

Homily - 2nd Sunday of Easter

Han Van Meegeren was an art forger in the Netherlands in the 1930s and 40s. He made millions forging paintings in the style of the Old Dutch Masters and selling them through an unscrupulous dealer. His skill and techniques were so good that his forgeries were never DOUBTED. His undoing came when he sold a painting directly to a high-ranking Nazi officer that he passed off as a work of the 17th century artist Jan Vermeer. After the war, a receipt for the fake Vermeer surfaced and led 2 army officers to his studio to question him about how he had happened to have this priceless painting in his possession. When his answer was less than convincing, he was arrested and charged with treason for aiding in the sale of national and cultural treasures to the enemy. Confined to prison and facing a death penalty, he confessed that the painting was not a Vermeer but a forgery created by his own hands. It was a preposterous and unbelievable claim! Experts were brought in to verify the painting's authenticity, and they concurred that, without a DOUBT, the painting was a Vermeer. In the end, the only way for the forger/artist to prove himself innocent of the charges against him was to produce another fake in the Vermeer style. A studio was set up in prison and under the watchful eyes of guards and other authorities, Van Meegeren spent weeks painting a new Vermeer forgery (which he called *Jesus and the Doctors*). By the time he was finished, he had erased all DOUBTS as to the origin of the Vermeer forgery, and the charges for treason were dropped, although he did get a year's sentence for selling forgeries.

We live in a skeptical world. We all have doubts - about many things - our relationships, our careers, our health, our future, even about our faith. (And then there are the times when we fail to doubt and get taken advantage of.) Today's gospel gives us the greatest doubting story of all time. In the entire liturgical calendar, a gospel passage appears only once every 3 years. On this weekend, however, the gospel is always the same: the appearance of the Risen Christ to his apostles on Easter Sunday Evening and the reaction of the one apostle who was not there.

We can only imagine the scenario: the fear of the apostles who have hidden themselves away behind locked doors. Their whole world has crumbled. They are in utter despair--afraid that they might be next. Jesus, their leader, was dead, and he wasn't coming back--not in this world. They had left everything to follow him---their families, their friends, their homes, their livelihood- everything. They had placed all their trust in him. He had been their hope. Now he was gone. And they would not see him again in this life. (Their belief in resurrection was a resurrection at the end of time not in current time.) What would become of them? They were like a ship without a rudder.

Then at their very lowest point, Jesus is suddenly there with them! Imagine their overwhelming surprise. They go from despair to rejoicing in one instant. When Jesus appears in their midst, they make a leap of faith. And Jesus banishes any pangs of guilt, that they may have had for abandoning him, when he says, "Peace be with you." At that moment, those troubled and discouraged men knew, they had been forgiven. Moreover, Jesus entrusts them with a mission: to proclaim divine peace, mercy and forgiveness to everyone on earth. The Church sees this scene as the origin of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

But it is not so easy for Thomas who wasn't there. It seems to him that his brother disciples have somehow lost their senses. Thomas is a scientific person. He wants proof: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Thomas holds on to his doubt for another week before Jesus comes to them again. This time Thomas is there, and when Jesus comes into their midst his doubt immediately turns to faith. He recognizes the divinity of Jesus and says to him, "My Lord and my God." The apostles were among the first to see the Risen Jesus but St. Paul tells us, in Corinthians, that between Easter and the Ascension more than 500 disciples saw him.

Jesus asks Thomas, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me?" And then goes on to say "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Surely, Thomas is the patron saint of doubters.

Although we, 2000 years later, may not have seen, we can believe because Jesus is with us today much as he was with the apostles on that first Easter:

- Jesus is with us in the Eucharist,
- Jesus is with us where 2 or 3 or more are gathered in his name,
- Jesus is with us in the Holy Scriptures.

Because we believe in the Jesus Christ we have never seen, with the help of God's grace we can learn to love and serve the Jesus we see each day in our families, in our church, in our community, and in our world. Like Thomas we are called to touch his wounds and in doing so to minister to the sick, the suffering, the wounded, the marginalized, and the oppressed of our world.

Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.

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