

2nd Sunday of Easter – Divine Mercy Sunday

Acts 4:32-35; Psalms 118; I John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31

The state of belief in America is waning. For the first time since Gallop poll has been doing research, 8 decades, less than 50 percent of Americans associate with a church. More astonishing is another poll that indicates over 50 percent of American adults who believe in God, do not believe Jesus is God. What's happening? How have so many lost the Biblical witness that Jesus and God are one? How have so many lost sight of the truth and peace of Jesus' resurrection?

John begins his gospel with the acclamation, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1,14). Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is God. The rest of the Gospel seeks to reveal more and more this truth and inspire such faith.

The Apostle John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that "we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that through this belief we might have life in his name" (John 20:31). The Bible is God's love story and Jesus is God's love made flesh.

The disciple Thomas, a week after the first Easter, upon seeing the wounds of the Risen Jesus proclaims, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas gets it! Thomas experiences the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and knows that Jesus is God. The Risen Jesus desires all of us to believe – to believe Jesus is God, Jesus is Risen, Jesus is Mercy!

Jesus Christ is risen! He is Risen indeed! Our gospel lesson takes us back to the first Easter evening. So much has happened already that first Easter morning and afternoon. John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark. She found the stone had been removed from the tomb. "So she ran to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved." (Many believe that disciple was John, the author of the Gospel.) Mary said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:2). Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it as Mary had said. Peter went in and saw the burial cloths lying there. Then, "the one who ran to the tomb

first went in, he saw and believed.” However, John goes on to say that Peter and the other disciple “did not yet understand what the resurrection meant.” John goes on to describe Mary’s anxiety and grief believing that someone had taken Jesus’ body from the tomb. Weeping outside the tomb, she saw who she thought was a gardener, and says to him, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him” (John 20:15b). The “gardener” was, in fact, the Risen Lord. Jesus called her by name saying, “Mary.” Mary recognized Jesus and she when an announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18).

Even though Mary, John and Peter had all seen the empty tomb, and Mary had shared her encounter with the Risen Lord who called her by name, there was nevertheless confusion and fear among the disciples. They were still trying to grasp the empty tomb and what a resurrection might mean. Out of fear and uncertainty, the disciples are gathered in a locked room. We can imagine some of their thoughts and questions. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Did the Roman guards take the body? Are Mary’s words true? Did she really talk to Jesus? If Jesus is alive, is he angry? Will he condemn us for abandoning him?

While the doors were locked where the disciples were gathered, the Risen Jesus appeared to them. John makes it clear that Jesus didn’t appear in some spiritual form. John said, Jesus “stood in their midst.” The Greek word translated “midst” means **“in the middle”**. Thus, the Risen Jesus came to them and stood in the middle of all their questions, fears and uncertainties. Jesus died in the middle of two thieves and now, in his resurrected body, he comes in the middle of the disciples confusion, fears, anxiety, and questions.

I appreciate the Risen Jesus coming “in the middle.” To stand in the middle is to be totally invested. Jesus stands in the middle of our needs, our struggles, our questions, our fears, our doubts, hopes, and longings.

He stands in the middle of our own attempts to understand the resurrection.

Standing in the middle of the disciples, the first thing Jesus does is offer his peace. That first Easter evening when the disciples were locked in the room Jesus stands in the middle of them saying, “Peace be with you.” Twice (for emphasis) Jesus says, “peace be with you.”

Notice, there is no mention of the disciples abandoning Jesus after his arrest. No mention of Peter denying Jesus three times. Jesus has not anger, but mercy and peace.

The Resurrected Jesus stands in the middle of our lives as well and offers his peace. Regardless of what we have done or how many questions or fears we may have, Jesus comes in the middle of our fears, our longings, our marriages, our relationship with our children, our work places, and our community. The Risen Lord comes in the middle of our existence. The Resurrected Jesus stands in the middle to give us His peace and mercy. No matter how far we run from Him, not matter how we have rejected His love, not matter how many ways we have locked ourselves away, the Risen Jesus comes to us. The Risen Jesus stands in the middle with us and for us.

We desperately need peace in our lives. A peace only the Risen Lord can give.

Earlier in John's gospel Jesus said, "Peace I give to you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives, let not your hearts be troubled neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). Jesus also said, "I have shared this with you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33).

After the events of Jesus' arrest, brutal suffering and crucifixion, the disciples were afraid, troubled, and unsure - with a host of emotions and questions engulfing their minds and hearts. Yet, Jesus came in the middle of their fears and uncertainties to give them his peace, healing and mercy.

In the middle, Jesus gives the disciples his peace and then shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. Jesus freely revealed his wounds to them. The wounds of Jesus are part of his peace and the glory of His resurrection. The Risen Jesus never ceases to understand our own wounds, our fears, our questions - that in itself should give us peace. What appeared to be Jesus' greatest defeat, his greatest humiliation, turned out to be a sign of victory and a promise of hope and mercy.

The resurrected body of Jesus is a mystery since we are told that the doors were locked. Yet, Jesus' body is present, his wounds are visible. As Christians we believe

in the resurrection of the body. In the mercy of the Risen Lord, our wounds are destined for healing.

Not only does the Risen Jesus stand in the middle to give the disciples his peace, he also gives the disciples his Power and his Purpose – The power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus breaths within them and His purpose sending them out to be vessels of his forgiveness and mercy. As Baptized children of God we too have received the power of the Holy Spirit. We too have been sent by God with the purpose of Jesus - to be vessels and ambassadors of Jesus' mercy and forgiveness to the world.

John goes on to tell us, "A week later on the first day of the week when the disciples were behind locked doors, Jesus again appears "in the middle." This time Jesus stands not only in the middle of the disciples ongoing questions, but specifically Jesus stands in the middle of Thomas' doubts. Again, He stands in the middle with total mercy and love. There is no mention of why the disciples are still locked in a room. There is no rebuke of Thomas, just a merciful offering of his peace. In the middle, the Risen Jesus always offers his peace. And as he did to the other disciples on the first Easter, he does for Thomas – showing Thomas his hands and his side.

The Risen Jesus knows all the details of our struggles. He knows all our doubts and fears and uncertainties. It is Divine Mercy that the Risen Jesus comes in the middle of our lives and offers His Risen and eternal peace, a peace the world is unable to give. After Jesus showed Thomas his hands and his side, Thomas proclaimed, "My Lord and My God." These words of faith are among the greatest confession of who Jesus is in all the Scriptures. These words fulfill in Thomas what God desires for us all – to know and believe that Jesus is Lord and God, our Lord and our God. Thomas received Jesus in the middle of his struggles to believe. In the middle, Thomas found Jesus' mercy and grace to believe. Jesus then responds to Thomas with a gift of mercy to each of us. "You believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29). Blessed are those, blessed are we, who embrace Jesus in the middle of our lives even though we do not fully see.

I don't know all the reasons many people do not believe Jesus is God, but it saddens my heart because Jesus came to reveal God's Divine Mercy to each of us.

Jesus suffered and died and rose from the dead that we might know of God's limitless love, that we might know Divine Mercy, that we might know and believe God stands in the middle of our lives offering us his peace, mercy and love.

In his book, *Bruised and Wounded*, Ronald Rolheiser writes, "Twice, in John's Gospel, Jesus goes right through locked doors, stands in the middle of a huddled circle of fear, and breathes out peace. That image of Jesus going through locked doors (*and standing with us*) is surely the most consoling thought within the entire Christian faith (and is unrivalled in any other world religion)."

This week we received the heart breaking and heart wrenching news that Janet's cousin Gene's only child, Lauren, and her husband, Kamel, were both tragically killed in an auto accident on their way home from an Easter weekend get-away. They leave behind their two young children. How does one walk through such sorrow? How does a family find hope in the midst of such devastating and unimaginable loss? Only by the grace and love of supportive family and friends. Only by the mercy and presence of the Risen Jesus who stands in the middle with them in their sorrow and cries of anguish.

The Risen Jesus, our Lord and God, stands in the middle of all our cries of sorry and suffering. The Risen Jesus stands in the middle of the chaos of our world. The Risen Jesus stands in the middle of the ongoing COVID pandemic. Lord, give us eyes to see you and a heart to welcome you in the middle of our lives, our fears, our doubts and questions. And by your grace, give us courage to share with others the difference your Divine Mercy and Risen love make in the middle of all we do.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me. Please also pray for Lauren and Kamel's children and their families and loved ones – and all who are suffering such loss and pain.

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

Deacon Steve

