

Homily for the Second Sunday in Easter Doubting Thomas

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Today, in the gospel of John (20:19-31) we are with the disciples of Jesus and it is the evening of what we call Easter Sunday. They will not be named apostles until the readings from the *Acts of the Apostles* because, at this point, they are not declaring anything to anybody. They are behind locked and closed doors for fear that there would be reprisals to them as followers of the crucified Jesus.

But let us go back to what we heard last week from the description that John writes about what Mary Magdalene experienced while waiting outside the tomb of Jesus.

Remember, we heard that Mary came to the tomb early on the first day of the week, which would be Easter Sunday, and saw the stone had been removed. She ran and reported this to the disciples. Some came and went in and saw the tomb was empty and then returned to their homes. But Mary stayed on, no doubt distressed that someone had taken the body of her beloved Rabbi, Jesus. She then looks inside the tomb sees two “angels in white” and they ask why is she weeping. She tells them she does not know where Jesus’ body had been taken and then someone, who she presumes to be the gardener, raises the same question. As she turns, she asks him if he knows where the body is. She does not recognize Jesus until he says her name, *Mary (Mariam)*.

Later this month we will have a reading from John 22:27, in which Jesus says “...my sheep **hear** my voice. I know them and they follow me.” Mary, finally through her sorrow, truly HEARS his voice, when he calls her by name Mariam (Hebrew for Mary).

I suspect it is safe to say she was so caught up in her own sorrow she did hear Jesus voice at first! But with recognition comes joy, but as soon as that door is open, it is shut for she is not even to touch him yet she is told, but go to the disciples and tell them that he is ascending: *to my Father and your Father to my God and to your God*. And Mary leaves, perhaps reluctantly and goes and tells the disciples what Jesus has said to her. And in doing so she became what is called “the Apostle to the Apostles” and is so revered by the Orthodox Church and later Western Christendom.

That same day, in the evening, with the doors locked, the disciples are gathered in a state of fear. Justifiably so, for Rome had a history of not only killing leaders of those who revolted against Rome, but also the followers, in the hundreds. While Rome never killed the followers of a non-violent, peaceful movement, only their leader—there could always be first with Rome. And clearly, the Temple leaders did not want to make any waves with Rome. We might call the Sanhedrin “collaborators” ... and for this, we in the western world have colluded, by condemning the whole Jewish people throughout history as if they were responsible for Jesus crucifixion. We chose to forget that it was Rome who crucified him and that our founders were the hundreds of Jews who risked their lives and chose to follow Jesus way.

In our gospel today, we read that Jesus appears to the disciples in a closed and locked house and says, “Peace be with you.” It is not recorded that they responded, “And also with you,” as is the custom then and now. It is safe to presume they were

“struck into silence,” - even Peter. Like Mary, I suspect that they were surprised, even with her announcement that she saw and spoke to Jesus and gave them his message!

Then Jesus showed them his hands and side and they rejoiced! It WAS true what Mary had told them. Jesus was still here!! He again repeats the word peace and breathed on them saying, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. I want to suggest that this was not to say that they did not have the *spirit* within them already, but he activated it and gave what was latent, unknown and unclaimed— a renewed life. Remember, in *Genesis 1:2*, God directs the wind to spread over the formless water. ‘Wind’ as word in Hebrew is *Ruaha*, which also means spirit.

Listen to these lines from *Ezekiel 36:27*, as the word of God, comes to the prophet and he proclaims God’s message to the people of the house of Israel by declaring:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes (my way).

This is pretty close to what Jesus is proclaiming to those who were huddled in fear behind closed doors.

Later, we learn that Thomas, one of the twelve, was not there in the room when Jesus appeared. And when the disciples told them what they had seen and heard he does not believe them and asserts that until he sees the nail marks and touches Jesus side, he will not believe. He would not trust his friends and fellow disciples who you would presume he would trust!

We all have read and heard what happened. He got his proof with a first-hand encounter with the Risen Christ, but I suspect he felt embarrassed or sad when Jesus appeared and showed him his hands and offered to let him touch him. Thomas’ response, without touching Jesus was profound, “My Lord and My God!”

Unfortunately, as James Martin, SJ, writes of this time in the life of the Jesus and his disciples in an enlightening book titled, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, Thomas became unfortunately saddled with the name “Doubting Thomas.” It seems unfair, he writes, that Peter not only doubted but denied Jesus at a crucial juncture and despite this, he was called the *Prince of the Apostles* and has a great basilica named after him in Rome! Tradition has been hard on Thomas, Martin points out, but Jesus was not.

We can take assurance from this story and many others, that the earthly Jesus, and as the Risen Christ, is gentle with doubters. In fact, it can be said that in his in so many ways he takes people where they are. He tells stories to help us think, he forgives, he heals, and above all, loves. We have an open invitation to explore the Risen Christ in ways helpful to each of us: reading stories about him; experiencing him through contemplation; by being with nature, in the forest; or, by engaging with our domesticated animals. All of nature, that has been created for us to steward and care for, and attending to all that, are loved as they are as well.

We are invited in this Easter Season trusting that much will be revealed to us as well if we take the time in a “now” time. Opening our hearts in silence we will come to know, as we travel together or alone trusting that the Risen Christ has called each and every one of us to be and do ... individually and as church work in his name.

My childhood hero was Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) and when he received the Nobel prize for peace, he became even more famous. The closing lines from his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, goes something like this:

*He comes to us as one unknown, without a name as of old, by the lakeside.
He came to those who knew him not and he speaks the same words, "Follow thou
me."*

He sets for us tasks which he has to fulfil for our time.

*He will reveal himself along the way, in our questions, toils, joys and sufferings. and
above all, in his fellowship. For in an ineffable mystery we shall learn through this
experience of love, **who he is!***

Sources:

The New Oxford Annotated Bible. (1991)

Jesus: A Pilgrimage, James Martin, SJ. (2014)

The Quest of the Historical Jesus, Albert Schweitzer. (1906)