

HOMILY FOR THE EASTER SUNDAY

Sunday, 4 APRIL 2021

Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 44

Reading I Acts 4:32-35

The community of believers was of one heart and mind,
and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own,
but they had everything in common.

With great power the apostles bore witness

to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,

and great favor was accorded them all.

There was no needy person among them,

for those who owned property or houses would sell them,

bring the proceeds of the sale,

and put them at the feet of the apostles,

and they were distributed to each according to need.

Responsorial Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

R. (1) Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.

Let the house of Israel say,

“His mercy endures forever.”

Let the house of Aaron say,

“His mercy endures forever.”

Let those who fear the LORD say,

“His mercy endures forever.”

R. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.

I was hard pressed and was falling,

but the LORD helped me.

My strength and my courage is the LORD,

and he has been my savior.

The joyful shout of victory

in the tents of the just:

R. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.

The stone which the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone.

By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.
This is the day the LORD has made;
let us be glad and rejoice in it.
R. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.

Reading II 1 Jn 5:1-6

Beloved:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God,
and everyone who loves the Father
loves also the one begotten by him.
In this way we know that we love the children of God
when we love God and obey his commandments.
For the love of God is this,
that we keep his commandments.
And his commandments are not burdensome,
for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world.
And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.
Who indeed is the victor over the world
but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?
This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ,
not by water alone, but by water and blood.
The Spirit is the one that testifies,
and the Spirit is truth.

Alleluia Jn 20:29

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
You believe in me, Thomas, because you have seen me, says the Lord;
Blessed are those who have not seen me, but still believe!
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Jn 20:19-31

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."
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.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit.

Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained.”
Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,
was not with them when Jesus came.
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 nailmarks
and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”
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.”
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.”
Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!”
Jesus said to him, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”
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.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Happy Easter.

For many years, I have asked myself a question which many of you might find puzzling.

The question is this: Will there be multiple sclerosis in heaven?

Multiple sclerosis has been my constant companion for over twenty years. This uninvited guest has no plans to leave. There is no cure. Will the resurrection of my body on the Last Day send my companion packing? Will I leave MS in my tomb when I rise from the dead? Or, will there be multiple sclerosis in heaven?

I presume that some of you are surprised that I would even ask such a question. Heaven will be paradise... right? How could there be multiple sclerosis in heaven? Stop being morbid.

To all this, I can only say: not so fast. Listen closely to the Gospel reading for this Sunday.

John, in telling the story of the appearance of the Risen Christ to Thomas, is asking if there is multiple sclerosis in heaven. Of course, he doesn't mention MS. Instead, he is trying to imagine what the resurrected body of Christ like. By extension, he is asking: What will our resurrected bodies be like?

It's the evening of the first day of the week. Jesus has been executed by the Roman authorities. His body was hurriedly placed in its tomb. Then, on the third day, women from his group went to the tomb to anoint the body of their dead rabbi and returned filled with fear and confusion. The tomb was empty.

That evening, with the disciples still confused and fearful behind locked doors, Jesus came and stood in their midst. Apparently, resurrected bodies aren't slowed down by locked doors.

And [he] said to them, "Peace be with you."

I am fascinated by what happens next.

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

What is this about? The Risen Christ is showing his "hands and his side" as a way of assuring the disciples that what they were seeing was not a hallucination or chimera. And the great sign that it is really their crucified rabbi standing before them is that he has the wounds on his hands and in his side to prove it. In effect, the Risen Christ is saying to them, "It's really me."

This is what fascinates me.

John is telling us that the Lord is risen and that the great sign that it is truly Jesus, who was crucified, is that we can see his wounds.

The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you."

After this comes the story of the Apostle Thomas. (St. Thomas, by the way, is the founder of Father Jojo's local church in India, half a millennium before Christianity was preached in Northern Europe. The Church is really old).

Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,
was not with them when Jesus came.

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 nailmarks
and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

Once again, John focuses on the wounds of Jesus as the great sign that the Risen Christ is really the crucified rabbi.

A week later, the disciples were gathered and Thomas was with them this time. Once again, locked doors do not seem to be an obstacle to a resurrected body.

Jesus came, although the doors were locked,
and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.”
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.”

And Thomas, now a witness to the Risen Christ, comes to a *metanoia*, a realization of Easter Faith.

Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

I am fascinated by the fact that, for John, a resurrected body retains all its wounds. In John’s telling of it, a resurrected body has been “glorified” (it is not bothered by locked doors) but remains wounded. In fact, for John, the wounds on the resurrected body of Christ are the great sign that it is truly Jesus, the crucified rabbi, who is risen from the dead.

I am fascinated by all this because my body is wounded too. I have three lesions on my spinal cord, all in my neck. For reasons my doctors are struggling to understand, my immune system creates antibodies that attack my spinal cord. There is no stopping this. The lesions become inflamed and eventually scar-over. Nerve-signals traveling to my right leg don’t pass down the cord smoothly anymore. You can see this in the way I walk. People with this medical problem end up with multiple scars on their spinal cord. For medical purposes, my doctors use the ancient Greek word for scarring: “sclerosis.”

Of course, I am not the only one with wounds. We all have wounds to show (or hide). Many of us have wounds that mark our body; all of us have wounds that mark our heart. All of us bear the ancient wound that marks our soul and comes down to us from Adam.

All of us.

John is saying that we will retain these wounds when we enter the resurrected life of heaven. Just as Jesus’s wounds marked his resurrected body, my three lesions will mark my resurrected body. Your wounds will mark your body as well.

But will there be multiple sclerosis in heaven? I think John's Gospel offers a profound insight into this question. John is telling us that the wounds on my spinal cord will remain, just as Jesus's wounds remained on his hands and in his side. It's our relationship with our wounds that is being transformed. It's the meaning of what we suffer in this world that is being transfigured.

The old way of saying this would be to say that my lesions will be "glorified" when my body is resurrected. In the resurrection of the flesh, our wounds will remain, but they will be resurrected wounds – wounds that testify to the mysterious working of God's grace in bringing a new form of life out of death.

And the abundance of John's teaching goes even deeper.

Remember: for John, the great sign that it is truly the crucified Jesus that appears to Thomas is that Thomas can reach out and place his hand into the wound in Jesus's side. In the depth of this awakening of faith, all Thomas can say is,

"My Lord and my God!"

The wounds suffered by Jesus on the cross have marked the Risen Christ as the one who was crucified. This is how we know who the Risen One is none other the rabbi who taught us with parables, cured the sick, calmed the stormy waters and wept over the grave of his friend, Lazarus.

So also, our wounds mark us. Our wounds make us utterly unique individuals, holy and precious in the eyes of God. God sees this truth about us, even if our fellow human beings cannot or even refuse to see it.

God recognizes us by the wounds our bodies bear.

In the Gospel, Thomas recognizes that it is truly Jesus standing before him because he can touch his rabbi's wounded hands with his fingers and place his hand into the wound in Jesus's side.

And in the resurrection of our wounded bodies, we will appear to Christ, much as Christ appeared to Thomas. And Christ will say to us: is it really you? Is it really my beloved disciple, my faithful one?

Then, like Thomas, Christ will place his fingers in our wounds. Each and every one of these wounds he will touch. And in doing so, he will recognize us. Christ will recognize us because our wounds have made us to be the creature he loves so tenderly.

Will there be multiple sclerosis in heaven?

I can at least say this much: My lesions will be there. All that has wounded me and all that has wounded you and everyone else will continue to mark our resurrected bodies in heaven.

This has to be. How else will Christ recognize us?

But our wounds – these wounds that have to be – will be resurrected wounds – each and every one of them a great sign of what the grace of God is bringing about within every single human being who suffers and yet has the courage to hope in the resurrection of the flesh.

Happy Easter everybody.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* (“divine reading”). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?