

2ND SUNDAY EASTER (A)

MARCH 30, 2008

FR. VINCE ALAGIA, S.J.

ACTS 2:42-27

1ST PETER 1:3-9

JOHN 20:19-31



PARADISE TO BE REGAINED

What an idyllic picture the first reading gives us. Like the second Garden of Eden! – not quite. Everyone is being nice to everyone else, generous to a fault in concern for the other. No wonder new disciples were drawn to follow Christ after his Resurrection. What is presented here is the fact that there were *some* communities who strove to live this way, but let's not get the idea that all were like the one presented here. It was an ideal and it was attainable. It took a lot of work to believe in the Lord, and trust that what he said was true and to be disciples courageous enough to show the way. *And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

The second reading is a call to meet the challenges of daily life: *...now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than the gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* And those incredible words that our faith is more precious than gold! – something to ponder.

The Gospel points to one of the major obstacles we have to deal with in life: fear, something the followers of Jesus knew almost immediately after his resurrection—*the doors were locked...for fear.* Fear. It was real to them, – something they had to admit. Just as they had to, so do we. It is like someone has branded us with reasons for being fearful: homicides, home break-ins, car-jackings, robberies at the malls. The list goes on – enough to make one paranoid if one chooses to live like that.

First, *locks of fear.* Fear guarded the doors of the room where the disciples were hiding, as well as we might find ourselves behind fear. Despite the locks Jesus passes through and the doors

and stands in the midst of the group of his disciples as if he were standing in an open field. If their own fears before this were not enough, imagine how disconcerted they must have been with this particular revelation of Jesus himself.

It was hard enough to accept him standing there, especially since they were well aware of his death; but then to hear him call them to be peaceful. He wants to say that to you and me today. There are so many places we look for peace in our lives: in the world, in our families, neighbors, everyone but there is none unless it begins in here in my heart. It has to begin within me, then it can be shared, a simple strategy, and yet so difficult for so many because of the fears that hold you and me back.

As Jesus could walk into that room with its confused, hurt, and angry disciples, he wants to walk into our hearts with that same message: *Peace be with you*. His peace is the lasting peace. His peace is the only peace that will not disappoint. It overcomes fear, like a light turned on in a dark room pushing the shadows to the corners. He wants to banish fear with his presence, his peace. He knows our hidden places, our hidden secrets, our hidden fears.

We don't have any idea about what went on in that room. They may well have been considering their options: could they return to Galilee to fish and collect taxes as before? Would the Jewish authorities recognize them as accomplices to Jesus? Were they marked men and women in the streets, or could they simply slink back into the anonymity of the crowd and return to their former lives. How their fears were magnified with every sound and anxious thought. How the normal sounds of the street must have sounded like the approaching steps of the Roman legionnaires, perhaps as we might experience when we hear police sirens coming closer.

Did they talk about their failure to live up to their brash early claims only days ago that they would each die for him rather than betray him? Or did they simply rehearse that utter failure and fear in individual silence? He came to unlock their hearts imprisoned in the memory of those recent failures.

He never gave up on them, and he won't give up on us. It is John's Gospel that most clearly invites us to cast off the locks of doubt, and fear. After that first visit, somehow or other, they tasted that peace he offered and it gave them courage to challenge their fears.

And then there was Thomas, the doubter. He was not there the first time Jesus appeared to his disciples. He had to hear about the appearance of Jesus. Nothing like that could be kept quiet for long. He could see clearly the changed demeanor of his friends, as the chains of fear and guilt had fled their hearts. One of his great gifts to us is that he was not someone who borrowed on other peoples' faith. He had to experience everything for himself. For him faith did not come easily. Notice that Jesus does not scold Thomas for his approach to faith. He knew that each disciple must come to faith in his/her own way. I have never viewed him as truly doubting in Jesus. Else, why would he come this far with Jesus? It is just that it was not easy for him to approach faith from someone else's perspective. Doubting is a good thing for all of us, if in doubting there is a willingness to meet the responsibility to seek answers for those questions we ask in good faith.

This is exactly what he did: *unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.* It sounds very much like an ultimatum but Jesus understands the heart of this man. He answers him in a way that will help him move to deeper level of faith. This is the way he treats each of us who question and are willing to seek out the answers.

For some the path is easy, almost painless. But for others, like Thomas, faith does not come easily or simply. It must be tested, experienced and challenged, in order to be real. Thomas stands at the head of a great line of believers in this regard – Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Pascal, C. S. Lewis, to name just a few. Even intellectual doubters, like these, can become locked in their own doubt and questions. So with tenderness and persistence, Jesus set Thomas free.

Finally he challenges all of them to live that central gospel message which he lived himself to the fullest: to be instruments of peace in forgiving others. We know there is no peace without it within ourselves, our communities and the world. Yes, Jesus commissioned those disciples to be instruments of peace in the special ministry of forgiveness we know as the Sacrament of Reconciliation; however that call, that challenge is one for all of us. That did not, however, exempt them from being instruments of peace in their daily lives. We, too, are asked to share each in our way to be stewards of forgiveness.

In preparing this homily when it came to considering forgiveness, it struck me how valuable the Sacrament of Reconciliation is in teaching us how to be forgiven – to receive forgiveness from another, in this instance, the Lord. Can we truly be forgiving if/when we do not accept forgiveness?

It is through the action of the Holy Spirit upon us that we are able to accomplish this. As he told them, *Receive the Holy Spirit*, he tells us the same, and it is in this Spirit we find the strength to overcome fears and to be good stewards of forgiveness where needed and to know his peace within us.

And so, let us pray with this prayer of St. Claude de la Columbiere, a Jesuit, on this Sunday we are asked to remember in a special way the love and power of Divine Mercy:

**O God, what will you do to conquer
the fearful hardness of our hearts?
Lord, you must give us new hearts,
tender hearts, sensitive hearts,
to replace hearts that are made of marble and bronze.**

**You must give us your own Heart Jesus.
Come, lovable Heart of Jesus.
Place your Heart deep in the center of our hearts,
and enkindle each in each heart a flame of love
as strong, as great, as the sum of all the reasons
that I have for loving you, my God.**

**O holy Heart of Jesus, dwell hidden in my heart,
so that I may live only in you and only for you,
so that, in the end, I may live with you
eternally in heaven.
Amen.**