Deacon Julio Lara

Second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday) (C)

A priest once told me that we Catholics are remarkably good at Lent, but for some reason, we aren't quite as good at Easter. What he meant was that we know how to "do" the desert. We are disciplined. We fast, we abstain, we pray more, and we give alms. We enter those forty days with a checklist and a heart, ready to repent. But then Easter arrives, and we often find ourselves at a loss. We forget that Easter is not just a single Sunday; it is a **season**. We spent forty days in the desert, and now the Church gives us fifty days of rejoicing, feasting, and celebration. We celebrate that we are no longer stuck in the tomb, that the war has been won, and that the gates of heaven are open. We are here to celebrate the gift of faith!

Yet, if we look closely at today's Gospel, we see a group of people who were having exactly the same problem. The Gospel begins on the evening of that first day of the week. *It is officially Easter. The tomb is empty. The news is spreading*. Yet, where do we find the disciples? We find them behind **locked doors**.

The text says they were there "for fear." Even though it was Easter, they were still living in a form of "Lent" of the soul. Their doors were bolted because they were afraid of what was outside, but perhaps they were also afraid of what was inside their own guilt, their failure to stand by Jesus at the Cross, and their uncertainty about the future.

How many of us are sitting today behind our own locked doors? We come to Mass, we sing the "Alleluias," but internally, we've bolted the door. Maybe your door is locked by **anxiety** about your health or your children. Maybe it is locked by **shame** over a sin you think is too big for God to handle. Or perhaps it is locked by **grief.**

The beauty of Divine Mercy Sunday is that Jesus does not stand outside the door knocking and waiting for us to get our act together. The Gospel says, **"Jesus came and stood in their midst."** Locked doors are no obstacle for **Mercy**. He enters our mess, our fear, and our "Lent", and His first words aren't a rebuke. He doesn't say, *"Where were you on Friday?"* He says, **"Peace be with you."**

This encounter leads me to ask: What is the difference between a believer and a non-believer? I believe that the difference is **faith**. Faith is a gift from God that allows us to assent to divine truths. It is what allows us to look at a piece of bread and a cup of wine and truly believe, that they have become the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. As humans body and spirit, we cannot keep that faith trapped inside our heads. We have an urge, a need, to act on that faith. This is where **devotion** comes in.

Similar to a sacrament (external sign of an internal grace), a devotion is an external expression of our internal faith. In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we see the first Christian community as a model of this. They didn't just "believe" in private. They **devoted** themselves. They met together, they broke bread, they shared their possessions. Their devotion was the "proof" of their faith.

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Today, we celebrate the **Devotion to Divine Mercy**. This isn't just a set of extra prayers or a nice picture; it is a way for us to express our trust in the unconditional love of God. It is the external act of saying, "Jesus, I trust in You," even when my doors are locked and my heart is afraid. **Think of Thomas.** Thomas wasn't there for the first visit. He wanted proof. He said, *"Unless I see the mark of the nails... I will not believe."*

Notice what happens a week later. The doors are **still locked**. Jesus returns, and He goes straight to Thomas. He doesn't tell Thomas to just "have more faith" in an abstract way. He says, *"Put your finger here... bring your hand and put it into my side."* This is the heart of Divine Mercy. Jesus uses His **wounds** to heal Thomas's **unbelief**. In our lives, we usually try to hide our wounds. We hide our failures, our struggles. We think God only wants the "perfect" version of us. But Jesus proves that He meets us in the wounds. He invites Thomas and He invites us to touch the scars.

Our faith matures when we realize that God's mercy doesn't ignore our past; it is a light that shines through our brokenness. St. Peter reminds us in the second reading that our faith is "more precious than gold" because it is "tested by fire." Those fires those trials create the very wounds where Mercy enters.

As we continue through this Easter season, I want to challenge you: **Unlock the door.** If you have been living as if it is still Lent carrying a burden of guilt or fear let it go. Jesus gave the apostles the power to forgive sins in today's Gospel specifically because He wanted to ensure that the "locked doors" of sin would never keep us from Him again.

Similar to our Easter Vigil, the Lord added to the number of the early Church not because they had a great marketing plan, but because they lived with "exultation and sincerity of heart." They were people who knew they were forgiven.

Let our devotion to Divine Mercy be more than a prayer. Let it be a lifestyle. **Be Merciful, Offer Peace** to a family member you haven't spoken to **Practice the corporal and spiritual works of Mercy.** Through the gift of faith may you have eternal life and may you be able to say, **"My Lord and my God"**.