

Acts 5:12-16
Psalm 118
Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19
John 20:19-31

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Well, I have good news and bad news for you this morning. The good news is that today's readings, especially the Gospel, are so rich in homiletic material that I hardly know where to begin. I could talk about abandonment, betrayal, forgiveness, mercy, community, exclusion, inclusion, discipleship, mission, doubt, fear, persecution, peace, hope, or faith. Any of those topics would make good starting points for a homily on these readings. But the bad news is that today's readings, especially the Gospel, are so rich in homiletic material that I may not know where to end. So, let's start with two of the topics – betrayal and fear – and see where they take us. You will just have to trust me to find an ending.

In today's Gospel, John writes that the disciples were gathered behind locked doors for fear of the Jews – undoubtedly a well-founded fear. But in another narrative on this same event, Luke infers that they may also have feared an encounter with the risen Jesus. According to Luke, the disciples in that locked upper room were discussing the empty tomb as well as the appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus when they were "startled and terrified" by Jesus standing in their midst. Could that fear have been driven by their guilt and shame? Except for the beloved John and a few women, these disciples had all betrayed or at the very least abandoned Jesus during his time of greatest need. They must have felt at least some anxiety over how the risen Jesus would respond. Imagine their

relief, however, when they realized that Jesus was not there to retaliate or to condemn them for their infidelity, but to offer peace. How many of us could do what Jesus did in that room? Picture a group of your friends gathered together after having let you down in some way. Could you approach them with the words, "Peace be with you?" I am afraid I might start the conversation a little differently. But Jesus showed no anger or disappointment. He showed mercy, offered them peace, emboldened them with the Holy Spirit, and he gave them the mission that the Father had given him -- to forgive sins.

Now, let's turn our attention specifically to Thomas. I have said before, and I firmly believe, that we give Thomas a bum rap. Most of us learned that Thomas was the lone doubter among the disciples. But what really sets Thomas apart from the others was the fact that he was not present when the risen Jesus appeared the first time in that upper room and showed them his wounds. Imagine how Thomas must have felt when the others, filled with joy, told him what had happened. This was the most significant event that any of them had ever experienced, and Thomas missed it. No wonder he reacted the way he did. His declaration that, "I will not believe" was more about the pain of his exclusion than it was about his lack of faith. But Jesus broke through that pain of exclusion when he appeared a week later with Thomas in the room. Jesus welcomed Thomas by inviting him to put his hand in his side. And, Thomas responded with the most profound statement of faith of all time, "My Lord and my God!" This tells us something important about community. Thomas needed to be included. He needed the support of his community to manifest his faith. In a very similar way, we all need the

support of our faith community so that we might live our faith to the fullest. From time to time we might hear someone say, "I don't need a church to help me find God. All I need is to be standing alone on a quiet mountaintop, at a roaring seashore, or in a peaceful field of wildflowers." Baloney! Those are feel-good moments that give us the opportunity to thank God for the beauty of creation. But we truly experience God in our lives through other people sharing our joys and sharing our troubles. That is what the church, our community of faith, does for us. Church is much more than an institution. It is the people of God supporting one another. It may get messy from time to time, but we all need to be included in our community of faith just as Thomas needed to be included in his.

I will soon end this homily as I promised, but before I do, I have to talk a little more about mercy and forgiveness. When Jesus appeared to the disciples in that room, he offered them peace. It was a sign of God's mercy. But behind it all was forgiveness. Had Jesus not forgiven the disciples first, he could not have offered them peace. Then, asking them to receive the Spirit, he gave them their mission to forgive sins. Let's think about that for a moment. Of all the missions he could have given these disciples, he told them to forgive sins. And, that became the purpose of their lives. But the mission to forgive sins did not end with the lives of the disciples. We are all called to forgive even to this day. Nothing is harder than forgiveness, yet nothing is more important. Forgiveness brings us into union with God as well as with one another. Forgiveness enables love. It generates peace. Forgiveness is the centerpiece from which everything else flows.