

2nd SUNDAY OF EASTER – A (April 16, 2023)

Again I wish all of you a very blessed Easter as we continue to rejoice in Jesus' resurrection for this holy season of fifty days. So...what did you get for Easter? That may sound like a weird question; we might ask someone "what did you get for Christmas or your birthday?"...but Easter? Now I imagine that many of our youngsters got an Easter basket filled with chocolate bunnies, jelly beans and maybe even some Peeps (nothing like sugar-coated marshmallow, right?).

But...what did you get for Easter? This is in fact a time for gifts; not necessarily from a candy store, but instead from our God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let's remember the basics: Easter is all about the great miracle of Jesus rising from the dead which overthrew once and forever the lasting power of sin and death. For many at that time, that sounded utterly impossible—we can hear the skeptics of the apostles' time saying "that's ridiculous; dead people don't come back to life. They're dead; it's as simple as that." And there is no shortage of skeptics in our own time who dismiss our Easter faith for the same reasons.

The main problem with that skepticism, however, is the inconvenient truth, the fact that Jesus did rise from the dead, and we have eyewitness testimony to that end. St. John in his gospel tells how he and Peter saw that Jesus' tomb was empty and then how the risen Christ appeared to them in the upper room. He showed them the wounds in his hands and side. As we heard, Thomas wasn't with them the first time the risen Christ appeared to them, and he refused to believe; he was the first and the most prominent skeptic: "Unless I see and touch his wounds, I will not believe!" No wonder he is known as 'doubting Thomas'... Of course, he gets his chance to probe those wounds when Jesus appears again a week later—Thomas can no longer disbelieve because he sees and hears the risen Christ with his very own eyes and ears. John was a stickler for historical details in his gospel; he himself saw and heard the risen Christ, and he had absolutely no reason or motivation to lie about something like this. We have all received a priceless gift for Easter: the faith, based on historical fact verified by eyewitnesses, that Jesus truly rose from the dead.

That leads directly to a second priceless gift we have all received for Easter—the sure faith and hope that we will be able to share in Jesus' risen glory. St. Peter makes that crystal clear in our second reading today from his first letter: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who...gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." That new birth, that living hope is all about the eternal gift that Peter describes as "the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." We can have such a hope for no other reason than Jesus' own resurrection.

Peter describes that hope as a gift of the 'great mercy' of God, and what a tremendous gift that mercy is. The gospel tells of another gift the risen Christ gave the apostles when he appeared to them—breathing on them, he gave them the Holy Spirit and the authority to grant forgiveness of sins. This is the origin of the sacrament of penance/reconciliation/confession, and what an amazingly powerful gift that sacrament is. Those who acknowledge with genuine sorrow their sins—no matter how serious or how numerous—they are assured of the loving mercy and forgiveness of God and the removal of those sins through this sacrament. What a gift of freedom

from the bondage and the burden of our sins that we otherwise have to carry around with us! In the mid-20th century, Jesus appeared to a Polish nun named Faustina Kowalska and told her to remind the world about the great gift of mercy that he wants to give to everyone. Thus began the devotion to the Divine Mercy that has become so popular; thus the reason that St. John Paul II designated this Second Sunday of Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday.

There is one more gift we have all received for Easter, and it is illustrated by our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. St. Luke (the author of Acts) tells us how the earliest followers of the risen Christ lived and conducted themselves: they prayed together, worked together, they broke bread together (a clear reference to celebrating the Eucharist), and they gave from their own resources to help those who were in need. They were given the gift of the joy of loving and serving others in the concrete circumstances of their needs. In this they remembered and lived out Jesus' commandment of love lived out in service that he gave the apostles when he washed their feet at the Last Supper. What may first seem a burden—the giving of oneself to others in their need—is in fact a great gift. It is the opportunity and the privilege to see and serve Christ in our neighbor and thus to know the joy that results.

So...what did we get for Easter? We got the greatest gifts imaginable: the reality of Jesus' rising from the dead, the great gift of the mercy of God that cleanses us from our sins, and the ability to live out our faith in imitation of Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. Again from St. Peter: "...you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy as you attain the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

That's what we got for Easter!