

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2017 (Year A)

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Witnessing God's love in the flesh.

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 1: 3-9; John 20: 19-31

Thomas missed out on the very first Easter! I have always had a lot of sympathy for Thomas, who seems to have gotten the short end of the stick. We don't know why he was absent that first evening. Perhaps he had to be somewhere else. Or maybe he just had to get away from the terrible memories, feeling that he could not deal with his own grief plus that of the others.

Whatever the reason, it's not because he didn't care; his rather vehement response to the other disciples during the intervening week suggests that he cared very much: *I will never believe it without putting my finger in the nail marks and my hand into the spear wound.* It sounds to me as though he didn't want to be jerked around by any airy-fairy, unreal hope. Reality, in the flesh, is what mattered to him:

John's gospel does not give us the back story to Thomas's absence. Instead, the evangelist chooses this story to make a very important point. This, after all, is the gospel that insists on the importance of the flesh.

One of its first statements, after *In the beginning was the Word*, and the phrases about *all things [being] made through him*, is this crucial affirmation: *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.* God comes to meet us in the flesh. It is in the flesh that we encounter ourselves, other people, and also God. And, on this Earth Day we should add, that it is in the

flesh that we encounter this beautiful world that God created through the Word.

Two chapters later we find a similar idea, *that God so loved the world that God sent the Only-begotten Son, . . . not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.* Both the flesh and the world, our earth, are God's creation, the object of God's love, and of God's redeeming action. We are recipients of this creation, and we are called to participate in caring for it.

In this evening's reading we reach a high point in the gospel story. The evangelist wants to remind us again, through Thomas, that it is in our mortal, fleshly bodies—with whatever nail holes and gashes, whatever scars and deep wounds, whatever infirmities of age or health—that we experience God's redemptive love in its astonishing fullness. Where Jesus went, through death, there we will go, too, to the other side, where he has gone before us to prepare a place for us.

We have lost several members of our community this year, and many of us have

personally lost, or are losing, friends and loved ones. We know all too well what happens to human flesh, from age, or accident, violence or disease. Thomas speaks for all of us, faced with the finality of death, who do not want false comfort and hardly dare to believe in so great a hope as life beyond death. Thomas voices his skepticism so that we, like he, can receive reassurance of a reality beyond any that he had dared hope for—Jesus, alive in the flesh, but beyond the reach of death.

Jesus acknowledges Thomas's need for fleshly assurance: "My broken body is real, as you can see and touch," he seems to say. Then he adds, *blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed*. Those words are for our benefit, of course, for us latter-day believers who now have the advantage of Thomas's hard-won witness.

These words are echoed in our second reading, from the first letter of Peter: *Although you have never seen Christ, you love Christ; and without seeing, still you believe, and you rejoice with inexpressible joy touched with glory, because you are achieving faith's goal—your salvation*. These words are for all Christians, whose lives have been transformed by the love and the joy they have experienced through the Christian community.

Our first reading, from the book of Acts, tells how the early church attracted new followers by the quality of their life, their generous sharing to meet the needs of others, their worship, and their breaking of bread together. The importance of the community must never be underestimated. After all, it was the core group of disciples that held Thomas through his period of doubt and grief, until he was ready to return and experience the reality of resurrection. The community, the church, does the same for us, if we do our job! It holds us through our times of trouble and despair.

The church's essential work is to continue to witness to God's love for us, for all of us, in the flesh. We do this in our support of each other, in our works of mercy to house and feed and protect the vulnerable. And we continue to witness to God's love for the world, God's creation, our earth, of which we have been made stewards.

This is a critical time for our earth, a time for prophetic witness from the Christian community. We are called to reassert our willingness to care for the earth in the daily conduct of our lives, in the ways we structure our economy, and in the values that we insist that our political leaders embrace.