

Homily – April 7th, 2024 – Second Sunday of Easter



It's not the Second Sunday *after* Easter but the Second Sunday *of* Easter. And only since the year 2000 has this Sunday become known as the Sunday of Divine Mercy.

In Poland, back in 1925, a 19-year-old teenage girl fled to a convent without her parents' permission. Her name was Helena Kowalska. Three years later she professed vows as a nun and took on the name Sr. Faustina. She had powerful visions of conversations with Jesus and, of course, they thought she was crazy. (Mystics like me and her are often mistaken for "crackpots," but later the truth prevails and we're vindicated). Psychological tests proved she wasn't crazy and that the visions and messages, she was receiving, were real. She was encouraged to write these messages down in a diary, and you can read this book entitled, Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul. Before Sr. Faustina died of tuberculosis at the young age of 33, she communicated with whoever would listen that Jesus wanted, above all, to be a refuge of mercy for all people.

It was in the year 2000 that the late Pope John Paul II canonized Sr. Faustina, and five years later, in 2005, Pope John Paul II died on the Vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday. Divine Mercy Sunday is not a feast with a long history, but it does lend itself well to the Second Sunday of Easter where each year we get the story of the Risen Lord appearing to his disciples behind the locked doors. (Just as an aside, Pope Francis says that of all the names we can use to describe God, the best word is "mercy").

Getting back to the Gospel, this story unfolds over two Sundays. Thomas wasn't present, as we heard, when Jesus appeared to the disciples on that first Easter

Sunday. Thomas doubts the story of the other disciples when they tell him how the Risen Lord appeared to them. I sometimes think Thomas gets a bit of a bum rap for his lack of faith. After all, where were the other disciples a week after Jesus appeared to them and supposedly breathed his Spirit onto them? Back behind closed doors again!

It seems that Jesus has to do everything at least twice before his followers get it. Seeing and believing apparently are not enough. I personally don't think sacraments are enough. I'm baptized, I'm confirmed, I'm ordained...big deal! Adolf Hitler was baptized and confirmed; some good it did him or humanity. Just seeing, believing, and celebrating sacrament is not enough. What's required is that we are sent forward into the world so that the seeing, believing and sacraments can make a difference in our world. The Risen Lord was sending the disciples forth just as the Father sent him forth in life. They needed to get out from behind the locked doors of their lives and to continue what Jesus did—teach, heal and forgive.

The disciples were to go back to the Temple and teach as Jesus did, but this time the Temple would be very different. In Matthew's version of the Passion, when Jesus breathed his last on the Cross, it says that the curtain in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. This curtain wasn't a flimsy shower curtain from Walmart. The Temple curtain was 4-inches-thick, 70 feet high, weighed four tons and required 300 priests to carry it in place. The purpose of the curtain was to separate the "holy" from the "unholy". The Latin word for temple is "fanum", and everything (before) or outside the temple is considered "pro-fanum" from which we get the word "profane." The "holy" was what was *inside* the Temple and the "unholy" was on the *outside*. With one last cry of Jesus on the Cross, the curtain tore in two. What we deemed "holy" and "right" by our standards was now unleashed into the entire world no longer captive in the inner room of the temple. Jesus' death ended the divisions of who was "in" and who was "out."

God's breath at the beginning of creation sent life into the clay of the earth and human beings emerged from it. Spirit and matter came together and life emerged for the first time. Jesus breathed out on the Cross bringing Spirit and matter

together when we thought a curtain could keep them separate. The curtain splits in two and life is unleashed for the second time. When Jesus appears to his frightened disciples in the Upper Room, he breathes on them his Spirit and life emerges for the third time.

With this appearance to Thomas and the other disciples, Jesus did not ask for retribution toward his persecutors. He did not ask for a “just war” on his oppressors. He didn’t ask his disciples to start a new religion. He didn’t ask them to write a book of Canon Law. He didn’t ask them to go out and build cathedrals and basilicas in his honor. And Christ certainly didn’t ask them to erect curtains so as to decide who is worthy and who was not, who was in and who was out. Rather, the Risen Lord sent his disciples forward with the grace of the Holy Spirit to do one thing: ***Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, and whose sins you hold onto, they are held onto.*** He asked them to go forth and forgive others just as he had done. We are all called to forgive. That’s the way we show mercy and that’s the way we breathe life into the world of relationships.

We are called to forgive our spouses, our children, our parents, our co-workers, our priests, our Church, our institutions, our government, and even those who violate us. But probably the most important and the most difficult person to forgive is always ourselves. Very few of us even want to go there. Maybe that’s why Jesus had to come to and single out an individual—Thomas. Thomas is every one of us. No matter what we’ve done, God’s love will always find a way of splitting the curtain and unleashing mercy in us. That was the message to his disciples and the same message repeated to Sr. Faustina.

You can almost picture Christ shaking his head after 1,900 years and saying, ‘They missed my point! Let me try it again!’ when he told Sr. Faustina, “Every soul who believes and trusts in my mercy will have it.”

-Fr. Phil