

**Second Sunday of Easter /
Divine Mercy Sunday
April 16, 2023**

We have just heard one of those Scripture stories we know so well. In fact, we know it SO well that we can almost “tune out” as it’s being proclaimed. And it’s familiar for a few reasons. One – because we hear it read every single year on this Sunday. It’s not one of the stories we only hear every third year. Two, it’s just a really good story. It has a plot that’s really quite straightforward and pretty dramatic, and therefore relatively easy to remember. And thirdly, many of us remember this story in detail simply because we really “like” it. We “enjoy” its basic message. And the most likely reason so many of us “like” this story is that it seems to affirm each of us, seems to allow each of us to proudly think to ourselves, “Well, I must be pretty good because I’m nothing like Thomas. I’m able to believe without needing proof. Even Jesus calls me “blessed”.”

There seems to be an underlying assumption that believing something without seeing is much more difficult than believing when we have seen something with our own two eyes. Jesus seems to be implying that very thing. And on the surface, that may very well appear to be true. Most of us, if not all of us, would trust our own eyes before we’d trust the word of another. I’m sure that in ages past many explorers returned to their home countries telling tales of all sorts of new creatures and lands and natural wonders and peoples and such that others must have responded with a skeptical, “You must be making all of this up. What you are saying is not possible.”

But think for a moment. Isn’t the opposite also true at times? How many people dismiss scientific evidence and replace it with the way they think things are, or the way they hope they would be. (For example, people who still argue that the earth is flat.) Or how many of us believe the most convoluted, outrageous conspiracies rather than accept the simplest, clearest, most logical explanations? Or how many of us still date a person despite all sorts of red flags, insisting that what we are seeing is not the

“real” person? In other words, sometimes believing without seeing is actually somewhat easier than simply accepting what we see with our own naked eyes.

Might it be that way (at times) in matters of faith?

I guess it depends on what we mean by “believe”. All of us “say” we believe, and I guess in some way, that is a logical starting point. And whether those words are a declaration, a wish, a hope, or an effort at convincing ourselves, it really doesn’t matter. Embracing the “idea” of belief, the “possibility” of belief heads us in the right direction, starts us down the path of faith. And yet, in many respects this is the easiest step, for it demands little from us. Virtually all of us present this day would respond to the question, “Do you believe in God?” with an emphatic “Yes!” - even though we are well aware that no two of us probably mean exactly the same thing by that “yes”. And so, it’s really not that hard to say the words, or to call ourselves “believers”.

But it’s more than that. For us Christians it also means that we are asked to accept some pretty amazing things. And at the foundation of our faith is a person, Jesus. And no ordinary person - God himself. And this Jesus walked among us, showing us how to love, how to live, and in the process lost his life, for our sake. For the salvation of the world. And oh yeah, if that wasn’t enough, he destroyed death too. Christian “belief” entails accepting and taking to heart all of these incredible things.

But it’s more than that, right? What’s the point in believing if it doesn’t change us on the inside, if it doesn’t actually shape how we live, how we love, how we treat one another? What’s the point in believing if we reduce it to just words, or ideas that simply rattle around in our heads or our minds? In other words, the depth of our belief is, or must be reflected in the depth of our love. That’s the only true “evidence”. If love is entirely or nearly absent, then maybe authentic belief and true faith are absent too.

And so maybe believing without seeing isn't that hard at all, then what we mean by belief is simply saying the words or agreeing to accept a few stories and a few ideas. But if our words match our commitment, if our words match the love we have for Jesus, if our words reflect a true surrendering to a God who loves us beyond all understanding, then maybe we are on to something, maybe we are more true to what Jesus means by "blessed", more in the spirit of Thomas who cried out with his whole being,

"My Lord and my God!"

Many of us probably wish that Jesus would come and stand in our midst. We should be careful what we wish for, for I'm convinced that many of us might reject him, or not accept him, or wish he would go away. No? I'm guessing we'd probably find him a little too kind. Too compassionate. Too loving. Too forgiving. Too understanding. Too accepting. And so maybe we tend to "like" the story of Thomas for the wrong reasons, for the wrong conclusion, presuming that we would never be like him.

The truth is, Jesus doesn't have a problem with Thomas. He understands the difficulties inherent to belief. And he understands our own spiritual journeys - journeys that often involve wonder and doubt and confusion and a resistance to fully buy what Jesus is selling. Jesus gets all of that. And he loves us anyway. And so, let's accept the challenges that come with trying to believe; challenges we see both in others and in ourselves. And let's pray to take our "belief" - however solid or shaky it may be, and turn it into action.

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday, the Second Sunday of the Easter season. It was named by Pope John Paul II at the canonization of St. Maria Faustina on April 30, 2000, and then officially decreed by the Vatican. Divine Mercy Sunday can be seen as the convergence of all the mysteries and graces of Holy Week and Easter Week. The feast focuses the light of the Risen Christ into a radiant beam of merciful love and grace for the whole world.

In his revelations to St. Faustina, Jesus expressed His desire to celebrate this special feast. He says that the Feast of Mercy emerged from his very depths of tenderness and mankind will not have peace until it turns to the Fount of his Mercy. Jesus says that the divine floodgates through which grace flow are opened and let no soul fear to draw near to him, even though his sins be as scarlet because the Feast of Mercy emerged from the very depths of his tenderness.