

Holy Ghost

Sunday Readings

Scripture study

Second Sunday of Easter
Cycle C
April 11, 2010

Holy Ghost Catholic Church
Knoxville, Tennessee

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father and God of mercy,
we no longer look for Jesus
among the dead,
for He is alive and has become
the Lord of life.
From the waters of death
you raise us with Him
and renew Your gift of life within us.
Increase in our minds and hearts
the risen life we share with Christ
and help us to grow as Your people
toward the fullness of eternal life with You.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

First Reading

Acts 5:12-16

¹² Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles. They were all together in Solomon's portico. ¹³ None of the others dared to join them, but the people esteemed them. ¹⁴ Yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, were added to them. ¹⁵ Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. ¹⁶ A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

Salvation history and the story of Jesus' ministry did not end with the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, their final phase only begins with the Resurrection. In the weeks that follow Easter, the first readings for Sunday recount the early years of that final phase. They recount the beginnings of the church.

These weeks are the only time in the Sunday liturgical calendar in which there is no reading from the Old Testament. Instead, the Lectionary follows an ancient Christian liturgical practice and gives us a series of readings from the Acts of the Apostles.

In today's reading we hear that the apostles have begun to minister to the people in the same way that Jesus had done. They have found that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring wholeness (health) to people in the name of Jesus.

The apostles were accustomed to gather in the part of the Jerusalem temple known as Solomon's Portico. Solomon's Portico was the name given to one of two great colonnades which surrounded the temple area on the eastern side. The temple is identified as a place of meeting for the apostles in Acts 2:46. The portico is a location where Jesus had preached and taught during his earthly ministry (John 10:23). It became a gathering place for his followers who continued his work.

They were well known for bringing about cures and other wonders. Most people seem to have been afraid to come too close to the apostles, either because of the divine power that they perceived in them or because they were afraid of getting involved in the tensions that were already growing between the apostles and the Jewish religious authorities. Yet the people esteemed the apostles and became believers in great numbers:

The people's faith in the apostles' power was so great that they were eager to have their sick touched even by Peter's shadow. Word about the cures had spread to the towns outside Jerusalem, and country folk in large numbers came into town to have their sick cured of ills of body, mind and spirit.

Here we have a vignette of the church as it was in its earliest days: the apostles gathered as one in the context of the Jewish temple; wonders of healing; continuous and impressive increase of membership. Luke's description also affirms the fact that the early church assembled in public, where their faith and courage could be witnessed by all.

One thing that would soon change or at least be clarified would be the church's relationship to Judaism. One of the most fundamental questions the early church's leaders had to face was whether a person had to become Jewish in order to be a follower of Christ. In last week's pivotal reading (which comes later in Acts than this Sunday's reading), we saw how Peter was led to welcome gentiles into the church on non-Jewish conditions. Much of the rest of Acts will concern itself with the implications of extending the salvation of Christ to the gentiles. It would not be long before peaceable gatherings of the apostles in Solomon's Portico would become unthinkable.

1. What leads people to seek membership in the Church today?
2. What would your response have been if you had been among those listening to the preaching of the Apostles and witnessing all that is described in today's readings?

Second Reading

Revelation 1:9-13, 17-19

⁹ I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus. ¹⁰I was caught up in spirit on the Lord's day and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet, ¹¹ which said, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lamp stands ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, wearing an ankle-length robe, with a gold sash around his chest.

¹⁷ When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead. He touched me with his right hand and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld. ¹⁹ Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards."

Although the Lectionary readings for the Sundays after Easter have no relation to one another on any given Sunday, they are all somehow connected with the resurrection of Jesus. The gospel readings for the first three Sundays give us the narratives of Jesus' post-

resurrection appearances. The gospel for the fifth Sunday of Easter is about the good shepherd, the risen Christ looking after His flock. For the last two Sundays we have gospel readings from Jesus' last supper discourse in John's gospel in which Jesus encourages His followers to look beyond the events of the next few days to a more distant future.

The first readings for these Sundays are about the results of the Resurrection in the young Church as described in The Acts of the Apostles.

The second readings are series of readings from books of the New Testament that "fit in especially well with the spirit of joyous faith and sure hope proper to this season." For year C we have readings from the last book of the New Testament, The Book of Revelation. This book deals with the ultimate outcomes of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Revelation is a book whose intent is to offer encouragement and hope to its readers in time of tribulation. The tribulation may have been a persecution, or, more likely, a time of rejection and alienation during which Christians were being excluded from ordinary society because of their refusal to take part in the worship of the emperor that was expected as part of ordinary civic life. The encouragement that Revelation offers comes in the form of visions and narratives that deal with God's involvement in the present world and with His future triumph in the world still to come. It's important to be aware that Revelation is not intended to give us a set of specific predictions about the future, but rather to remind us of ultimate salvation and ultimate victory that began with the resurrection of Jesus. It is a difficult book, not so much because its content is obscure or enigmatic, but because the means that the author uses to communicate his message (e.g., symbolic colors, garments, numbers) are not the means that we would employ for the same purpose.

The first part of Revelation consists of letters from God to seven local churches. Their general message is that God knows what is going on here in our world and that He has expectations about the behavior of Christian believers. The reading for this second Sunday of Easter is the introduction to this first part of the book. It comes immediately after the verses that give the title of the book and its opening salutation.

The Book of Revelation is a unique book in the New Testament in that it narrates extraordinary visions and audition that concern things unseen and unheard by human beings. It is the only prophetic book in the New Testament. In the prologue of this book the author is referred to simply as God's servant. He does not call himself an apostle or a disciple of Jesus. He does not even claim the title of prophet. He authorizes his

message by describing its heavenly origin. The earliest Christian writer to comment on the authorship of Revelation is Justin Martyr (ca. A. D. 160); he identifies the author as John, one of the apostles of Christ. Irenaeus (ca A. D. 180-190) is the earliest writer to say that both Revelation and the fourth gospel were written by John, the disciple of the Lord.

The Book of Revelation is primarily a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in September of A. D. 70. Replete with bizarre signs, symbols, numbers and beasts, apocalyptic literature was not intended as a forecast of coming events but as a message of encouragement to the author's contemporaries who were suffering persecution during the last years of the reign of Emperor Domitian (ca. 92-96 C.E.). During his tenure, Domitian was declared a god by the Roman Senate. At his insistence, statues of him were erected throughout the empire; all peoples subject to Rome were to venerate the statue and acclaim Domitian as "Dominus et Deus noster" (our Lord and God).

While Judaism and its adherents were tolerated by Rome, Christianity, considered an aberrant sect of Judaism, was not. In the mid-eighties A. D. when the breach between the church and the synagogue became absolute, Christians became completely vulnerable to Roman persecution.

Today's pericope has been excerpted from the authors' inaugural vision in which the glorious and victorious Son of Man, i.e., the risen Jesus, commissions John, the seer, to record the visions that will be communicated to him. Having written down all that he will see and hear, the author was to share his experiences with seven of the churches in Asia Minor. Portrayed as seven lamp stands, the churches were to remember Jesus' mandate to be the light of the world and to take heart in the fact that the triumphant Christ would not allow anyone to extinguish them.

Some scholars think that the seven churches listed here were chosen because of their particular situation at the time. They stand for the entire Church universal, and therefore what is said in the seven letters is addressed to all Christians who, in one way or another, find themselves in situations similar to that of these churches.

The lampstands symbolize the churches at prayer; they remind us of the seven-branches candlestick (the *menorah*) which used to burn in the temple of Jerusalem and which is described in detail in Exodus 25:31-40.

Our Lord used the title "son of man" to refer to Himself (cf. Matthew 9:6; Matthew 10:45; Luke 6:22). It is always used in John's Gospel to indicate Christ's divinity and transcendence (cf. John 1:51, 3:14; 9:35; 12:23).

"I am the first and the last" (verse 17) refers to the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the

Greek alphabet; everything is encompassed in Him. The Lord says of Himself in Isaiah 44:6 "I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but me" (see also Isaiah 48:12).

"I hold the keys" (verse 18) is the symbol of authority. The possession of these keys means that he who rose from the dead is now *master* of life and death. This assurance was intended to dispel the fears of the persecuted, so that one day they also would share in the victory of Christ over all.

1. How does John's experience with the risen Christ affect your experience with the risen Christ?
2. How would you responded if you had seen this vision?

Gospel

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, 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." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

²⁴ Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶ Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe."

²⁸ Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are written in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

Given the fact that this gospel, or a portion of it, is

proclaimed no less than six times during the three year Sunday lectionary cycle, it would appear that the model of the church herein represented warrants serious consideration.

First and foremost, John has portrayed a community of fearful disciples who clung to one another for strength and support. With the doors locked, they found security in one another and in the shared memories of one whom they believed had died on the cross. Second, this model of the early church knew the strength of the risen Jesus' presence and the power and peace of the Spirit which he breathed into them. Third, the nascent community was diverse in its strengths and weaknesses. Even though Thomas doubted their claim that they had experienced the risen Jesus, the other disciples did not shun him or deny him a welcome with the assembly. With their support, Thomas' doubt grew to full faith. Fourth, the community was mandated to be both a model of and a means of extending forgiveness to others. Fifth, the community's parameters were enlarged and its membership expanded to include all whom Jesus pronounced as blest, because we have not seen, but have believed. Sixth, the community took care to remember, preserve, order and hand on the signs and traditions about Jesus, so that through faith, all may have life in his name.

Highly apologetic in character and content, this gospel also modeled the community's growing faith and understanding of the resurrection. That there was continuity between the Jesus who died on the cross and the risen Lord who suddenly appeared in their midst is shown in the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. That Jesus was not merely resuscitated but transformed is illustrated in his mysterious entrance into the locked room. Some, in the community, who were influenced by the gnostic intolerance of all things material and corporal, were inclined to overlook the cross and concentrate solely on the risen, glorious Jesus. The evangelist's portrayal and his frank admission of Jesus' scars served as a reality check.

In addition to Jesus' visible wounds, the invitation for Thomas to take his finger and examine his hands and to put his hand into Jesus' side is a further affirmation that his risen body was not simply a vision or figment of a community's collective and wishful imagination. Jesus' resurrection was as real as Thomas' doubt. Thomas' experience of the risen Jesus called him to move beyond pragmatism, logic and the sensational aspects of the event to a committed faith. As to whether or not Thomas actually touched Jesus, John has chosen to remain silent. Faith does not come from seeing or even touching. Faith is God's gift to those who will listen, hear and live by the challenge of Jesus: "Do not persist in your unbelief but *believe!*"

The story is told of an imaginary conversation that

took place between St. Michael and Jesus after his ascension into heaven. St. Michael asked, "Jesus, now that you have returned to heaven what are your plans for reaching the world with the Good News?" Jesus replied, "I've given the task to my disciples." St. Michael, knowing that the disciples were "unlearned and ignorant" people, asked, "What is your back-up plan if they fail?" Jesus replied, "I have no back-up plan!"

And so it is, Jesus fully entrusted the task of world evangelization to us, his Church. When Jesus appeared to the Church he gave them peace, he gave them purpose, and he gave them power—and he gave them a mission. We believe and have just recently celebrated that we too were there at the cross, fully included in the saving work of Christ. It is essential that we understand that we were also there, fully included in the commission which Christ gave to his followers. If we profess our inclusion in the first truth and deny our inclusion in the second truth, we deceive ourselves. Full experience of the saving work of Christ propels believers to willingly participate in the mission of Christ. It (salvation) is the cause that brings about the effect; desire to share the Good News. If there is no urgency or willingness to participate in the mission we must question whether we have fully experienced and understood the gift of salvation. In Pope Paul VI's words, "It is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn." (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 24)

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1. To whom is the commission, in verse 21, given?
 2. To what extent are you able to identify with Thomas?
 3. Verse 31 speaks of the need to believe and the hope of believing. What synonyms define and amplify what Jesus meant when he spoke of believing?

Closing Prayer

Lord God,
we bless You for giving us
new birth from above.
Grant that we may never be parted by sin
from the Church, the Body of Christ,
to which we have been added.
Let our baptism be a pledge of Your kingdom,
through Jesus Christ Your Son,
Who once was dead, but Who now lives
forever and ever. Amen. Alleluia.
