

Second Sunday of Easter, "Divine Mercy Sunday"

April 19, 2020

Scripture: Acts 2:43-47; Psalm 118: 2-4, 13-15, 22-24; I Peter 1:3-9;

John 20:19-31

Blessed Divine Mercy Sunday to each of you.

A few weeks ago my daughter, Savanna, asked if we could read out loud the book "Savvy" by Ingrid Law. She had read the book herself and thought we would enjoy it. One time, when it was my turn to read, I came across these words: "You never can tell when a bad thing might make a good thing happen." I read it again. "You never can tell when a bad thing might make a good thing happen."

Nowhere is this quote more true than in the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. "You never can tell when a bad thing might make a good thing happen." The disciples on the first Easter evening are locked in the upper room for fear of the Jews. They are still reeling over the death of their Lord, the empty tomb and the news that Jesus had appeared to Mary. The truth of the resurrection had not yet awakened their spirits. The Resurrection of Jesus is a mighty good thing. But it can take a while, maybe even a lifetime, to let the news penetrate our own weary and burdened lives.

Easter gives birth to a myriad of good things. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ opens pathways of love and life, of peace and hope, of joy and goodness, of Faith and trust, of mercy and forgiveness.

It is especially significant on this Divine Mercy Sunday and during this global pandemic that we linger and contemplate the peace of our Risen and Living Savior. Jesus is alive and the first words he spoke to the disciples after his resurrection are words for us to sit with and rest in. "Peace be with you." This peace is a Divine Mercy.

John writes:

"On the evening of that first day of the week, (*Easter evening*) when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "**Peace be with you.**" When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The

disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you.”**

During this pandemic, many people are sheltering in their homes. Some of us are burdened with fears, others are anxious, some are overwhelmed and feel isolated. Some are grateful for family time and a slower pace. Amidst the many and various emotions that weigh heavy on our hearts, the resurrected Jesus comes to us – right where we are. No locks or doors can prevent the Risen Christ from being present to us speaking words of peace.

Again, the first words the disciples hear from the Risen Lord are, “Peace be with you.” Twice Jesus says these words of Peace. Anytime a word or phrase is repeated in Scripture is it repeated for emphasis. No question, Jesus and the writer of the Gospel want us to know and experience resurrected peace. No matter what walls we may hide behind or live within, whether physical doors or emotional barriers, our resurrected Lord comes to offer us his peace. No matter where we find ourselves “hunkered down” or “sheltering in place,” Jesus knows where we are and comes to speak peace into our weary, troubled, and anxious minds. The gift of peace offered by the Risen Jesus is a peace this world cannot give us. Earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus said to his disciples. “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, nor let them be afraid.”

Eirene, the Greek word for peace, is used 92 times in the New Testament. The Biblical meaning of the word “peace” is broader than our English word. The Hebrew word for peace is “Shalom.” (The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek.) Both words, *Shalom and Eirene*, have a connotation of harmony and completeness. The risen Lord desires to give us harmony, purpose, and right relationship with ourselves, the world, and with God.

The great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “God thinks peace toward his children. “Peace, peace,” says he. He is the God of peace (Philippians 4:9), the fruit of his Spirit is peace (Galatians 5:22), the very name of his Son is peace (Isaiah 9:6). The heaven to which he is bringing us is everlasting peace. And even now the peace of God which passes all understanding keeps our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ (Philippians 4:7). The Suffering and death of Jesus

has brought the peace of God's resurrected Love. "You never can tell when a bad thing might make a good thing happen."

John goes on to tell us the familiar story of Thomas, "Doubting Thomas". We are told that Thomas was not with the other disciples that first Easter evening. I wonder where he was? It makes me think there are different ways we deal with grief and disappointment. Maybe Thomas just needed to be alone. Maybe he fled far from Jerusalem the night of Jesus' arrest. Whatever the reason for his absence, John makes a point of Thomas' doubt and demand for a sign. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

The Scripture tells us a week had gone by and the disciples are again gathered behind locked doors but Thomas is now with them. Again, Jesus comes in their midst and proclaims, "Peace be with you." Thomas has doubts, questions, and even desires certainty to believe and the Risen Jesus comes to offer peace. With his peace, Jesus also offers Thomas his hands and his side with the words, "do not be unbelieving, but believe." Jesus doesn't reprimand Thomas, but encourages his belief.

I am reminded of the father who, pleading for Jesus to heal his son, said to Jesus in Mark 9:24, "I believe, help my unbelief." It seems Thomas was expressing another form of this prayer. "I am unbelieving, help my belief." Is this the prayer of a doubter or a prayer of one who is honest with the challenges of faith?

After witnessing Jesus in the flesh and touching his hands and side, Thomas responds with a profound faith, "My Lord and My God". In this profession of faith, Thomas fulfills John's whole purpose for writing the Gospel. John writes: "Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name."

Thomas' struggle to believe put these grace-filled words on Jesus' lips. "You believe because you've seen me, Blessed are those who do not see, yet believe." This is you and me. We are blessed when in dim light and a world pandemic, we still believe and have the grace to see with eyes of faith, hope, and love.

While writing to the first century Christians in Asia Minor, who were experiencing persecution, Peter offers a similar perspective, “Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet you believe in him.” Truly we are blessed when we believe yet do not fully see.

In closing, I want to share with you an excerpt regarding Pope Francis’ Easter homily last week:

“In a nearly empty St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis celebrated Easter in virtual solitude on Sunday, calling for the world to come together in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

The world is ‘oppressed by a pandemic severely testing our whole human family,’ Francis said, according to a translation provided by the Vatican. In the midst of that suffering, Francis said, the message that Christ has risen is “the contagion of hope.”

‘For many, this is an Easter of solitude lived amid the sorrow and hardship that the pandemic is causing, from physical suffering to economic difficulties,’ Francis said. ‘May Jesus, our Passover, grant strength and hope to doctors and nurses, who everywhere offer a witness of care and love for our neighbors, to the point of exhaustion and not infrequently at the expense of their own health.’”

I appreciate Pope Francis’ use of “Contagion.” While Contagion is most often associated with a quickly spreading disease, such as the coronavirus, it can also mean a rapid communication of an influence or truth.

The message of the Risen Christ truly offers a contagion of hope and a contagion of peace. This contagion started with the Risen Lord’s words “Peace be with you.” The contagion continued through the witness of the apostles and the humble servants, saints and martyrs of all times and places.

We are invited not only to receive the peace of the Risen Christ, but to be a contagion of hope and peace to our families, our communities and our world.

“You never can tell when a bad thing might make a good thing happen.”

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve