

## Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

April 7, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 4:32-35 (The life of the early Christian community.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 118 (Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.)*

*Second Reading: 1 John 5:1-6 (Everyone who believes in Christ is begotten by God.)*

*Gospel: John 20:19-31 (Doubting Thomas.)*

Every year, on the Second Sunday of Easter, poor Thomas gets his one humiliating moment in the spotlight, when we hear this story from the Gospel of John. The other disciples all have the privilege of seeing the Risen Jesus on that very first evening after his resurrection from the dead. But Thomas, for some reason, is not with them. They report what they have seen and heard, but Thomas simply cannot believe their incredible story. He has to see Jesus for himself to believe that a man really could rise from the dead. And that means waiting *an entire week* to have his doubts put to rest. Just imagine how difficult that week must have been for Thomas. While the other disciples were deliriously happy, he remained grief-stricken, wondering if it could possibly be true. Had his friends really seen the Lord alive, or were they just seeing ghosts or living in denial about Jesus' death?

When Jesus returns the following Sunday evening, Thomas is quick to profess his belief not only in Jesus' *resurrection*, but also in his *divinity*. "My Lord and my God!" he declares. Yet, Jesus seems unimpressed by this delayed outpouring of faith. He scolds Thomas for needing to see him in order to believe. Then, as if to rub salt in the open wound, he tells Thomas that there will be many people who *never* get to see him in the flesh, yet they will come to believe.

Those words might have been directed at *all* of the Apostles, not just Thomas, for *none of them* believed that he could rise from the dead until they had actually seen him in the flesh. And now, all of them had to take up the daunting challenge of going out into the world and proclaiming the Risen Christ to other people who *had not seen him*. If eyewitness testimony from his fellow disciples couldn't even convince Thomas, how were they going to convince anyone else that Jesus had risen *and* that he is the Son of God?

Ironically, Thomas' initial *unbelief* might have given him an advantage over his fellow Apostles. If somebody said to him, "I will not believe until I see his wounds and touch them with my own hands," Thomas could say, "I understand exactly how you feel; I said the same thing when my friends told me that Jesus was alive." The fact that Thomas struggled with doubt before coming to faith gave him *greater* credibility as an eyewitness and evangelizer. He could assure other skeptics that his faith did not come easily, but now that his faith had been confirmed, it was utterly unshakeable.

One of the keys to successful evangelization is the ability to *understand* the obstacles to faith that other people confront and to *empathize* with their struggles to believe. For Thomas and the other Apostles, that meant remembering the sorrow and confusion that they felt *before* they saw the Risen Lord, not just the joy that they felt *after* seeing him. For us, the challenge of evangelization is quite different, but it still depends on that same combination of

sincerity of our beliefs and empathy with other people's doubts. Today, our testimony is directed primarily at people who *believe* that Jesus is the Son of God and that he rose from the dead, but who *do not* feel a need to be close to him. So, we need to understand why people push Jesus away, and why we ourselves sometimes push him away. At the same time, we must find ways to articulate the joy that we feel from drawing close to him, in ways that others may not have experienced.

Many people, including devout Catholics, who have faithfully participated in the sacraments of the Church all their lives, have never had a truly intimate experience of God. I suspect that all of us can remember times when God seemed *distant*, if not completely absent. Even Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" But, not all of us can recall specific moments when we felt God's loving presence. That's because many of us have never been taught how to pray in a way that invites such an intimate encounter with the Lord. The memorized prayers that we learned as children will not get us there. Neither will our prayers of intercession for other people in need. Both are legitimate forms of prayer, but they don't necessarily open our hearts to God. *Intimacy* requires mutual *sharing*, that is, sharing our innermost thoughts and feelings with the Lord, and listening for his loving response. In order to convince others that such an experience of God is even possible, we must regularly seek intimacy with Christ and then reflect on our experiences, so as to discover how to share them with people who have never "seen the Lord" in that way.

Our faith is not only our salvation, but it can also be a great source of strength to get us through each day. We turn to the Lord, not expecting to see him in the flesh, but hoping to perceive his presence in other ways. For example, we might hear his words of consolation in a Scripture passage, or feel his love for us in a quiet moment of reflection. These encounters can be deeply meaningful and comforting. They can dispel our doubts and overcome our fears. But, they are not just for *us* as individuals. Those personal encounters can become gifts for others, if we are willing to share them, and if we can develop the vocabulary to do that. However, we must remember to balance the sincerity of our beliefs with empathy for other people's struggles. No one will want to hear our pious thoughts, unless they first perceive that we genuinely understand their personal obstacles to faith. But, once we make it clear that we *do* appreciate their doubts and concerns, and perhaps even *share* some of them, then we can encourage them to follow our lead toward a deeper faith. That's how evangelization works. That's how it has *always* worked, from Apostolic times up to the present day.

So, let us not be afraid of having doubts and admitting them to others. Instead, let us remember how Thomas' initial doubts gave way to the most stirring profession of faith in all of the gospels: "My Lord and my God!" *Our* lack of faith can likewise lead us to question and to search – and then to find answers. Our seeking can draw us closer to the God who *wants to be known and loved*. And, as a bonus, the struggles that we have *overcome* in our journey of faith can become an inspiration for others with whom we share them.