

## SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

ANNO † DOMINI 2022

John 20:19-31

Unbelievable. Thomas is such a fool, isn't he? How could he not believe what all the other disciples were telling him? "We have seen the Lord!" they said. But Thomas, who was not there on the evening of that day, the first day of the week, when Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to His disciples in the flesh, refused to believe, saying, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe." What, did he think they were joking? Pulling a fast one on him? "April Fools, Thomas! He is not risen. We're all going to die, if they find us!" No, that's crazy. And in spite of the fact that he once said to his fellow disciples, "Let us go also, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16), poor Thomas has earned the reputation of being a doubter.

But that's really not fair, because, if you go back and read through the resurrection accounts, Thomas is not the only one who doubts. Last week, we heard about the women who went to the tomb, taking spices that they might go and anoint Jesus' body, and how they ran away in holy fear at the angels' announcement that "He has risen; He is not here." Luke then records that they went and told these things to the apostles, "but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." They thought it was nonsense. They doubted.

After this, John tells us that Mary Magdalene returned and stood outside the tomb crying. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where Jesus' body had lain. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Notice, she doesn't speak as if she believes that Jesus has been *raised* from the dead. She speaks as if she believes that Jesus *is* dead and that His body has merely been moved. Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." So, Mary saw the angels. She saw Jesus. She had a *conversation* with Him. And yet, she did not believe it. She doubted.

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were doing this, Jesus Himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing Him. And He asked them what they were talking about. They told Him all about Jesus' death and crucifixion, His promise to

rise again on the third day, and the report of the women at the tomb. They knew everything. They had all the information. But even they were slow of heart to believe. They doubted.

On the evening of that day, Jesus stood among His disciples and said to them, "Peace to you." But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" They doubted. They *all* doubted. Every single one of them. It wasn't just Thomas. *Nobody* took it on faith. *No* one believed the evidence, not even when it was literally staring them in the face. How can this be?

Because the resurrection *is* unbelievable. It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand. It's not as if any of *us* has ever seen someone come back to life again from the dead. That's not usual. And Jesus didn't just die, He was brutally *murdered*. The prophet Isaiah described His appearance post-crucifixion as "beyond human semblance" (52:14), i.e., He was so marred by the beatings, the thorns, and the nails that He didn't even look *human* anymore. And this is the guy we're supposed to believe rose from the dead?

In fact, the resurrection is *so* unbelievable that people have come up with all sorts of different theories to try to explain what "really happened." Karl Venturini, a 19th century German theologian, said that Jesus did not really die on the cross but only "swooned," or fainted; later, when He regained consciousness, He escaped from the tomb and managed to convince His disciples that He had risen. Another theory, based on Mary's episode at the tomb, posits that Jesus' body was indeed *stolen*, either by His disciples or possibly a grave robber. Yet another claims that the disciples only *imagined* that they had seen the Lord. Or, some say it was just a good old-fashioned *hoax*, a get-rich-quick scheme hatched by the power-hungry disciples.

Ultimately, however, the problem of doubting the resurrection is not one of misunderstanding nor of an overactive imagination. It's a problem of *sin*. Ever since the Fall, human beings are by nature without true fear, love, or trust in God. We *hate* God. Our hearts are inclined only to evil. We are spiritually deaf, dumb, and blind. This explains how Jesus can foretell His death and resurrection *three times* to men He's just spent the last three years of His life with, saying, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day" (Matthew 17:22-23), and they can *still* be caught completely unawares. You'd think it'd be obvious, but the apostle Paul writes, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). It doesn't matter if you have all the information. "Even the demons believe—and shudder!" (James 2:19).

No one can by his own reason or strength say "Jesus is Lord." It's not just Thomas. We *all* doubt. We all question the claims of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying, "Unless you show me, unless you heal me, unless you make all my problems go away, I will never believe."

But then look at what Jesus does. He comes to Mary and calls her by name, and she does not disbelieve, but believes. He comes to His disciples, hiding behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews, and says to them, "Peace be with you," and they do not disbelieve, but believe. He comes to Thomas and invites him to touch His wounds, and Thomas does not disbelieve, but believes, saying, "My Lord and my God!" He does not get *angry* with those who doubt, but comes and makes the unbelievable believable.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). That describes the vast majority of believers, including you and me. We have not seen Jesus. We have not had the opportunity to touch His nail-scarred hands, and to place our hands into His side. But even if we had, it wouldn't matter. Because faith comes from *hearing*; it is the *gift* of God. So, *if* you believe, even if that faith hangs on by a thread, then you are blessed, because it means that Jesus has come to you and performed a miracle in your heart. He has convinced you of the truth. These bones are far too dry to live on their own. We were more than just blind in our sin, we were *dead*. But God has breathed new life into us. He has made us alive together with Christ, calling us to faith by the Gospel, the good news that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised. He did not swoon, His body was not stolen, the disciples didn't imagine it, nor did they make it all up. The tomb was empty, because Jesus got up and walked out of it, no longer humbled to the point of death on a cross, but exalted to the glory of God the Father.

It also means that, *when* you doubt, the best place to go is to *Him*, drawing near to His throne of grace in time of need. There is no one better suited to strengthen your faith than the One who freely gives it. "This is He who came by water and blood," writes John in today's Epistle (1 John 5:4-10). No doubt a reference to the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' pierced side on the cross, these words also point us to the *means* by which the Spirit testifies to doubting sinners, working faith in Him who by His death has conquered death for all.

We will witness/witnessed one of them later/earlier today in the Baptism of little Stella. Using just plain water, God will make/made the unbelievable believable, uniting her, a doubting Thomas, with Christ Jesus in a death like His, so that she will one day certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. The same promise was made to you in your Baptism. *You* were washed, *you* were sanctified, *you* were justified in Jesus' name and by God's Spirit. You too are a member of His Son, Jesus Christ, and an heir of

all the treasures of heaven, being kept safe in the holy ark of the Christian Church. Doubts or not, your sins are forgiven, dead and buried in a watery grave.

As for the blood, the Spirit testifies that as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup (of the Lord's Supper), you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. You proclaim that His death was for *you*. That you receive the *benefits* of His death whenever you partake of His true body and blood. No, you may not have seen Jesus, but in the Sacrament you receive Him. You may not have touched Jesus' wounds, but here you are healed *by* them, your heart sprinkled clean and your faith fortified, as often as you need it, to life everlasting.

Both are made powerful by the Word, the same Gospel promise of which John says, "These things are written that you may *believe*" (John 20:31).

So, never say never. There is nothing more certain in this world than the fact that our Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after our skin has been thus destroyed, yet in our flesh we too shall see God (Job 19:25-26). "For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree" (1 John 5:7). And God's testimony is greater than any other, all the theories of man. Men are fallen, but God is holy and perfect and true, not to mention gracious. He is slow to anger, coming to sinners who doubt and saying, "Peace be with you." He comforts them and encourages them not to give up, not to disbelieve, but to believe. And because faith is a gift, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. The unbelievable is believable. Christ is risen (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!), and we have peace with God.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

*Soli Deo gloria*