

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our Gospel text begins this morning with the words, “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews...”.

In 1988, when I went to Israel, I visited that room. It was in a building at the end of a narrow alley, at the top of a winding staircase. The door was at least 6 inches thick, with equally thick wooden shutters on the windows that looked out on the narrow alley. Tradition says it was the same room in which Jesus shared in his Last Supper with his disciples.

It was a bright, sunshiny day on which I visited that room. But inside, it was dark as night, with the shutters closed tightly, and only a few candles to provide a little bit of light. It was easy to imagine it as a place for hiding; a place full of fear; a place with no way out.

Such was the plight of the disciples of the Lord. They were full of fear...and with good reason. The One who they had put all their hope in; the One whom they knew as Lord, Master, Teacher had been crucified and died a most horrible death. Naturally, they feared the same fate awaited them. Even though they knew he was no longer in the tomb; some had said that they had seen him; their minds couldn't wrap themselves around the idea that somehow he was still alive. So, they huddled in that darkness, filled with fear and anxiety, awaiting perhaps their own terrible fate. Isn't it interesting, if tradition is to be believed, that they had gone back to the last place where they felt secure with Jesus?

We too live in a fearful time and, like the disciples, we sometimes hide behind walls we build around ourselves and hunker down in that darkness, afraid to come out into the light. And, like the disciples, who had much to fear with imminent threat from both the civic and religious authorities, we too have legitimate fears: violence in our schools; random mass shootings; terrorism; ISIS; the deterioration of our environment. Every day there seems to be something else to become anxious about. Our fears are every bit as existential as were those of Jesus' disciples. It might not be a bad idea—to do as the disciples did—go back to that place, that time in our lives, where we felt closest to Jesus.

Then, He comes to them. He walks through the locked doors. All of a sudden he's there. He says, "Peace be with you!" They see him; they're glad, but now they're even more scared—they think they're seeing a ghost; how did he get in here; how did he come right through that six inch thick door. No! They're not scared! They are petrified! So, again, he says, "Peace be with you!" Calm down! Relax! I'm here now. It's alright!

It is the comfort, the reassurance of a parent to a child awakening from a terrible nightmare. It's alright! You're going to be okay! I'm right here. I'm here with you.

In the midst of all this fear; in their weakest, most vulnerable moment, Jesus then says to them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." What a strange thing to say? What a strange time to say it?

Everyone there knows that only God has the power to forgive sin. Here now is the Risen Christ giving that power to bestow God's mercy to these weak, frail, beaten-down, fearful followers on whoever they want, wherever they want. How strange is that! But, when you think about it, "How brilliant is that!" God's gift of mercy is given to the Church in the weakest, most vulnerable moment of her fledgling life—the first gift of His Spirit, even before the fullness of the Spirit that will be given on Pentecost. Don't lose sight of the fact that the Lord gives the power to forgive sin to weak, fearful, sinful men like the Apostles, like me to show how wide and deep and broad and inclusive is God's mercy—His already-forgiving love.

The Apostle, Thomas, had not yet made it to the disciples hidey-hole. When he comes in, everyone is talking at once. Telling him what happened. He thinks that they've all gone crazy. The fear must have turned them into madmen. He says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

The Daring Thomas we met a few weeks ago who alone among the disciples was willing to go to Jerusalem with Jesus "to die with him" now we see as Doubting Thomas. Many of us are so much like Thomas, living lives of honest and sincere and, sometimes, courageous faith. But then sorrow envelops us; sickness wears us down; disappointment piles upon disappointment; a job is lost; a child falls victim to drug addiction; divorce tears apart a once happy marriage and a once happy family; God seems absent. Like Thomas, once daring in faith, we become doubters.

Fascinating isn't it? This time when Jesus comes to his disciples, he doesn't go to the ever-faithful John whom he loved so much, who alone stood by him at the cross. He doesn't go to Peter, who even though he had betrayed him, was still the one he had chosen to lead his disciples. No! He goes to Thomas, filled with doubt. "Peace be with you. Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side., and do not be unbelieving, but believe."

It is when doubt overwhelms us; when our faith is shaken; that Jesus seeks us out to show us that he is here for us. He again becomes like that parent soothing the terror-stricken child. "It's alright! I'm here! You're not alone. In your deepest, darkness moment, when it seems that all is lost, our blessed assurance is that the Lord will come into our lives in the person of someone who will bring PEACE to our hearts and souls.

Seeing Jesus, Doubting Thomas becomes once again becomes Daring Thomas. He is the first of the Apostles to declare who Jesus really is, "My Lord and My God!"

Jesus responds to this proclamation of faith, not chastising Thomas for his earlier doubting, but by praising and blessing you and me, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Our blessing is this, what we sang of last week:

BECAUSE HE LIVES, I CAN FACE TOMORROW!

BECAUSE HE LIVES, ALL FEAR IS GONE!

BECAUSE I KNOW HE HOLDS THE FUTURE!

AND LIFE IS WORTH THE LIVING,

JUST BECAUSE HE LIVES!