

FIRST SUNDAY OF EASTER: April 11
Acts 5:12-16; John 20:19-31

Notes: Acts 5:12-16

- This is the third summary of the community's life and actions, the others being 2:42-47; 4:32-37).
- By the time Luke wrote his gospel and the Acts, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed for a decade. His mention of it here is meant to create an impression in the mind of the readers, many of whom would not have even seen the Temple. But the impression is of the Apostles, like the ancient philosophers, walking through the temple precinct, teaching and gathering followers.
- The impression made by the Apostles (see the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 and the numerous miracles stories) was such that people approached them with a sense of approaching powerful holy men. It was more with awe than with fear.
- The numbers grew but they were people who believed in the Lord and not just of those attracted to the miracles and wonders. Luke makes that clear.
- The healings carried out remind us of the power of Jesus – Luke 4:40; 5:19; 6:18-19.
- The cure by having the shadow of Peter fall on the sick man is a particularly powerful image. Luke seems to be saying that the power from above is so strong in Peter that it seems to emanate even without it having to be acknowledged or sought. Such is the Kingdom of God!

In these early stories from Acts, Luke is doing at least two very important things. He is first of all asserting the central and predominant place of the apostles in the life of the early faith community. They exerted control over the preaching and teaching, over the possessions held by the believers and even over sickness and health, life and death. There can be no doubt that this early community was gathered in Christ around the Apostles, with Peter having a place of special significance. They carried out a key role in preaching the Good News of Jesus dead and risen and brought many, many people into a shared life in the Church. This is nowhere more dramatically brought out than by the image of people dragging their beds out into the streets so that the very shadow of Peter can fall upon their sick relatives and friends. All in the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding towns were aware that something special was happening among them and that something special grew out of that man Jesus who had been recently crucified.

Our story today begins by telling us that *great signs and wonders were being performed by the apostles among the people*. In Luke's hands this line is telling us that through the faith community, gathered around its Apostles, were conduits for a heavenly power that was even stronger than it was when Jesus walked among them. This was because that same Jesus had risen and ascended to the Father and was sitting at his right hand in heaven (5:31). All of this then came not from Peter but from heaven. A power had been let loose in the earth and it was being released into the whole of creation through the ministry of the Apostles within the communities of believers.

This introduction to chapter five is important because it is setting the scene for what is going to happen in the rest of the chapter, for Peter and the others will be dragged before the Sanhedrin and put on trial. We will read the account of this trial next week but sufficient for today to note the groundwork set by Luke. The Apostles can go into the trial knowing one thing for certain: the political power and the legal manoeuvrings of the Sanhedrin will not be enough to stifle the action of God in the world. Little groups can be set up to plot and plan the demise of the work of the Apostles but they will never be successful because God is at work and because Jesus is ruling in power from the right hand of God. The plotters are impotent because they have not taken into account what God wants. They are acting only to protect their own power bases, their own comfortable temple ministries and their own ways of living. God, however, has no favourites and expects everyone to repent and to live Kingdom lives.

With this reading we continue the excitement that is to be found throughout the earlier chapters. It is almost as if Luke is inviting the community to take a risk and to climb on board (or jump on board!) the Kingdom express. Things are changing under the direct involvement of God. Things happen when Jesus is at the centre and the worrying thing is that this kind of message is not just one for the Church in those opening decades, it is meant to be a description of the Church of every age. The same Spirit is at work among us today, the same Jesus Christ is ruling from the same throne at the right hand of the same God in heaven. Nothing has changed except the communities bearing the name Christian.

But it is not a reading meant to depress us. It is a reading meant to reassure us, to challenge us and to offer us a way forward as Church. Our hope is not in what we can manage, what we can afford and what we can understand. The way ahead is blindingly simple: Jesus Christ. If he is truly in the centre of what we do and how we live, then the rest will flow from him. If we do not see much happening then the question to ask this Easter is: Where is Jesus Christ in our lives and in our Church planning and Church life?

Notes for John 20:19-31

- The doors are shut, a symbolic way for John to show that the power Jesus has over human constraints.
- The group gathered is not just the apostles but all of Jesus' disciples. What follows is directed to all of them and not just to a select group.
- When Jesus offers them the he is (given the grammar of the Greek) actually saying *Peace to you* affirming a peace they already have.
- The mission of the disciples (the Church) is one and the same mission as is the mission of the Son. This is brought out in the expression: *just as*. In exactly the same way with exactly the same task in mind, the Father is sending the disciples *into the world* (the recipients of the mission has already been presented in 13:20; 17:18).
- The expression *he breathed on them* is exactly the same expression in the Greek of Genesis 2:7 (and Ezekiel 37:9-10; Wisdom 15:11) suggesting that what John has in mind here is that this event is the equivalent of the beginning of a whole new creation at the hands of God. This new creation is in many ways characterised by the power to forgive sins – through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

- The story of Thomas contains some strong and emphatic language. He does not want to simply “put” his finger into the wounds but more plunge them in. The disciples did not simply tell him about Jesus but forcefully tried to convince him that Jesus had appeared. And Thomas does not simply disbelieve, he forcefully rejects the idea out of hand. It is not possible.
- Early Jewish - Christian and Greco – Roman understandings of a resurrection are rejected here by John. In tradition resurrection meant a body that was “substantial but disembodied” (Francis Maloney). For John we have a living Jesus and this is what is rejected by Thomas as being an absurdity.
- At the second appearance the disciples show no fear. After what was said in verses 19-23, fear is no longer an option.
- When Thomas says *My Lord and my God* he is making a statement against the background of the emperor cult of Rome where Domitian claimed by be “Our Lord and our God” (Dominus et Deus noster) and demanded that he be worshipped as such. Thomas is rejecting all other Lordships other than that of Jesus.

Throughout the early part of this Gospel story we see that the disciples are still living in fear. Although they have heard the news of the resurrection of Jesus, they are still constrained by the very human emotion – fear. They knew what “the Jews” had done to Jesus and so remain conscience that the same terrible fate could await them if they were to ever move out of their hiding places. It would be a mistake to read John in a way that demonises the Jews for he is not talking about a race of people as much as a community of believers who had lost the plot. God had brought them into a covenant relationship with them but they had turned that covenant into something of their own making, had shaped it into something over which they had control and had managed to marginalize God. This is what John’s Gospel means when it speaks of “the Jews”. The disciple lived in fear of those people who sensed that they had lost power and influence by the ministry of Jesus and who now thought that all was well because they had put their tormentor to death. Facing such opposition, it was reasonable for them to keep their heads down and remain locked away.

But today’s story begins with the simple but enlightening image: *the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them.* Nothing could restrain the movement of Jesus. He came and went according to where he wanted to be and how he wanted to act and no door and not human group was going to be able to put up effective resistance.

This simple act of getting around a locked door just about says it all: nothing is going to stop the movement of the Kingdom for it is God at work. Given the enormous task that was facing this early faith community, this was a key message and a great source of reassurance, hope and power.

But John goes on by then presenting what was happening as a whole new work of creation by God. As the divine Spirit hovered over the darkness and the deep at the beginning of creation, so the same divine Spirit is hovering over this small band of believers as they now take up God’s work of transforming the whole of creation in and through his risen Son, Jesus who is the Christ.

This is made abundantly clear in the words: *just as the Father sent me, so I am sending you*. Nowhere in the whole of the Bible is our mission today made clearer. If we want to know what we are supposed to be doing and how we need to be living as Christians all we need to do is to read the Bible and find out what Jesus presents to us as his own ministry! As with Jesus, so with us. He is the God-given measuring rod for our own lives and our own ministries in the Church. His preaching, teaching and way of life is to be our way of preaching, teaching and our own way of living in the world.

It is a tough ask but there are no compromises given to us by John. We have two options. On the one hand there are “the Jews”, those who turned their religion into a life of spiritual convenience, who shaped the laws of God to suit themselves and who constrained God by human laws and human visions, human perspectives and human politics. They became the very enemies of the God they professed to serve and ended up putting to death the Divine Son of Man.

If we believe that we are not like that then we need to look at our lives through the prism of Jesus Christ: how does what we do, how we live and how we plan and shape our lives measure up against the Jesus revealed to us in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament? That is a massively difficult challenge.

But the consequences of this kind of living are enormous – a new creation, a whole new way of living and a very different world. The way of self serving are destructive and lead to darkness while the ways of those who live in a Christ-like manner lead to life and light. They are our options.

This is what the story of Thomas brings out. He is well versed in the Jewish, Greek and Roman understanding of what a resurrection might look like and is in no way going to accept the risen Jesus as presented by the other disciples. It is not in keeping with his way of thinking and so he rejects it as a possibility.

This is one of the options John is talking about and Thomas is no different to the priests and Pharisees to opposed Jesus and put him to death. It is not that he cannot believe in the resurrection, it is more that if it is true then it has to be in ways that he can understand, that do not push him too far. In this way, Thomas is very much like all of us. Our “yes” to Jesus can easily become a “yes” that is dependent on Jesus not pushing us too far, demanding too much of us and being willing to allow us to shape his agenda in the world.

Conclusion:

In both of these readings today, we find a common message: *Do not live in fear for Peace is already with you!* Both readings remind us that we have an enormous task in front of us – being God’s agents in his ongoing work of transforming the world in which we are living, beginning with our own particular place in that world. It can appear to be quite daunting and much too hard for us with all of our limitations and past failures.

The temptation may well be for the Church of today to lock ourselves away in our neat and comfortable rooms where no one will harm us. It is good in there and we

can look after ourselves and not have to worry about our “enemies” in the world seeking us out to harm us. But that is not what Jesus wants, not what he commands and certainly not why he called us at our baptisms. We are called and chosen to leave our secure rooms and go out into the world, empowered by the Holy Spirit from above and live the Gospel. Should we dare to do that, in everything we undertake and in all that happens to us, then God will do the rest.

This is why we can greet each other with *Happy Easter!* It is happy because we are drawn back to basics – God is doing something in the world, in Christ his Son and through us his Children. Alleluia!