

**April 16, 2023**

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 118

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Most reflections on today's readings center on the doubts expressed by the Apostle Thomas about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Thomas was not with the others on that evening of the first day, so when they told him later that they had seen the Lord, he replied, "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." But we need to broaden our perspective of this Gospel reading. It is not only about Thomas and his doubts. It is also about the mercy and forgiveness that Jesus extends to his disciples and to us. Early that morning, the risen Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Later he appeared to two other disciples on the road to Emmaus. And now, in the evening of that same day, as the disciples were gathered behind locked doors, afraid for their lives and ashamed of their cowardice during the crucifixion of Jesus, he appears once again and stands in their midst. What would he say to them? What would he do? Would he condemn Judas who had betrayed him and then ran away to take his own life? Would he berate Peter for denying him three times in the courtyard? Would he rebuke all of them for abandoning him at his trial and crucifixion? All of those admonishments would have been well-justified. But Jesus did none of them. Instead, he said simply, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." With those few words, Jesus forgave them, showed them mercy, and sent them on a mission. These appearances of Jesus on the day of his resurrection did much more than reveal his resurrection. They transformed his disciples into true apostles.

The Gospel tells us that the disciples rejoiced when they saw Jesus and heard his words. His simple message, "Peace be with you." calmed

their fears, relieved their anxieties, and wiped away their shame. Such is the power of God's mercy, or Divine Mercy, as we have come to know it since 2000 when Pope John Paul II declared this Second Sunday of Easter Divine Mercy Sunday. God's mercy is total, unconditional, and relentless. It knows no bounds, and it has no end. It is born of love, and it has the power to transform our lives just as it did the lives of Jesus' disciples. We cannot earn God's mercy, but we can accept it. The disciples certainly did not deserve the mercy Jesus gave them on that evening of the first day, but they accepted it, and look what it did for them.

In his homily on this Sunday a year ago, Pope Francis said, "Divine Mercy...makes us aware of the sufferings of our neighbor." It is a reminder to us that we are not only the recipients of God's mercy, but we also have the responsibility of extending that mercy to others. My experience of God's mercy, of being forgiven totally and completely, all the time, opens me to "see" the suffering of my sisters and brothers and to extend to them that same mercy and forgiveness. God's mercy motivates me to work for justice and for peace and to help build a better world in which we all must live. But unlike God's mercy, ours has limits. Very few, if any, of us have the capacity for unconditional love, total forgiveness, or unbounded mercy. We all have our limits, as the saying goes, even priests and deacons.

For many years, deacon formation in the Diocese of Fort Worth took place at the Sid Richardson Boy Scout Ranch on the shore of Lake Bridgeport. Deacon candidates and our wives drove out there one weekend a month for over four years to attend classes, worship, receive counsel, and reflect. I am not sure why we used that facility unless it was to minimize cost and maximize humility. It was rustic, to say the least, and remote – about a 50-mile drive from Fort Worth, with the final 10 miles on an unpaved dirt road. The drive out was not bad. Some couples went on Friday evening and

others on Saturday morning with enough separation between cars that the dust remained tolerable. But the drive back home on Sunday evening was brutal, especially over those first 10 miles of dirt road. The dust was so bad we could hardly breathe, much less see. Our cars accumulated thick layers of dust, both inside and out. Mercy was in full force for most of the time during those formation weekends. We were caring and polite to one another – holding doors, lugging boxes, and making way. But on Sunday evening, after the closing mass, that all changed. No one wanted to be at the end of a line of 25-30 cars eating everyone else's dust. So as the weekend ended, none of us carried boxes or made way for anyone. Instead, we elbowed and pushed our way through the doors, revved our engines, and got on the road as quickly as we could. Mercy had hit a brick wall.

Now I know that showing mercy goes far beyond being polite, but I think you get the point. It also goes beyond forgiveness. Mercy is a concrete and generous response to the needs of others. It can take many forms. Our second reading today, from the First Letter of Saint Peter, praises God for showing us mercy by giving us "a new birth to a living hope" through the resurrection of Jesus. In addition to today's Gospel, two of the most well-known Scriptural examples of mercy are found in the Gospel of Luke – Jesus' parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. The Samaritan risked his life and his wealth to care for the robbery victim left on the side of the road. The father embraced his Prodigal Son and welcomed him home lavishly after the son squandered his inheritance. The mercy we are called to show one another may never approach these Scriptural examples, but these examples should inspire us to push our limits toward the total, unconditional, and relentless mercy of God. If you remember nothing else from today's Gospel, please remember that Jesus did not dwell on the failings of his disciples. Instead, he restored them with mercy, and he empowered them to live to the fullness of their potential. In

the long run, that asks much more of us than simply being sorry for our sins.