

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel lesson can be divided into two parts. In the first, the setting involves the disciples being gathered together on the first day of the week after the Resurrection when they encounter the risen Lord. In the second, John relates the story of Thomas and his declaration of faith when he acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

In that first part of the passage, we find once again the familiar theme in John of the ongoing controversy surrounding Jesus and the growing animosity toward him which ultimately leads to the Passion itself. This is what John means by speaking of the "fear of the Jews." And, as I explained on Good Friday, this does not refer to all Jews but rather to that small group of very orthodox Jews who at the end of the first century were expelling the followers of Jesus from the synagogues. Another theme here is the emphasis on the faithfulness of Jesus in following up on his words with deeds. He had promised the disciples to give them peace, joy, and the Holy Spirit. And here he does precisely that. He follows through on his promise. And his purpose is to reassure them that he will not leave them feeling abandoned like orphans.

The peace he offers is not that of the world. The peace he brings "comes *with knowing him*." It is relational. It comes to them in the midst of growing conflict and thus reassures them as they live under threat. The word here does not mean "not having troubles in the world." Rather, it is a description of "a type of relationship between people rather than a personal inner tranquility." In John's gospel, "belief" is never a noun but always a verb" because believing in Jesus means to be in relationship with him. For example, let's look at the fact that the other disciples "kept telling" Thomas what they had seen and kept trying to win him over to a belief in the resurrection. "How (could) they keep a harmonious, peaceful relationship with an untrusting friend?" He needed to join them so that the kind of peace Jesus brought with him would prevail in the fellowship he had created when he called the twelve to join him in his public ministry.

To repeat an earlier theme, John tells us that the disciples had locked the doors "for fear of the Jews" whereas in reality there is no evidence that any of the Jews who were opposed to the Jesus movement had any intention of disturbing the gathering. But the fact is that Jesus "leaves no quarter for fear." He no sooner arrives among them than he says "Peace to you!" He says "shalom." He says it's all right." He speaks a word that is the opposite of fear and thus he squelches shame, puts away and "banishes any thoughts the disciples may have had about Jesus bearing a grudge." And this is a fundamental part of the kind of peace he brings to those who follow him, a peace that leaves behind any petty recollections one might have about the life lived before the encounter with him. Jesus never "says a word about (the) past actions (of the disciples or) their betrayals and denials."

Instead, he breathes on them and in doing so he gives them “the Spirit from above” (which) recalls the act of Creation itself when the Father breathed life into humanity. He then sends them out on a mission in the wake of his death and resurrection. He “does not proclaim the forgiveness of sin during his public ministry...(but) rather his response to the need to deal with human sin (is) concentrated in his taking it upon himself on the cross. And the language here is decidedly trinitarian despite the fact that as a concept the Trinity does not emerge in the early church until a good deal later and perhaps not before the 4th century.

In the famous story of Thomas demanding physical evidence before he could believe in the resurrection, what is interesting is that it is not the *appearance* of Jesus itself which evokes faith in him. Rather, his declaration of faith occurs in a particular context. That is, it happens *after* his compatriots have witnessed it and have urged him to believe. Therefore, it was “the testimony and witness that had gone before” which was the necessary ingredient in the growth of his faith. And this, of course, is true for many of us. We come to faith by a circuitous pathway; it is seldom a spur-of-the-moment epiphany.

And recall that the whole point of the message of John’s gospel is to present evidence so that the reader or listener might believe and “that (in) believing you might have life in his name.” The famous words “my Lord and my God” take us directly back to the Prologue to John’s account: “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” There is every reason to appoint this lesson for the Second Sunday in Easter in the immediate wake of the resurrection which we celebrated last week.

It is unfair to regard Thomas as any more doubtful than any of the others, all of whom had an initial reluctance to acknowledge the reality of the resurrection and all of whom required some kind of immediate evidence in order to believe. It might be more accurate to call Thomas a realist. In the New Testament, “doubt isn’t the exception but the rule.” Scripture actually teaches us that “questioning God is an aspect of faith.” It isn’t the opposite of faith but actually part of faith. In fact, it may be an essential part of genuine faith which naturally begins in doubt and only later grows into belief itself. In Greek, the word “doubt” does not actually appear in the passage. Instead, two words convey the meaning: of being trusting or not having trust, being faithful or not being faithful. What is most remarkable about the passage is that when offered the opportunity to actually examine the wounds of Christ, Thomas, requiring no further evidence, brushes aside the offer and immediately acknowledges Jesus as the true Son of God.

We cannot fully appreciate the uniqueness of the story we encounter here unless we recall that the resurrection of Jesus was “profoundly unexpected and profoundly surprising.” Jesus may have alluded to a tragic death and a departure from this world, but for the disciples there was nothing even remotely imaginable about an individual being raised from the dead by God. The General Resurrection would

come at the end of time, of course, but not a single soul being identified, validated, endorsed and glorified before the whole world in this spectacular way. *We* know the end of the story. They did *not*. Does it not make perfect sense that they would seek proof before believing something this unexpected, this surprising, and this other-worldly? It is important to recall this reality in order to truly comprehend the thrust of this passage.

In the words of the familiar collect from the prayer book, **“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”**

Amen.

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