

Divine Mercy Sunday, 2023—

When I was in training and formation to become a deacon, I had to take several Theology courses, and one day, a professor asked my class this question. “So, what’s your favorite Sunday Gospel?”

What would you say to that? Do you have a favorite Sunday Gospel? Well, guess what several of the deacon candidates and I answered? We said the Gospel you and I just heard today: The Divine Mercy Gospel—or—as it’s sometimes called—the Doubting Thomas Gospel.

One candidate said he chose it because it speaks directly to everybody. He said at one time or another, on one level or another, we all have some doubts, so we all need some empathy and some compassion. And this Gospel does that better than any other because it’s a story of doubt that turns into belief. It’s a story of stubbornness that gives way to assent and to conversion.

Another classmate said it’s also the perfect Gospel for this Sunday of Divine Mercy. That’s because—among other things—it shows Jesus is the Lord of do-overs. In fact, in his care and in his mercy, Jesus offers one of his most troubled and doubt-stricken apostles—someone who even mocked the idea of the miraculous—a second chance.

But don’t you and I have to be empathetic with Thomas? I mean, he was absent when Jesus first appeared to some apostles after his Resurrection. And those apostles were understandably stunned. Who wouldn’t be?

But when Thomas joins them and hears their astounding testimony—their eyewitness account of actually seeing and talking with the Lord—he can’t believe it. Not one bit. You get that totally when he says: “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

Thomas even demands more than something he can see. He wants physical evidence. He needs to touch with his own hands Jesus’ wounds.

And what follows is an iconic moment for us—for Christians everywhere. It’s when Doubting Thomas becomes a steadfast believer. It’s when Jesus appears again, and Thomas sees—sees Jesus’ wounds—but then does something he once mockingly considered undoable. He slides his hand into Jesus’ wounded side.

Now that experience would change anyone, wouldn’t it? With that experience for Thomas, his eyes open—his heart changes.

Thomas’s immediate turnaround serves as a lesson for anyone of us who doubts—who disbelieves—who may sometimes criticize others who accept things on faith. His turnaround says to us: With God, the impossible is possible. The faithless can become faithful. Even the unbelieving can come to believe.

In our own time, that was clearly demonstrated nationally. Last weekend, at Easter, nearly 40,000 women and men joined the Catholic Church in the United States.

They were attesting that, yes, doubt can become belief. Faith can become solid and reliable. And two-thousand years after Thomas, it continues to happen—to happen in many ways that can’t be explained.

And it happens through the breathtaking gift of God’s mercy and compassion.

Jesus could have dismissed Thomas’s doubt and left him skeptical and scared. But he doesn’t. He comes back. He appears again to the apostles, and it seems especially to be kind and understanding and uncritical and inviting and forgiving to Thomas.

So, how does all this apply to us today? Well, just as Jesus never considered Thomas undeserving of another chance, so he considers us, and through this Gospel, he’s asking us to be aware of that—that he’s always giving us a second chance, and a third chance, and a fourth—and even more if we keep asking and keep trying.

In this Gospel today, we see another example of The Good Shepherd searching for his sheep. Jesus, the worker of physical and spiritual miracles doesn't tire of doing anything he can to help the blind see.

Ours is a God who comes back—again and again—coaxing us to learn—to grow—to love—to believe. He doesn't give up on us. In the case of Thomas, Jesus does more than offer proof of his rising. He provides a second chance.

He provides another opportunity to accept what seems unacceptable. That gesture of mercy and empathy becomes an act of transformation—a way of not only helping an unbeliever believe, but of making him realize, profoundly, Jesus' real presence in his life—AND God's transformative love at work in our world.

So, the lesson of this Gospel is two-fold, right? It teaches us the power of faith—of believing in what we cannot see. But it also shows the great wideness and depth of God's mercy—the Lord's willingness to be patient and help us find our way.

And how we need to remember that, don't we?! In moments of despair or disillusion or frustration—when we may feel God is distant or indifferent—we need to believe.

And we need to trust. And we need to have faith in the seemingly impossible empathy of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

Above all, we need to hold fast to this enduring truth: Ours is a faith of second chances—a faith of renewal—of forgiveness—of starting over. And Easter and our current Easter Season are a glorious testament to that, reassuring us that even death doesn't have the final word.

The story of Thomas takes that idea even farther. It tells us that even lack of faith doesn't have to define us. Instead, we are defined by our never giving up on our second chances and choosing to take those chances as often as we possibly can—because Jesus never gives up on any of us. As he did for Thomas, he comes back for us to dispel our doubts—to reinforce our faith. He comes back. Yes...he does. He always keeps...keeps coming back.

Please give it some thought....