

2nd Sunday of Easter--Cycle A
(Acts 2:42-47; 1 Pet 1:3-9; John 20:19-3)

The time-line of our Easter liturgy is formed very much along the lines of what St. Luke reports in the Acts of the Apostles. That is, after Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday, He continued to appear to various people for 40 days. After that He led His disciples to the Mt. of Olives, whence He ascended into heaven. After nine days more the Holy Spirit descended on the Christian community at the first Pentecost. And this scenario establishes our liturgical celebrations: Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost.

But in order to understand St. John's gospel, today's reading in particular, we need to put all that aside. Remember St. John's lovely account of Jesus appearance to Mary Magdalen outside the tomb? I won't forget it because I almost came to grief over it. As a student at Sant'Anselmo I was being interrogated by Fr. Jacques Dupont in a final oral exam. What Jesus said to Mary Magdalen used to be translated many years ago, "Don't touch me," but I was being asked the precise sense of the Greek verb. So I said that it implied continued action and should be translated "Don't cling to me." "All right," he said, "what reason did Jesus give for that?" "Because I have not yet ascended to my Father." "So what do you conclude from that?" He was trying to get me to say that Jesus ascended that same day. Horrors! What happened to the forty days?

But that is the scenario in John's gospel: Jesus ascended on Easter Sunday, as He said to Mary: "Tell my

brothers, 'I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'."

If that dazzles you, even more surprising is that, for John, the descent of the Holy Spirit, i.e., Pentecost occurred on the same Easter day. Today's gospel begins, "On the evening of that first day of the week." Jesus appears to the disciples, after greeting them with "Peace be with you," said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," then He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven them."

We can rely on Luke's assertion of many days between the resurrection and Pentecost; certainly it would have taken some time for the Christian community to absorb Jesus' resurrection from the dead before they were prepared for the coming of the Spirit. St. John, however, condenses the events to better bring out their theological import and connection. Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and sending the Spirit cannot be separated. As St. Luke has Peter tell the crowd, "Exalted at the right hand of God, [Jesus] received the promise of the holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth" (Acts 2:33). The Spirit could not be sent until Jesus had been glorified. John even expresses it by saying, "There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified."

Jesus' glorification at the right hand of the Father is not a matter of His ascension from earth to heaven. We should rather think of resurrection and glorification as simultaneous.

Thomas wasn't present when Jesus appeared to the

others, and he refused to believe the Lord had appeared to them. Much has been made of his doubt; the term "doubting Thomas" has even entered our vocabulary. But this is just John's treatment of a theme found in all the gospels. Mark's gospel, for example, reports that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalen, but when she reported it, "they did not believe." Thomas here demands to touch Jesus' wounds, but Luke's gospel has something similar when Jesus appears to the disciples and, to overcome their doubts, shows them His hands and feet and invites them "to touch and see."

Thomas' doubt is in line with the gospel tradition, but he is much more stubborn in his refusal to believe the other apostles and is specific in exactly what would be required for him to believe. When Jesus did appear with him present, we wonder whether Thomas really did put his hand in Jesus' side. I doubt it. The sight of Jesus was enough for him, and we are grateful for his spontaneous expression of awe-filled faith: "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas' need to overcome his skepticism strengthens our faith; it also occasions from the Lord a word very consoling for us: "Have you come to believe because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." That's us! Jesus was not to remain on earth forever. The continuation of faith in His resurrection and of His teaching would depend on those who have not seen and have believed, namely, we who live now. That's why we're here now. In that sense we can call St. Thomas the patron saint of all believers.

St. John concludes this chapter by telling us that these things are written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name." Standing now at a distance of 2,000 years, we have in today's first reading Luke's summary of the early Christian community, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles ... to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." In what St. Luke writes "breaking of the bread" is a technical term for celebrating the Eucharist. We can rejoice that in all this we have kept the faith of those early Christians and do as they did. Today's second reading from St. Peter's letter speaks of the genuineness of our faith, "more precious than gold"; it echoes John's gospel: "Although you have not seen him you love him ... believe in him ... you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, as you attain the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

This is why we rejoice at Easter time. This is what Easter is all about. But we must remember that our response must be our love of God shown in our love for all others, a love which is to be shown especially to those most in need of our love and our support. The great prototype of Easter is Israel's exodus from Egypt, their deliverance from slavery and oppression. Peter summarizes Jesus' as "going about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). He freed us from slavery to selfishness and sin. In our country today there are many oppressed; we think of refugees from war, crushing poverty, violence. Sometimes they find only new

oppression here. They deserve our compassion and whatever aid we can bring them. That, too, is what Easter means.