

Homily for 4/12/15

By Katie Spero

Welcome to the joyful occasion of this the second Sunday of Easter. Easter, coming after Lent and the journey of Holy Week tells us something about the nature of the world and our walk with God through His creation. I'm not sure if any of you noticed, but for a while there during Holy Week things looked pretty grim. I mean once you get to Good Friday the pain of the story to which we bear witness mingled with the residue of our own pain makes for a less than joyful experience. And even though we are recalling events of the past, in our liturgy they are made real to us now and that can hurt. But now we are here on the second Sunday of Easter and don't worry I'm not about to preach all about pain. But how amazing is it, that even though we know the end of the story, we know what is going to happen next, and we do this every year, the story still hurts. And this too is the nature of human experience in the world. In every bad situation, difficult season, painful experience, we know from our Holy Week journey with Jesus that while there seems to be no way out and it feels like this pain will last forever, it is but the outside of the door through which we will enter into our greatest peace and even joy.

So how do we walk in the light when surrounded by darkness? How can peace be with us in the midst of a painful story? Thomas is our first great teacher today. Thomas sometimes gets a bad wrap but let his lesson not go unnoticed. That lesson being, ask God for what you need. Just ask.

In our modern sense of self-reliance asking for help from friends and family are not the only supports to have fallen by the wayside. As we see today reading about our early church family, giving and receiving were necessary for the health of the community. If everyone gave but were too self-conscious or proud to ask for what they needed the efforts of the community would have been in vain. God won't hold asking for what you need against you. On the contrary, he provides for each person according to their needs. We see that with Thomas. He provides Thomas with precisely what Thomas needed to believe. And not only Thomas, but we hear that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples. He provided all of them with exactly what they needed at the time. Of course Jesus also tells us blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. I don't think this takes away any blessing from Thomas. But rather it is said by Jesus to us, to those whom the disciples would minister to, to everyone else who he knew would enter into relationship with him by faith and in a world which no longer has the *man* Jesus residing in it.

And, to their credit, of course the disciples would have had a much more difficult time believing their eyes than we do, believing our minds. What I mean by this is, the disciples are seeing their beloved Lord whom they know has been killed and put in a tomb, appear to them in a locked room, alive and well and bearing the wounds of his death. We, on the other hand, have the Gospels and Torah and the advantage of a complete story from beginning to end laid out for us so that we may read about it, intellectualize about it, have a distance from it all before our minds are convinced and we decide to actually believe.

I mean can you imagine having to convince yourself that standing before you was a man you loved who was known to have been killed? Presented with such a sight, I think our minds would have the much more difficult task of reconciling the inconceivable with its regular scheme of reality.

Which leads me to the second way in which we can walk in the light of God when surrounded by darkness. Ask yourself, how much am I missing by only allowing myself to see that which I already know and understand? That of course cannot be answered, but it definitely *can* be tried and tested only in your real life experience. It is the frightening and true experience of faith. You can't convince your own mind of this, but another way to walk in the light is to deeply know that there is truly little the thinking mind understands, and from there you can permit yourself to learn anew from the experiences the world presents you with on a day to day basis. As I get older again and again I am faced with this reality, that there is very little I truly understand. But every time I accept this, it is greeted not just with the small ego death that is generally deemed far too uncomfortable to stand in our society, but it is also greeted with that which comes after a space once filled with conviction has been cleared and made empty. It is greeted with a new shining realization, which is a felt oneness with creation, a closer relationship with God and His reality.

So how can the acknowledgement of a lack of understanding actually bring peace in the midst of a painful story?

I recently had just such an experience. It was the beginning of October and I was visiting my sweet younger brother Joey at his college during their homecoming weekend. And we walked together down the sidewalk to a football game and I had the strangest sense of déjà vu. Joey and I were suddenly walking down the street we grew up on. "I'm having the strongest déjà vu," was the last thing I remember saying before waking up in an ambulance with two handsome young men excitedly declaring to me that I had suffered a seizure. "really?" I said to them, "how strange that has never happened to me before!" That was my new reality even though I didn't understand it.

I was told later by my brother that I woke up laughing. This to me was a sign that God must have been telling me a pretty good joke, and that everything was going to be okay. For a little while though, in the normal scheme of my experiences, things didn't look very okay. I was faced with a world I had never known before and with a complete lack of understanding of my life and my future. It turned out a benign tumor had taken over a portion of my skull and was pushing in on one side of my brain. I was quickly set on course to have a craniotomy, in which that portion of skull would be replaced with titanium mesh. Life felt very uncertain. But I wasn't in the desert of my understanding, but rather a rainforest.

I was in strange territory that was rich with insight that could not be of my own accord having never navigated such a terrain previously. I had to ask questions to God and rely on the fact that I had little understanding. I first asked why I was so afraid. And in that darkness a light came on, I was afraid because I didn't want to die. So naturally the question followed, "Why don't I want to die?" And from that the unknowable forest was illumined with the understanding that *it* was the reason I did not want to

die. I didn't want to miss the journey, I wanted to be here, to feel the sidewalk beneath my feet, to smell the leaves of the trees, to feel rain on my head, to gaze upon a streetlamp in a foggy mist. And all of the sudden, the peace rushed in. I saw that *that* which I was afraid of losing, was happening right now, the moment I was living, and how grateful I then was to be enjoying it. It was not a peace I could convince myself to have in the face of such insecurities, not a peace I could have been shown through example, but a peace that could only ever have been uncovered, always existing within, but usually obscured by the delusion of my own misguided understandings. Jesus, as we heard today, said to us "peace be with you" and from the word of God peace entered into us.

We also learn from Jesus today that from such peace, and with the Holy Spirit, comes forgiveness. And in my own experience the uncertainty I was living with before my surgery bore a new compassion within me. I realized riding the bus one day that no one there knew what I was facing at that moment, and I myself didn't know what unknowable landscapes everyone else was facing. How much compassion must they need as they navigate and search for light. It was then that I could forgive more easily.

Which leads to the third way in which we learn today how to walk in the light of God in the midst of darkness. Jesus told his disciples that if they forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them and if they retain the sins of any they are retained. Jesus gave them the option to be in either a world condemned or a world redeemed.

We all know how it looks out there in our world, but the real blessing comes from seeing it through God's eyes before it has changed in our own sight. You could see a forgiven world, you could see a world in which a Messiah has come, in which God himself has entered, you could see people as made in the image of God, and problems as signposts toward a new understanding, see it now, before it becomes tangible, and that will be the blessing. When you see a world encapsulated in the embrace of a loving God, even in the midst many painful stories, then you will be blessed, peace will be with you, and you will truly have life in His name. By asking God for help with your needs, by relinquishing the firm understandings of your mind, and by seeing an entire world which has been redeemed, we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light. It is then that we will truly understand Jesus when he says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Amen.