And, that's because the church believes in the use of reason. We believe but we also use reason. We don't believe in faith alone, in a sense, faith without reason; faith and reason go together, although faith transcends reason. And, so that's a kind of natural human instinct to want there to be evidence, especially if there's an extraordinary claim being made; and in this case the resurrection of Jesus is an extraordinary claim.

Okay, so with that said though, I don't think we should really refer to this just as doubting Thomas, we should call it doubting and believing Thomas; because what happens here is that when Jesus appears to him, he goes from faithlessness, from doubt to not just faith, but to one of the greatest confessions of faith anywhere in the gospels. So if you look here, when Jesus appears — go back there — he says 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...” So that is a real charge there, I mean, he is lacking faith. Jesus says “do not be faithless, but believing.” And, in response to that exhortation, Thomas goes above and beyond; he doesn't just say I believe, he says to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" And, that's the first time in the Gospel of John where someone confesses Jesus not just as Messiah, not even just as Lord, but as God. And the Greek word there is *theos*, from which we get the word theology, the study of God. So a lot is often made of Peter's confession of faith, for example, in Matthew's gospel, chapter 16, because Peter recognizes the divinity of Jesus when he says “you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus says “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” We laud Peter for that confession of faith and we should. I would also say though that sometimes we tend to forget that Thomas makes an equally amazing confession of faith here when he says that Jesus is his God, because it's a confession of the divinity of Christ.

Now obviously Jesus doesn't respond to it in the exact same way, but I do think it's important because Jesus takes that confession of faith, which really is kind of the climax of John's gospel. Think about it for a second; this whole gospel has been

building up to the revelation of the fullness of Jesus' divinity, right. It begins by saying in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, *theos*. And now it comes to a climax with St. Thomas saying my Lord and my God, *theos*, the same word. So it's like bookends to the gospel, this climactic confession of faith. And, then what Jesus does though is he calls all of us to go beyond Thomas, right, and for us to believe even when we can't see the concrete evidence of his resurrection as Thomas did, because he pronounces a blessing, a beatitude you might even say. He says "have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Now what does that mean? Again, Jesus here is pronouncing a special blessing on those of us who didn't live at the time of Christ, who didn't live in the First Century A.D., who didn't walk with him and talk with him and see him preach and teach and perform miracles and raise the dead, all those things that would've been reasonable motives of credibility for believing him. We lack those, we didn't experience them first-hand like Thomas did, and so Christ pronounces a special blessing on us. He says blessed are those who didn't see me, meaning who haven't seen me in person and yet still believe, because that really is a fruit of God's grace that we're able to believe in him even though we didn't see first-hand the miracles that he accomplished. Now we have testimony to them, we have the gospels themselves, but at the same time there is something special about having been one of the 12, right, and witnessing Christ and being able to believe in his presence. So I take a lot of comfort in that, that notion that those of us who believe without seeing him have a special blessing pronounced upon us.

Okay with all that said let's go back then to the first reading for today, which is not from the Old Testament, but from the Acts of the Apostles. It's a very famous description of the early church in Jerusalem, the community of believers in Jerusalem. And this is what it says Acts 4:32 and following:

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of

what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.

Alright, so that's the reading for today. So I've already kind of answered the question, why does the church give us this reading? Well because during the Easter season she's going to constantly begin with readings from the Book of Acts that give us little windows onto the life and the mission and the activity of the early church. In this case, the reading highlights three elements. First, the church in Jerusalem was unified, this is very important. Unity is a mark of the authentic, Apostolic church, and Luke expresses that by saying that they were of one heart and one mind. What does that mean, one heart and one mind? Well one mind means they believe the same things, right, so they have the same doctrine, unity of doctrine. They were of one heart means that they also chose to do, they acted in similar ways, they walked the same walk. So we tend to associate this in Catholic theology with the intellect and the will, right, the mind and the heart. What we believe but also how we act, what we do, the intellect and the will. So they were of one heart and one soul. A second element here is not just unity but also community. So they live together, and they not only live together, but they share their possessions with one another. It says here that they had everything in common. And, it gives an example of this by saying that any of them who possess lands or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of what was sold, lay it at the apostle's feet and then it would be distributed to anyone in the community who had any needs. So the poor would benefit from the almsgiving of the rich. And then finally, last but certainly not least, is just the practice of almsgiving. I just want to highlight that there. So when it says that these wealthy men would bring the proceeds of their sales and lay it at the apostle's feet and give to those who had any need, these are acts of charity, right. This is an act of almsgiving, especially for the needy, the poor, widows, orphans, those kind of people within the early church in Jerusalem. They would receive the alms of those who were well-off. Okay, so that is just a beautiful little window of what the church was like in the First Century A.D. in Jerusalem.

Before we go any further I just want make a little note about this passage here. In recent years I've heard lots of secular critics of Christianity frequently appeal to this passage as a kind of biblical foundation for communism, right, for the political, modern political system known as communism, in which everything is considered as ultimately belonging to the state. So the state can take your possessions and

dispense them at will to those to whom it sees fit. So people frequently will say ah look, this is the biblical, you know the early church was communist or some people even argue, you know, Jesus was communist. Is that really what's going on here? Is this the political system of communism? And if it's not, what's going on here? What does it mean when it says everyone had everything in common? So let me make a couple points about this real quick. First and foremost, I might just note, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for what it's worth, has a short section on communism that actually rejects the contemporary political system known as both communism and/or socialism, and this is what it says in the catechism paragraph 2424, it says this:

A system that “subordinates the basic rights of individuals and of groups to the collective organization of production” is contrary to human dignity... The Church has rejected the totalitarian and atheistic ideologies associated in modern times with “communism” or “socialism.”

In other words, the church there fundamentally rejects any political system that doesn't heed the right of the individual to private property and places the collective or the state over the rights of individuals with regard to ownership. And, you can look here at this early passage from Acts, notice the apostles are not gathering the money, giving it to the state and then having the state dispense it to whom they will. Possession in common and distribution to those who are needy are taking place within the ecclesial community itself, within the church. It doesn't involve any political system; they're not acting in concert with Caesar or with the tax collectors, with the Roman government, anything like that. So this just simply isn't about a political system, it's about the life of an early religious community. And in fact, the Catechism aligns this passage precisely with the life of the church, not with a political system, but with the life of the church, especially in the history of the church with religious life and religious orders, in which the radical living out of the gospel involves the Evangelical councils. What are the three Evangelical councils? Poverty, chastity, and obedience, right. And, you'll see this over and over again in the history of the church, especially in monastic communities. You can think here of the Franciscans for example, the early Franciscan order, when St. Francis was founding the order, one of the first things people do as they come into the order, some of the wealthy landowners, wealthy merchants, as they come into



the religious order, enter into the community, take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, they'll sell off their property and they'll give it to those who are in need, right. This is something that happens over and over again in the history of the church. So the Catechism tells us two things. First, it says in paragraph 918 that:

From the very beginning of the church...

And that's what we're reading about here.

...there were men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty and to imitate him more closely by practicing the evangelical counsils of poverty chastity and obedience.

And that's what we see here being practiced, a kind of radical poverty by some of the early Christians in Jerusalem. The final thing the Catechism says about this passage is probably the most important one. If you have your Catechism, you can take it out, it's paragraph 952. When this verse is quoted in the Catechism it cites it with reference to the principle of almsgiving. Listen to what the catechism says here, paragraph 952, it quotes Acts 4:32 and it says this:

"They had everything in common." Everything the true Christian has is to be regarded as a good possessed in common with everyone else. All Christians should be ready and eager to come to the help of the needy... and of their neighbors and want." A Christian is a steward of the Lord's goods.

So in other words, what the Catechism points out there is the church has always recognized that some people are called to live in radical poverty, but other people are not. But, all Christians are called to enact the principle which is being given in Acts 4, namely that we do not actually have absolute ownership of our possessions. We are stewards of God's possessions and we have a moral obligation to provide for those who are in need, to practice almsgiving, especially within the church itself, to any of our brothers and our sisters within the church who are in need. And, so we see that principle being practiced in the early church in a radical way in the church of Jerusalem. And it's very interesting here that you can see, if you read Paul's letters, whenever he refers to the Christians living in Jerusalem, he always

calls them, he uses the technical term, 'of the poor', to remember the poor in Jerusalem. So it seems that within the early church in Jerusalem this kind of radical poverty was something that was practiced very widely all the way through into Paul's own day, and we see a window into that from the Book of Acts here as well. But, all Christians are called to the charity of almsgiving, which is very significant for this day because we are on the Second Sunday of Easter, and the Second Sunday of Easter is also Divine Mercy Sunday. And, almsgiving, giving to those who are in need, is one of the corporal works of mercy, right. It's an expression of mercy to give to those who are need. So I actually think that what the church is doing here on this particular Sunday is, with the gospel, it's giving us a window into the sacrament of mercy, the institute of confession. And then with the reading from Acts, it's giving us a window into the corporal work of mercy through the giving of alms to those who are in need. So the whole thing kind of revolves around the theme of mercy.

And, if you have any doubts about that you can just look at the Psalm for the day. The Responsorial psalm for the day, although the refrain is:

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good...

The second part of it says:

...for his mercy endures forever.

And the Hebrew word there for mercy is *hesed*, right, and it means steadfast love, but it also means a kind of charity that goes over and above what's required; the love of mercy especially to those who are in need.

So in closing then, I would just suggest that this day is a really profound day because it encourages us to reflect on two things. First, the fact that Jesus Christ institutes what Pope Francis has called the sacrament of mercy, the sacrament of confession, on the day of the resurrection. And then secondly, that in the early church, from the very beginning, they began not just to receive mercy from Christ, which is a great thing, but then also to show that mercy toward others, especially toward those who are poor and those who are need, through the corporal work of mercy,

which is almsgiving. So I would encourage you as you're praying with this in the readings for today, ask yourself how am I living out the sacrament of mercy through confession and how am I living out the practice of mercy in the giving of alms. I think lots of Catholics in our day and time may think of almsgiving primarily just as, you know, writing a check to the church; maybe you tithe, maybe you don't and you need to start. But to really think about not just what are the needs of the church, but in particular, what are the needs of the poor, and what are the needs of the poor within my own parish, within my own community, within my own family. How can I take the blessings that I've had, whether it be land or wealth, possessions or money, whatever it might be, clothing, and provide for those who are in need. And, in that way make the mercy of Christ that he's shown to me in confession something that I show to others through the act of almsgiving.