

# Lesson 8

## Second Sunday of Easter

### **The Holy Gospel: John 20:19–31**

The story of doubting Thomas was so strongly traditional as the Holy Gospel for the Sunday after Easter that it has been retained as the Holy Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter in all three series of the Three-Year Lectionary.

The Jews did not name the days of the week but identified them in their relation to the Sabbath Day. The Greek text here has “the first day with reference to the Sabbath” or “the first day following the Sabbath.” Our English “the first day of the week” is appropriate. It was the evening of Easter Sunday when the events recorded occurred.

It is not hard to understand that the disciples would make their room secure—“the doors being locked . . . for fear of the Jews.” If the authorities had been bold enough to see to the death of Jesus, it surely could have been that they, Jesus’ disciples, were in danger too. The sudden appearance of Jesus among them without knocking and entering through the door surely got their attention. His “Peace be with you” was the common Jewish greeting.

122. How did the use of this greeting by the risen Jesus on this occasion add new meaning to it?

123. Why did He then repeat this blessing as He spoke to the apostles of their commissioning as His representatives?

124. How is the commissioning of His apostles related to Jesus Himself having been sent by the Father?

125. Why did Jesus breathe on the disciples as He gave them the Holy Spirit? In what sense was this gift of the Holy Spirit preliminary to the later outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost?

126. What do we call the authority Jesus gives to those who represent Him?

This authority to forgive or not forgive is never to be used in an arbitrary way by the Church but as a pointed application of the Law/Gospel message we are commissioned to proclaim. The Greek is more expressive than our “forgive” and “withhold forgiveness.” *Aphete* means that sins are “sent away,” no longer to be held against a person; *kratete* speaks of sins being “held fast” to a person.

Thomas was unwilling to base his faith on the experience of others—and Jesus accommodated His questioning disciple. As people who live in the age of empiricism, we can understand his desire to see for himself.

127. Why was Jesus willing to go this additional step to give Thomas firsthand experience?

128. Will Jesus always accommodate questioning and skepticism on the part of His followers?

Scholars generally agree that the last paragraph of John 20 ended the original Gospel of John and that John 21 was added later, either by John or by one of his associates. John summed up his purpose in writing: “So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.”

129. How did the account of Jesus’ interaction with Thomas appropriately wrap up that purpose?

## **The First Lesson: Acts 5:29–42**

Peter and John, going to the temple for prayer, had healed a crippled beggar at the temple gate—and had used the situation to preach the Good News of the risen Jesus to the astonished crowd. The temple guards took them into custody so the Council could investigate the situation. In their court, Peter brought bold testimony to Jesus, saying, “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11–12). The religious leaders ordered them to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus but released them because all the people were praising God for the miraculous healing. The apostles, of course, resumed their teaching in the temple courts, were arrested again, and were reminded they had been “strictly charged not to teach in this name” (of Jesus). But Peter and the other apostles again stood firm in their bold testimony.

Peter repeated the apostolic principle: “We must obey God rather than men.” He pointedly called the elders to repentance for crucifying the One whom “the God of our fathers” raised and exalted to His right hand as Leader and Savior, and Peter assured them that God’s purpose in all of it was to “give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” The Greek text says this “cut them in two.” On Pentecost Day, Peter had told the people essentially the same thing: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” On that occasion, the Greek says they were “pierced to the heart,” and were ready to be led to repentance and faith and Baptism. In contrast, the Council, though cut by Peter’s words, just wanted to get rid of the apostles by silencing them or putting them to death, as they had Jesus.

130. How is it that essentially the same words, powered by the Holy Spirit, produce such opposite reactions in different people? (See Matthew 23:27; 1 Corinthians 1:20–25; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16.)

Sometimes in hot situations cooler heads prevail. By God’s will for His apostles, that was true in their appearance before the Council. Instead of rushing the apostles to judgment, the Council accepted the advice

of Gamaliel, a leading Pharisee and grandson of the famous Hebrew scholar Hillel, who was head of a school for the training of a segment of conservative Pharisaism. Saul of Tarsus was one of his students.

131. What was Gamaliel's advice? What was missing in Gamaliel's reaction to the situation?

Flogging meant that the apostles were stripped and, in the presence of the Council, suffered thirty-nine strokes with a rod laid to their backs. The beating was to be a warning that more awaited them should they disobey the authorities and continue to speak in the name of Jesus.

132. What made the Twelve rejoice more than their just being released from custody? (See John 15:18–21.) How did they continue to apply their principle that “we must obey God rather than men”?

133. How does this First Lesson tie in with the Holy Gospel of this Lord's Day?

## **The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 1:3–9**

The Epistles for the Sundays of Easter, Series A, are from 1 Peter, providing a semicontinuous reading of Peter's Letter from Rome to Christians in Asia Minor. The Book of 1 Peter conveys profound truths for those who read and treasure it.

Their Master's crucial hour was a time of testing for all the apostles, and they all forsook Him. Peter followed to the High Priest's courtyard, but there his bravado got him in trouble. He shamefully denied his Lord—as Jesus had predicted. Jesus had said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Martin Franzmann wrote in *The Word of the Lord Grows*, “Because [Peter] had failed and had been forgiven, because he knew the fragility of man's resolves and the strength of divine grace, he was fitted for his task as strengthener of his brethren. . . . Peter writes to them out of the riches of the grace which he has himself experienced, out of the fullness of the glorious hope which Christ has implanted in him, to encourage them in steadfast endurance in the strength of that grace and for the sake of that hope” (pp. 219–20).

Writing to Christians beginning to feel the pressure of official persecution, Peter pointed them to just what they would need to stand up under the pressure. He praised God for supplying it: “He has caused us to be born again to a living hope.”

134. What did Peter say motivated God to give new birth to a living hope? What actualized the gift of new birth to a living hope? How does this living hope give a new perspective on all of life and death?

135. What was God's purpose in allowing the testing of their faith? As their faith proved to be genuine through this refining process, what would be the end result for them?

136. Peter, an eyewitness, was writing to people who had not seen the Lord as he had. What was the evidence of their faith and love even in time of testing?

“Salvation” carries the connotation of being healed, being made whole. The Greek for “receiving” is a present participle, indicating continuing action. Peter is telling us that we are continually being made whole as God guides and guards us through all of life.

137. How may we, as Jesus’ disciples, work at safeguarding our faith and hope as we face our testings?

# Lesson 8

## Second Sunday of Easter

*Almighty God, grant that we who have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### **The Holy Gospel: John 20:19–31**

122. The risen Jesus does not supply just a negative kind of peace that is the absence of turmoil. He provides a positive peace with God and a positive peace within ourselves in all circumstances through the assurance of the complete success of His saving work.

123. This gift of peace is intimately related to the mission that Jesus' followers have been assigned. When we actively represent Jesus and proclaim God's truth, the world will not always accept it peacefully. We are experiencing that more around the world and in North America today. We need strong inner peace to endure and persist in our calling.

124. Our calling to represent Jesus and to proclaim His Good News is part of God's saving will for our world, just as Jesus' being sent to carry out the saving work in His life, death, and resurrection was God's saving will for the world of every age and place.

125. Most interpreters see Jesus' breathing on His disciples as a way of getting their attention and giving them an audiovisual aid. In both Hebrew and Greek, the ideas of "wind" and "breath" and "spirit" are conveyed by the same word: *ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. Jesus' blessing the apostles with the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday enabled their faith in His resurrection and their understanding that they would represent Him. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost served to fill them with God's power for their outreach to the world with the Gospel.

126. We call the authority to represent Jesus the Office (or Power) of the Keys of the Kingdom. The Gospel key applied to repentant sinners opens heaven to them; the Law key applied to unrepentant sinners closes heaven to them. The Church happily announces forgiveness to the repentant; however, it is also the unhappy duty of the Church to declare the sins of the unrepentant to be not forgiven. This is a pointed application of the Law as a judgment against indifference to or rejection of God's gift in Jesus Christ. The spiritual health of the Church is not being fully promoted unless both keys are used conscientiously.

127. Thomas's experience surely is not to encourage us to a similar skepticism. Jesus dealt gently and understandingly with Thomas because this was the first contact for His followers with the reality of His resurrection, and Thomas was to be one of Jesus' special apostolic witnesses. We who live in the age of empiricism, in which we look for scientific evidence to verify things, may be happy that this first-century questioner was given sufficient empirical evidence by Jesus so that he was led to confess, "My Lord and my God!" and dedicate his life to his Gospel mission. Tradition says Thomas carried the Gospel all the way to India, where he met a martyr's death.

128. There is a difference between honest questioning, which God honors as a search for truth, and skeptical disbelief, which rejects His truth unless empirically evidenced (see Matthew 12:38–39).

129. Thomas's being convinced about Jesus' resurrection led him to state about Jesus what John had set out to convey in his Gospel: Jesus is none other than our Lord and our God. It was a fitting ending that fulfilled John's purpose.

## **The First Lesson: Acts 5:29–42**

130. The Bible clearly teaches that not everyone will react in faith to the Word of Christ when He comes to them (see Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23). But the Bible does not explain how or why this is the case. From the beginning, Christian theologians have asked, “*Cur alii, alii non?*” —Why some, not others? We can only say with Scripture that when some say yes in faith to Jesus, it is God's gracious act of grace that has produced repentance and faith, and we do not boast but praise Him for it. When others say no to the Gospel of Jesus, it is not because the Holy Spirit is not working to convert them; it is because they reject God's grace in Christ.

131. Gamaliel's advice was to not rush into drastic action but to wait and see what would become of the movement that was proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah—no doubt, expecting that it would be short-lived. He likely reasoned that drastic action against the Twelve at that point, when thousands had responded to their message, would only make them martyrs and spur the movement forward. What was missing was Gamaliel's suggesting that perhaps he himself and the Council had been hasty in rejecting Jesus—and his pointing to the abundant evidence that Jesus was still doing His thing in Jerusalem through the apostles.

132. On their release, the apostles were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.” Their suffering a beating for proclaiming the message of new life in Christ simply identified them more firmly with their Lord. St. Paul wrote about bearing “on my body the marks of Jesus” (see Galatians 6:17). The apostles' scars were badges of honor that displayed their faithfulness and glorified their Lord. “As every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” So much for knuckling under to man's authority!

133. The Holy Gospel told of Jesus' commissioning and enabling the apostles. This lesson shows the results of this in their faithful proclamation and rejoicing to suffer for Jesus' name.

## **The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 1:3–9**

134. It was God's great mercy, His tender love and concern for us, that motivated Him to give us new birth into a living hope. This rebirth is required for life in the Kingdom, but it comes to us as God's gift of grace (see John 3:3–6). It opens and enables a restoration of the relationship with God that was lost through sin. The gift of new birth into a living hope was actualized for us by Jesus, God's Son, through His life and death on our behalf, and it was climactically actualized through His resurrection from the dead and His exaltation to God's right hand. The resurrection is the keystone in the arch of faith (see 1 Corinthians 15:14–19). Living hope in Christ changes the focus of life away from temporary things to the inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for us who are shielded by God's power. How strong this expression is in Greek! *Dunamis* is God's almighty, invincible power. *Phourein* is a military term that speaks of being shielded all around by guards. How can we not feel safe when we stay in that secure position?

135. God's purpose in allowing testing is to prove, strengthen, and refine our faith and its application to life. The Greek word for “tested genuineness” was used to describe the testing of coins to determine their authenticity. When faith is proved to be genuine and is purified through testing, the result is that His faithful ones receive “praise and glory and honor” from their Savior. And that truly is to *His own* greater praise, glory and honor! Many of Jesus' parables speak in terms of this kind of gracious reward for faithfulness and service.

136. The evidence of their faith was displayed in the fact that they could “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” even in time of suffering. It was this quality on the part of the first Christians, and especially the martyrs, that Jesus used to turn their world upside down.

137. Many tests surround us in our world. Though we are not yet at risk of martyrdom for our faith, our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are being persecuted even to death. We face our tests because of the humanistic spirit that is more and more pervading our society. It puts man into the center of things as his own savior and determiner of life; it promotes a relative morality and permissiveness; it looks at

life with a secular, materialistic outlook; its motto is “If it feels good, do it.” We may safeguard our faith and hope in it all through conscientious use of the Spirit’s Means of Grace: Word and Sacraments. Continuing fellowship with Jesus in prayer and with Jesus’ people in worship and service continually remind us who we are and why we are here.