

Gospel Reading Group

Second Sunday of Easter (Year A, B, C)

John 20:19-31

About today:

On the Second Sunday of Easter, the Church continues to dwell in the radiant light of the Resurrection. In the Gospel, the Risen Christ enters the locked room, breathes peace on the disciples, and invites Thomas to move from doubt to faith. His confession, “My Lord and my God!”, becomes our own. The Risen One meets us even in fear, offers us mercy, and entrusts us with the mission of forgiveness.

This Sunday has had different names: “Dominica in albis”, “Low Sunday”, and more recently, “Divine Mercy Sunday”.

Dominica in albis (depositis) translates as “The Sunday in White (when the white garments are laid aside)”. In the early Church, those newly baptised at the Easter Vigil wore white garments all week as a sign of their new life in Christ. On this day they formally laid those garments aside. The Latin title highlights the deep baptismal character of the Easter Octave.

“Low Sunday” is a traditional English term. It contrasts with the “high” solemnity of Easter Day itself. It does not mean the Sunday is unimportant; rather, it marks the gentle transition from the peak of Easter Day and the Octave to the quieter continuation of the Easter season.

Since the year 2000, this Sunday has also been observed in many churches as Divine Mercy Sunday, inspired by the visions of St Faustina Kowalska. The theme of divine mercy resonates strongly with today’s Gospel: the Risen Christ breathes peace, offers forgiveness, and meets Thomas with patient compassion. However, even before this formal designation, the day was traditionally associated with God’s mercy because of its emphasis on reconciliation, the mission of forgiveness, and the continuing grace of the Resurrection.

Gospel Reading

Read the whole passage slowly a few times, keeping one or two minutes of silence between each time.

^{20:19} When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.

²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'

²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Broader Picture: The events narrated here are unique to John and they occur on two separate days; Easter Day and the successive Sunday. There is a lot to unpack, especially for a traditional sermon slot, and certain elements of the narrative can fall by the wayside.

On the Day of Resurrection, “*the first day of the week*”, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds it empty, then she reports the distressing news to Peter and to John (not named in the text) who run to the tomb to see for themselves what had happened. John “sees and believes” (Cf. 20:8). Afterwards, as Mary is again at the tomb, she encounters with two angels (Cf. 20:12) and then Jesus (Cf. 20:15) who tells her to announce his resurrection to “his brothers” (Cf. 20:17). Mary Magdalene’s shocking announcement, “*I have seen the Lord*” (20:18), forms the background to what follows here.

Interpretation Notes:

v.19: “...it was evening... the doors were locked...” This is the evening of Easter Day. The disciples are not expecting Jesus. In fact, they don’t know what happened to him or his body. It seems that Mary Magdalene is not with the disciples after her announcement. Out of all the people gathered there (How many were there? Who was there?) only Peter and John had seen the empty tomb. Emotions are running high.

v.19: “...for fear of the Jews...” One of such emotions is fear. Why? One possible explanation is that, after the solemn day of Passover, Jesus’ opponents could be looking for his followers to try them too. But is this convincing? Partly. Perhaps there is also fear of repercussions if rumours about the empty tomb and a resurrected Jesus get to the ears of the chief priests and the Roman authorities. In the synoptic gospels we find, for example,

...Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. (Matthew 28:11)

...Some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. (On the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:22-23)

It is in the midst of these fears and strong emotions such as grief and uncertainty about the future that Jesus enters the scene. He comes inexplicably and unexpectedly with a simple message, “Peace”, which is repeated three times in this passage.

Jesus enters through locked doors, but he is not a ghost. In doing this he manifests the character of the resurrected life, something completely new (the New Creation) and, for us, difficult to understand. St Paul refers to this physiology as “*spiritual body*” (1 Cor 15:44) uniting the elements of spirit and matter, divine and natural, in one being.

v.20: “...*the disciples rejoiced...*” According to the narrative, the disciples do not show their excitement and joy immediately. Understandably so. So far only two disciples have been to the empty tomb and there has been the announcement of Mary Magdalene. But there is more to the text. Jesus shows them his hands and his feet, then and only then, they rejoice. The marks of the nails are the distinctive signs which identify Jesus for who he is.

v.21-23: “...*so I send you...*” These three verses would be worth a Sunday gospel slot by themselves, but as it is, in the way the Lectionary has arranged the readings, they could in danger of getting lost in the narrative.

Jesus repeats his message: “*Peace be with you*”. Then he sends his disciples on a mission just as he himself was sent by the Father to redeem the world. The disciples’ mission is an extension of Jesus’ own mission. Their mandate of redemption is fuelled by the Spirit, and it is essentially focused on three things (though only the first is immediately evident); forgiving sins, bringing the peace of the risen Lord to others, and sharing their joy and faith so that others (who have not seen) may believe and have life in his name.

v.21-23: “...*he breathed on them...*” Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to his apostles. This moment called by scholars the “Johannine Pentecost”. Early Christian writers saw this as an anticipation of the events of tumultuous events of Pentecost in Acts 2 (not something in opposition to it).

The meaning of this “little Pentecost” is steeped in the biblical imagery featured throughout John’s gospel, and it is about the New Creation. In Genesis 2 we read:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7)

Just as God breathed life into the man he had formed from the dust of the ground, so Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into those who belong to the New Creation, thus re-creating them.

In John, Jesus (the Word of God made flesh) is involved in both the first and the new creation. So, on “*the first day of the week*” (v.19) the Lord Jesus rises from the grave, marking the official beginning of a New Creation, and then he breathes the Holy Spirit into the apostles, pouring the life of the new creation into his followers¹.

In the prophecy of Isaiah 65, the new heaven and the new earth are the place where “*former things shall not be remembered or come to mind*” (Is 65:17), and the place where peace will dwell. These are linked to Jesus’ announcement of peace and the mandate to forgive sins. In other words, the apostles become heralds of the risen One, and heralds of something wholly and unexpectedly new – the New Creation.

This understanding of the Christian life is also found in 2Corinthians as Paul writes about his ministry of reconciliation (forgiveness of sins):

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2Cor 5:17)

¹ Some ancient liturgical rites of ordination and baptism included a breathing gesture, hearkening back to this passage. Breathing over the water of baptism during the Easter Vigil was also a feature of the western rites until the 1960s (for example, it is still in the English Missal).

v.21-23: *“If you forgive the sins...”* The mandate of the apostles is clear: reconciliation is a key element of their ministry as heralds of the new creation. This, like every other aspect of ministry, is only possible through the action of the Holy Spirit at work in the apostles because forgiving sins is essentially a divine prerogative.

About this verse, Saint Augustine of Hippo observes:

“What else was the Lord signifying, when He breathed on His disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’ save that those to whom the Holy Spirit is given have also the power to forgive sins?”
(Tractate 121, paragraph 3)

Augustine is making the point that the breathing of the Spirit was not arbitrary but directly linked to the authority Jesus then conferred – and that this authority continues in the Church’s sacramental ministry.

However, although the passage is very straightforward, there have been many controversies in the Church about forgiveness of sins – the most glaring one is the Protestant rejection of sacramental confession (properly called the Sacrament of Reconciliation) in favour of direct repentance before God. Even at the times of the Church Fathers, great theologians like St Augustine (see above), Saint Ambrose, and Saint Cyril of Alexandria had to defend this mandate from Jesus to essentially continue his mission in the world, bringing about the new creation.

v.24: *“...called the Twin...”* Just a bit of trivia here; the name Thomas means “twin” in Aramaic (*Ta’oma*). John offers the translation of Aramaic into Greek to his readers.

v.25: *“...Unless I see the mark of the nails...”* Thomas’s unbelief is understandable. The disciples may have not been playing a cruel joke they devised while he was away from them, nevertheless, what could he make of their statement? So, Thomas, always the fiery character, says that he would not content with simply seeing the wounds of Jesus (like the other disciples did), he wants to touch them and put his hand in the Lord’s side!

v.25: “...his side...” The word here is *pleurá*, literally side, flank, or rib. Like at the crucifixion of Jesus (19:33-34), John uses this word as a deliberate echo of Genesis 2:

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib (pleurá) that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. (Gen 2:21-22)

We are back in realm of the New Creation. Just as in the second account of creation Eve came from the side of Adam, so the Church comes from Jesus’s (the second Adam) open side.

Thomas’ demand, then, transcends mere curiosity. He wants to put his hand into the wellspring of salvation, into the very origin of the Church. In this sense, Thomas’ unbelief mirrors that of every man and woman who affirm to like Jesus but not the Church; they are fine with what Jesus did in the past, but they are not convinced about his resurrection and the divine mandate of his followers, so they long to see and experience for themselves where it all came from.

v.26: “A week later... the doors were shut...” A week later the doors are still closed. There is no reference to “*fear of the Jews*”, but Jesus brings to them the same message of peace for a third time.

v.27: “Reach out your hand...” Jesus does not scorn Thomas. He does not call him “Doubting Thomas” as we do. Instead, he gently yields to his demands. Jesus’ tone is both a command and an invitation. So, although the verse could be read as a bit of scolding, it is not. Jesus bears with Thomas’ unbelief in order to lead him to the fulness of faith. St Cyril of Alexandria notes:

“Jesus does not scorn Thomas’s slowness but grants what he asked, so that in the disciple’s touching the wounds, the world’s wound of disbelief might be healed.” (Commentary on John, Book 12)

v.27: *“Do not doubt but believe!”* Jesus invitation to Thomas is not easy to translate. It contains the verb *ginou* – “become” – which implies a process: to move from unbelief to belief. It could be translated literally as *“Do not become/grow unbelieving but believing”*. Again, Jesus encourages Thomas’.

v.28: *“My Lord and my God!”* We are not actually told by John whether or not Thomas’ actually touches Jesus. However, Thomas’ words are important here. They are a short statement that acknowledges Jesus both as Lord and God; essentially fully divine, though clearly also human. And this statement of faith comes as a response to Jesus’ generous invitation to touch his wounds.

In the Septuagint (LXX) the word for Lord (*Kyrios*) was used to translate the Tetragrammaton (YHWH). Thus, to call Jesus Lord has immense divine connotations.

v.29: *“...Blessed are those...”* In John there are no Beatitudes, instead the teaching is the blessedness is to be found in believing in Jesus, through his teachings and the ministry of his followers whom he has sent into the world. Moreover, Jesus here rejects the idea that those who were able to “see him in action”, as it were, can attain a higher degree of faith.

While the verse does not explicitly mention the Eucharist here, many patristic commentators drew a Eucharistic connection between v.29 and the ongoing presence of Christ in the Church through the sacramental life. In the post-Ascension time, our time, the way Christians encounter the risen Christ is not by physical sight (like Thomas) but by faith through the sacraments – and especially in the Eucharist.

So, for example, using the language of this verse, St Augustine writes:

“What you do not see, you believe; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. That is us, for what we see is bread and wine; what we believe is the body and blood of Christ.” (Sermon 272)

v.30-31: “...*Jesus did many other signs...*” In a sense, John gives us the bare minimum for faith in Jesus. This is the formal conclusion of the gospel, though chapter 21 follows. Interpretations of why this is are many, but the important thing to remember is that every existing manuscripts of John contain both chapters 20 and 21 in this order.

Questions for this week:

- *“The doors were locked for fear...”*
What are the “locked rooms” in my own life – places where fear, anxiety, or past wounds keep me closed off from the fulness of life Jesus wants to give me?
- *“Peace be with you.”*
Is there a place or relationship where I am called to be an instrument of that peace this week?
- *“As the Father sent me, so I send you.”*
How do I understand Christ’s mission in my daily context—my parish, my work, my friendships?
- *Thomas’ journey from doubt to faith*
Where do I recognise myself in Thomas (his honesty, his need for evidence, his longing to trust again)?
What invitation might Christ be extending to me in my doubts?



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Interpretation Notes by Father Diego Galanzino for the *Gospel Reading Group* – A discipleship group of the Parish of All Saints' Houghton Regis, April 2026. allsaintshr.co.uk/learning