Second Sunday of Easter

For the longest time, I think I took this Gospel, as I took most of the Bible, at face value. It tells us what happened a long time ago. In this case, John wants us to know what happened, so he’s filling us in:

When Jesus rose from the dead, some folks were lucky – he appeared to them: Mary Magdalene, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the disciples who were gathered without Thomas the first time. Poor Thomas missed out, wasn’t present when Jesus appeared to them, and had a hard time believing that what the others were telling him… you get the idea. Just the facts.

Then, after I discovered how much we can gain from putting ourselves into the scene, I began to get so much more out almost every Gospel. From inside the story, trying to be there, I could see better how the Gospels helps us see how people not that different from us experienced Jesus, and what we can expect as we get to know Jesus.

Right from the start of his Gospel, John introduces a variety of characters: John the Baptist, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel. In each case, as succinctly as possible, he helps us watch how Jesus became part of their life; how the relationship with him, their journey of faith unfolded.

Fr. Francis Moloney describes that journey as moving from no faith, to partial faith, to complete faith. Complete faith seems like too high a bar in my estimation. I would rather call it moving from not knowing Jesus, to having some idea about who Jesus might be, to being intrigued, drawn to him, to a willingness to trust that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, to becoming friends, to eventually discovering who he really is for me!

John gives us plenty of folks, and we can identify with the journey of any of them, and see how it might help us understand our own journey. There is the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind, Martha, Mary & Lazarus; we had Mary Magdalen on Easter, and today, Thomas. If we put ourselves into today’s scene, to get closer to the characters, or specifically the main character, Thomas, can experience him as someone with doubts. He can show us that doubts are natural, and not a bad thing. Thomas’s doubts lead to an amazing, intimate experience of mercy! Stepping into the story, we get to know someone who seemed to have needed more to believe. So we can relate to him, and realize we are not alone when sometimes we want more. A great Apostle and eventually incredible missionary had doubts too. That can be very reassuring.

With time, I came to realize another layer in this Gospel, and it didn’t come from reading, or extra courses, or some great scripture scholar. It came from listening to people who have experienced a lot of pain in their lives. Folks who had been wounded, who have wounds. If you stay at the first face value level I mentioned at the beginning, then those who were alive when Jesus appeared after his resurrection were tremendously lucky. They had the opportunity to see his wounds, or in Thomas’ case, touch the wounds. But we just have to go on their word for it.
What I have discovered is that John probably is not just telling us about touching the resurrected, glorified body of Jesus as he appeared in the first century. It is also about touching wounds today. Christ’s wounds, our own wounds, or the wounds of others.

When we suffer wounds, Christ identifies with us, suffers with us. Christ understands suffering, brokenness, emptiness. Remember what we head on Passion Sunday:

   Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself.

Perhaps touching the wounds is about the intimacy, love, and mercy possible when we are drawn into that emptiness Christ experienced for us, and he reaches into our suffering, pain and emptiness. How many people have told you that after a tragedy, after some suffering, when wounded, their faith came alive in a whole new way? They experienced Jesus just when they needed love and reassurance.

If the majority of people never experienced suffering in their life, it is hard to understand why the paschal mystery would need to be the heart of our faith. But because suffering, loss, pain is eventually part of everyone’s life, the answer to suffering is crucial. Understanding the possibilities suffering or loss can bring is essential. Discovering that letting go, letting the ego die is truly not the nadir of life, but the apex – that is the most grace moment possible.

Sorry – I just started thinking like John for a minute….Jesus hour of glorification was when he was lifted on the cross.

Let me just recap the three ever deeper ways of hearing this Gospel I’ve mentioned.

First we need to know the story. The face value. It is the foundation in reality, the faith that has been handed on to us, the experience we work from, something, in this case, John, tells us to help us come to know and believe in Jesus.

That knowing and believing begins to happen when we step into the story. We see a person get to really know and believe. Perhaps it leads us to recognize how our faith can grow today.

Before the third way, let me share just a bit more about how faith can grow.

Growing in faith could be that I go from not knowing anything about the Bible, to reading it or listening at Mass. I realize this is no ordinary book from the book store. I come to realize it is the living Word of God! It can change how I understand and experience the world. Through a journey with the Bible, I come to know, and love, and become a disciple of Jesus. I encounter him through His Word.

Or let’s say I know next to nothing about prayer. Then I give it a try, and start to realize this really is something. Next I experience that this thing called prayer is a very real encounter with the Lord. Through it I can experience Jesus’ love and mercy, that mercy begins to change me, and then Jesus and I are living this life together. I both experience mercy and become merciful through prayer.
Or I come to Mass, but without much understanding. Then something grabs me, and I begin to tune in a bit more. Next thing you know, it is Jesus I hear speaking right to me in the Gospel, or I hear him speaking right to me in the consecration: this is my body, given up for you.

In each case, we can have a journey from encountering Jesus, to getting to know him, to a relationship that changes everything.

Ok, now back to the third way I mentioned for getting deeper into this Gospel, into where Jesus may want to lead us. There is something about wanting to believe, struggling, and then hearing the strange invitation Thomas heard: “Go ahead, touch the wounds. Probe them.” Vulnerability is an amazing thing. We so often want to avoid it like the plague, when in fact it can open up a world that is so much richer than living on the surface to avoid pain. Drawing close to someone else’s wound can help us find the courage to share our own.

I don’t want to be too dark here. We can share tremendously intimate moments in the joys of life. Absolutely!

But there is also an intimacy to be found when instead of running from wounds, we draw close, we connect, and an amazing healing happens. Wounds can be a turning point on the path to life. Lent, Holy Week --- each year this is a place we visit.

So wrapping it up: Try reading this Gospel in a quiet moment this week, but read it slowly, three times.

First, read it for the basic story. Who are the characters. What are they like. What happened. Then pause. Let it sink in.

Next read it a little more deeply. Try to step into the scene, or into someone’s shoes. Consider how the experience in the story changed their life; How their relationship with Jesus grew.

Finally, read it and focus on Jesus taking Thomas’s hand, and bringing it into his wound, like the picture on the front of the bulletin.

Think of any folks you know who have been wounded, but came to experience God’s love and mercy in a new way as a result.

We worship Word whose wondrous wounds whisper wisdom.