

A good many years ago now, a Quaker, a “seasoned Friend” as Quakers say, said something to me that I’ve never forgotten. “Sometimes,” she said, “people need love the most when they’re the most unlovable.” Think about that sometime. I’ve been pondering it recently because, though she wasn’t referring to Easter specifically, it’s as apt a summary of the Easter Season, and particularly of Divine Mercy Sunday that we’re celebrating today, as one is likely to find. And no one came to realize it more than the Apostles themselves.

We usually refer to Judas as the one who betrayed Jesus. It’s probably more accurate to refer to the one, John, who *didn’t* betray Him. There was Judas, of course, but ten of the remaining eleven abandoned Him during His Passion, and abandonment is a form of betrayal. No wonder they were cowering behind locked doors, as we heard in the Gospel today.<sup>1</sup> If we’d been in the Apostles’ position, we’d likely be doing the same thing.

How is it, then, that during the Easter season, we hear so much about the Apostles as they take to heart the Risen Lord’s instruction “that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, [will] be preached in [my] name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem”?<sup>2</sup> The Apostles and disciples will journey to the ends of the known world inviting others to hold in their own experience and in their own hearts the mercy, forgiveness, and love with which they’d been embraced by the rabbi from Nazareth, the rabbi who had been laid in a tomb after their abandonment and, to their astonishment, had risen again.

But as we encounter them in today’s Gospel, the Apostles aren’t ready to do that quite yet, and that’s why they’re in hiding. They’ve locked the doors and retreated behind them. They’re in seclusion, awaiting the retribution they thought was coming from

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 20:19 (NAB)

<sup>2</sup> Lk 24:47 (NAB)

the Romans. More than that, though, they're trying unsuccessfully to keep at bay the guilt of their own abandonment of their teacher and Lord, the Lord who had suffered an agonizing death for them.

These aren't the Apostles who would change the world. Not yet. They're a small, frightened band of defeated men who think — as who wouldn't in their circumstances? — that their hopes had been crushed along with their spirit.

But all that was to change, and it changes in the scene that we witness in today's Gospel. Suddenly, John tells us, in the midst of their fear, in the midst of their despair, in the midst of their guilt, "Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'"<sup>3</sup>

"Peace be with you."

The Risen Christ comes not in judgment, not in condemnation, not in wrath, not in vengeance, but in love and forgiveness. Death itself cannot overcome His love even for those who'd forsaken Him in His Passion.

"Jesus said to them again," John continues, "'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.'"<sup>4</sup> The disciples "rejoiced".<sup>5</sup>

Now, after having had a vivid experience of the Lord's forgiveness and after having received the Holy Spirit, the animating Spirit of mercy and reconciliation that calls them to extend to others the same forgiveness with which they've been embraced,

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<sup>3</sup> Jn 20:19 (NAB)

<sup>4</sup> Jn 20:21-22 (NAB)

<sup>5</sup> Jn 20:20 (NAB)

they're finally ready to carry the ministry and works of Christ to all the world. Now, finally, despite their flaws and imperfections (of which there are many), despite their sinfulness, they are Apostles.

This is John's depiction of Pentecost, the birth of the Church, a birth he links inextricably with the mercy and forgiveness, charity and reconciliation of the Risen Christ, something the Evangelist no doubt intended as a perpetual reminder to the Church of who we are (or at least of who we're supposed to be) and what we're about. This is always a timely teaching, and when the Church is inclined, as it is today perhaps, to lament its diminished influence in the world, we might ask ourselves how we measure up to what at our ecclesial birth we as a Church were called to be and to carry into the world.

The account of the Church's birth that John proclaims in our Gospel today reminds us that we're an Easter people, a resurrection people, and that we're called to invite others to enter into Christ's resurrection — and their own — as He rolls the stone away from whatever it is that entombs them.

Times change, of course, but human nature doesn't change. As it was when the Risen Christ first stood in the midst of the Apostles and brought them His peace, the need for resurrection — in this life — is great. The passage of two millennia with all of the social, technical, and other advances that time has wrought hasn't changed this. Our "tombs" may be fancier and they may come in ever-greater varieties, but we still need to rise from them, and often, like Thomas, we doubt that we can.

I suspect this is why Thomas couldn't quite believe that Christ, even if Risen, would appear to them. To *them*. He couldn't believe that he and the others would be forgiven for abandoning Jesus. They'd just have to remain entombed by their guilt. But he and the others *were* forgiven. Expecting judgment, they received mercy instead, and when they did, they didn't rejoice just in Jesus' resurrection, but in their own. Because now they had entered, truly entered, the new life, the resurrected life, to which they'd been called. Now they were Apostles, they were witnesses, and that to which they were witnesses was resurrection.

We celebrate Easter not just to commemorate Christ's resurrection, but to invite others to enter into His resurrection and thereby to experience their own — and in the here and now. We celebrate Easter to remind ourselves that we, like the Apostles, are called to be witnesses to the empty tomb — ours as well as Jesus'.

The need for witnesses, in fact, may never have been greater than it is today. I'm quite certain this is one of the reasons why Pope Francis is as popular as he is, even among many who regard themselves as non-religious and many more who would never dream of darkening the door of a Catholic Church. People see something of Christ in Pope Francis, someone who doesn't try to convince them of something so much as to show them something, and what he shows them his own experience of the resurrection and invite them to experience resurrection for themselves. They respond not to his position, not to his authority, not to his knowledge, but to his witness — his witness to the holy presence of the Risen Christ among us and, in the late Rachel Held

Evans' wonderful phrase from her reflection on faith, to "all the strange ways God brings dead things back to life again."<sup>6</sup>

As a witness to the resurrection, and perhaps we should really say "resurrections," since the Easter story isn't simply about Jesus but about all of those who've been raised to new life in His name, Pope Francis is an example of what Pope St. Paul VI spoke of nearly fifty years ago when he implored the Church to be "a community of hope lived and communicated."<sup>7</sup>

And for that we need witnesses. In our time, as Paul VI pointed out, and undoubtedly in every time, "[people listen] more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if [they do] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses," witnesses, he says, "of an authentically Christian life."<sup>8</sup>

That's the witness that counts, because that's the witness that brings mercy alive, and mercy is the language of resurrection.

Rachel Held Evans said she entitled her reflection on faith "Searching for Sunday" because her adult experience of faith was "less about searching for a Sunday church and more about searching for Sunday resurrection." She isn't alone. The Apostles were searching for resurrection too, though perhaps they didn't know it at first. But they were, and that's why they left everything and followed Jesus when they were called. Long before the first Easter, they saw resurrection in Christ — their resurrection,

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<sup>6</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2015), Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 15

<sup>8</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41

if not His. And all the people who aren't in our church or in any church today? Many of them are searching for resurrection too.

We can help them find it; we can help them experience it for themselves — if we'll be the witnesses our baptism calls us to be, witnesses to the resurrection, the one we've not only heard about but have experienced for ourselves.

We can help them find it, if Divine Mercy isn't just something we commemorate once a year on the Second Sunday of Easter or a chaplet we pray every once in a while, but something we practice every day, for every day is a day on which we're called to stand in the midst of whomever we encounter and say, in both word and deed, "Peace be with you."