

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 5:12-16

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles. They were all together in Solomon's portico. None of the others dared to join them, but the people esteemed them. Yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, were added to them. Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

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

Let the house of Israel say, "His mercy endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say, "His mercy endures forever." Let those who fear the LORD say, "His mercy endures forever."

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

I was hard pressed and was falling, but the LORD helped me. My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior. The joyful shout of victory in the tents of the just:

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

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. By the LORD has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.

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

SECOND READING: Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19

A reading from the Book of Revelation:

I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus. I was caught up in spirit on the Lord's day and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet, which said, "Write on a scroll what you see." Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, wearing an ankle-length robe, with a gold sash around his chest. When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead. He touched me with his right hand and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld. Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards."

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." Thomas, called Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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." Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written 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.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Octave of Easter

The apostles' work, in today's first reading, was twofold. They preached to people and healed people. I have to wonder which of these two activities was more important. The healings drew bigger crowds who then heard the message the apostles had to give resulting in more people who came to faith. The use of grammar is notable. Luke used the passive voice to describe the numbers coming to Christ. "Great numbers were added to them." Who is them? It could mean the apostles and their ministry and it can mean the community of believers. In any event, the group grew. The ancients did not view the individual person in the same way as we do. The collective group meant more than a group of individuals. This is a story of the formation of the Church in community. There is no mention of their message and no specific details about the healings. The reading has emphasized that the early Church continued to grow in numbers.

Luke is also a bit vague when describing those who were not added. "None of the others dared to join them," he wrote. Who are the others? As I've pointed out before, the gospels and Acts were compiled and written years after the events. Even though the earliest Church was almost exclusively Jewish, it quickly transformed into a Church made up of converted pagan gentiles. Quickly means over the course of years. When Luke wrote acts, the Church faced a challenge. In the year 70 of the Common Era, the believers in Jesus were expelled from worship in the synagogues marking the effective split between Judaism and Christianity. The language Luke used reflected a deeply felt pain of rejection and separation. The others were those, in Judaism, who did not convert. To the original apostles, this was a big deal for they had been faithful Jews.

As I reflect on this reading, we face a communal challenge now. Divine Savior will close by Labor Day. We are to form, with two other parishes, Our Lady Mother of the Church and St. Eugene, a new parish. We all will be added together, three communities into one. It is an action of sadness, joy and hope. Although the change seems difficult, these challenges have been part of the Church's experience since its beginning. As the Spirit led them, the Spirit leads us.

We don't always read very often from the book of Revelation, especially on Sundays. Much of the book contains symbols that seem strange. I know some folks who find the imagery confusing and to a few scary. However, it has the same message of the rest of the New Testament; the good news of salvation. Jesus died for human sin and rose from the dead to defeat death and sin forever. It also has a context that we can hear hinted in the seven golden lamp stands. John wrote this book for seven churches.

His vision of the Son of Man, the dead one now alive, is the resurrected Jesus who touched him. What, or whom, did John really see? He clearly experienced a very profound and deep religious experience. Did it happen just as he described or did he choose his words carefully telling an experience that could not be put into words. Describe the color green. Relate the taste of peanut butter. Define love. Those things are not so easy, are they?

I have once described a moment of profound inspiration by the grace of the Holy Spirit as a light bulb being turned on over my head with a ping. It was the best I could do to relate what was a personal experience of the presence of God which defied my ability for eloquence. Most of us have had such moments of God's depth. These are mystical moments when God is near gifting us. We merely glimpse the Spirit for a moment, but in its brevity God reveals eternity to us. We can only relate what the Spirit is like in words that fall short. This is what John has attempted in Revelation. When I read his words, I can know a fellow in faith who sought God who approached him in mystery.

Faith is a funny thing. Job once said, "I know that my redeemer lives." What did he mean by that? Did he know it like he knew that one plus one equals two? Did he know it like he knew his mother loved him? Did he know it like he knew his wife? He knew with eyes of faith. We can know things with our minds. We can know things by how they feel. We can know things with our intuition. We can know things by our desiring of them. We also can know by faith. I will never doubt what I can count on my fingers. But I can doubt my memory.

I can make the same statement as Job, but I can only say it after I profess my faith. "I believe that my redeemer lives." I know that my feelings are real, but to know that another's feelings are real, I must trust them. BB King once wrote a song that relates what I'm attempting to say. "Nobody loves me like my mother and she could be jiving too." This is what can cause us to doubt. The power of our faith does not guarantee that God truly lives. Doubt is always a part of faith and our relationships. Trust is also a gift we give and receive.

In this light, is Thomas any different than the rest of us? He had been one of Jesus' closest disciples. He believed in Jesus as one of his intimates. Today's gospel told us of two of Jesus' encounters with the disciples post resurrection. Jesus entered the presence of those gathered unbidden and with no advanced warning. He said and did the same things each time upon arrival. Peace be with you was his greeting both times. His first action, after his greeting, was to show his wounds. Did the others doubt too?

I look at this story slightly differently. Jesus breathed upon the people gathered together and they received Jesus Spirit. Thomas, who wasn't there, did not receive it, yet. This is about the coming of the gift of faith, not the doubts. Thomas made a show of his protest and what he had to do in order to believe. Did he do it? No, when Jesus showed Thomas his wounds and invited Thomas to touch them, he fell to Jesus feet with his profession of faith. My Lord and my God! At that moment the Holy Spirit rushed upon him. Thomas had no need for any proof; instead Jesus had touched him. The gift of faith was his and it needed no proof. Thomas had no doubt as the gift became his.

There's a humanity to this man. Perhaps, as he was an intimate of Jesus as one of the twelve, he felt cheated that Jesus didn't wait to arrive until he could be there. Perhaps Thomas grieved the loss of his mentor and Lord. I've lost those I have loved through death too. It hurts with many layers of grief. Could not Thomas have such hurt? What did he need to heal? He may have received the gift of faith but he also was healed. All he needed for both was to approach the wounds of Jesus. Jesus did return presumably and specifically for Thomas. Jesus seemed to seek him out, specially. Thomas supplied nothing but his presence. Jesus did the rest.

There's something about the appearance of Jesus in all the resurrection stories. Why is Jesus risen body still wounded? What do the holes in his hands feet and side mean? I got my second booster shot a week ago. Each time I received a shot, it felt like I was coming down with a cold for a day or two afterward. This time, my arm was tender at the injection spot for a few days. It hurt to touch it, so I didn't. It was just a pin-prick. Jesus had holes the size of railroad spikes in him. Were they tender with pain or compassion? I have an image of the gathered disciples moved by the wounds that forgave them. In approaching Jesus' wounds, Jesus healed them. In prayer we can bring our woundedness to Jesus. Jesus will always forgive and heal those who approach him.

Jesus also had words for us. "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." This is his prayer for each of us. Most of us have been baptized as infants. I cannot remember a time when I did not or could not believe. I have been raised by people of faith. Over a lifetime it has taken root in me and become mine. I cannot point to the moment when it became mine but I can remember moments when it deepened. As I type this, some have come to mind. I would not be writing this without them. I believe and that has made all the difference in my life. There is a leap of faith that happens in us. We don't make it. The Spirit leaps into us.

Over the years, people have asked me about my vocation of priesthood. Both as a kid and an adult, I was always hard pressed to answer. I've asked it myself. Why am I a priest? One day it dawned on me how I could respond for there is no really good answer. I asked another question instead. Why do people fall in love? And a second, why did you marry? Most people cannot give a good, solid answer either. We all have just known. There may be a few doubts along the way, but we face in love, faith and trust the leap the Spirit makes into each of us each day.

May we know that by his wounds, Jesus heals us.

James D. Beath
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