

Gospel Reflection Sunday 27th April 2025 | Divine Mercy Sunday

With Fr Brian Maher OMI

DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

SUNDAY REFLECTION

27TH APRIL 2025 | JOHN 20:19-31

“
The repeated words of Jesus, “Peace be with you” suggest to me that the very first act of Jesus, after his Resurrection, was to put his disciples’ minds at rest. As he was in life, so in Resurrection, his first and only thoughts were for others.”

REFLECT WITH FR BRIAN MAHER OMI
ON THIS SUNDAY'S GOSPEL

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In the life of any group there will come key moments; moments which will determine the future, or even survival, of that group. For the small band of the ‘followers of Jesus’ those moments came in the immediate aftermath of Easter Sunday morning.

With hindsight we all have 20/20 vision and can see things those who were there could not see. Regardless of the hints Jesus gave that he might die, the first disciples did not expect Good Friday to happen. It came as a

shock to all of them. Jesus' betrayal by a close friend; the crowds, at the behest of the Pharisees, paying for his execution and Pilate, their Roman overlord, handing him over to be crucified. ...And...then he has gone...dead...and quickly buried before the Sabbath.

The Gospels spell out for us, clearly and succinctly, the meaning of the events of Easter and their links to the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah, the coming of the Messiah, and the wider promises of the Old Testament. But for Peter and the others their friend and teacher had simply been ripped from them, tortured and murdered. In less than twenty four hours all their hopes and dreams for the future were shattered.

Often, when I reflect on parts of the Gospels, I wish I had been there with them, seeing and hearing what was happening. However, I have never been quite able to make myself present to the horror of Good Friday. The trauma is just too great.

"He is Risen from the Dead", we shout in triumph on Easter Sunday morning, but that, too, we do with the benefit of hindsight. All the Apostles heard were garbled reports of an 'empty tomb' and a 'missing body'. Mary Magdalene, in John's Gospel, sums it up well, "*They have taken my Lord...*"; she says, "*...and I do not know where they have put him.*"

We can, with the help of the Gospel writers, make the link between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but for those who were there, in those moments of grief, hopelessness and fear, a 'missing body and an empty tomb' meant just that – an empty tomb and a missing body!

None of the Gospels quite agree about the details of what happened on Easter Sunday morning. How could we expect them to? All of those involved were struggling with their own shock and grief at the death of Jesus. Stories of an empty tomb and a missing body only added more confusion to an already confused situation. Who saw him first? Where? When? What was he like? What did he say? All of these details differed because none of those experiencing them were keeping a journal or diary of events. We must also remember that they found themselves in a totally unique situation where there were no precedents, no guides, no set of rules to steer by.

'Resurrection' leads us into a mystery which is far beyond human understanding. Today, with over two thousand years of reflection, thought, research and reasoning, no two scholars agree on 'exactly' what is meant by resurrection and 'exactly' how it was experienced by those who were there. Imagine what it must have been like to have to process it all in real time, while already in shock and grieving.

I use the word 'exactly' above because some cynics use the differences in the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection to argue that it was either a con invented by the Apostles to keep the myth of Jesus going, or that their experiences were internal and purely spiritual. Showing these arguments to be untrue is outside the scope of this reflection, but we can say that despite all that the disciples were going through, the resurrection accounts agree on all substantial points: The tomb was empty and the body gone early on Easter Sunday morning; all accounts agree that the risen Jesus was real – he spoke, walked, ate, etc; all of those who met him are clear that the Jesus they encountered after the resurrection was not a ghost or a vision. It was the same Jesus they knew so well who was back with them; they are also clear that the risen Jesus was not just a resuscitated body (as in the story of Lazarus or the widow's son). The Jesus they met was the same – yet different (John uses the word 'glorified' to describe the differences). He was not confined by space and time, coming to them in locked rooms, not being immediately recognisable, etc..

Of course, none of these things would have been obvious in those early days after the Resurrection. The disciples were responding in real time to reports and stories which were extraordinary, to say the very least, and as with every human experience, time, space, reflection and interaction with others are all part of the journey towards understanding.

One of the things which adds credence to what we read in the Gospels is the honesty and transparency with which they were written. Far from trying to create a single, 'agreed' account of what happened, with all key people united in every detail, the Gospels accounts of the Resurrection allow us to enter into the doubts, fears, confusion, even outright disbelief of some of those involved. In a sense, the Gospels invite us to join the first witnesses to the resurrection as they reflect, talk, pray and gradually move to the incredible conclusion that Jesus was indeed Risen from the Dead!

The story of 'doubting' Thomas is a very good example of this. There is very little doubt in my mind that this story comes from the mouth of Thomas himself. Instead of seeing the story as one of the other disciples trying to embarrass him, I prefer to see it as Thomas humbly sharing with other believers his own doubts and disbelief and by so doing emphasising the wonderfully gentle way Jesus assured him that he was forgiven, and his doubts understood.

We are always much harder on ourselves than others are on us! I don't know how frequently in ministry I have said to someone, "You're too hard on yourself. Don't worry, God does not see you like that..." and even as I say it, I know that guilt or shame or self-pity lead me to say exactly the same things about myself.

The absolute vehemence with which Thomas says, "*Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.*", says to me that this is Thomas' own shame talking to us. Only Thomas could be this hard on himself.

The entire account, for me, reads as if Thomas is telling it; as if he is saying to us, "...this is the way Jesus dealt with my stubbornness and disbelief – so do not fear if you have doubts. Ask and he will reassure you too that he truly is risen.

Another important detail in this Gospel, for me, is the number of times Jesus repeats the phrase, "*Peace be with you...*" It would be crazy, I think, to imagine that the Apostles were 'at peace' as all these events were happening. As far as they were concerned Jesus was dead and his beautiful message of love and forgiveness died with him. All of them, except John, had run away in fear, with Peter, his chosen successor, denying that he ever met him. Hiding in their 'locked room' they must have felt utterly rudderless and lost.

The repeated words of Jesus, "...*Peace be with you*" suggest to me that the very first act of Jesus, after his Resurrection, was to put his disciples' minds at rest. As he was in life, so in Resurrection, his first and only thoughts were for others. In our own times of crisis, or doubt or fear or stress, surely the risen Jesus whispers to us, over and over again, "*Peace be with you...*".

On that first Easter Sunday morning, I am certain that all Peter and the others wanted to do was creep back to their families in Galilee, try to put behind them all that had happened, and begin to catch fish again. It must have been such a temptation to simply say, "It was good while it lasted, but now it's over.", and go back to doing what they did best – catching fish.

It was the moment, or moments, when everything Jesus had done and stood for hung in the balance. If Peter and the others had said, "...We've had enough. We're now tired and disillusioned and sad....", then resurrection or no resurrection the Church would have begun and ended in Jerusalem on that very first Easter Sunday. God invites but never forces. The freedom to accept or reject God's love is always ours. God can only send us out into the world to witness to the Resurrection if we are ready to go out into the world to witness to the Resurrection. Peter and Thomas and all of the others had that choice on the first Easter Sunday morning when everything lay in pieces around them.

Mary said her 'Yes' to God when asked (invited) to bring Jesus into the World. During these days immediately after Easter we celebrate Peter's 'Yes' to God and Thomas' 'Yes' to God and the many, many other 'Yeses' made by so many others.

This Easter (2025) God invites us to once again say our 'Yes' to being witnesses to the Resurrection. It is an invitation only. God waits in love for our response.

Many thanks,
Brian.

If you have any thoughts or comments that you would like to share with me on this reflection, please send me an email: b.maher@oblates.co.uk

Gospel John 20:19-31

Eight days later, Jesus came.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord'. But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

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