

Doubting Thomas

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

April 11, 2010

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

Early in his novel, *Les Miserables*, the basis for the Broadway musical, Victor Hugo describes the actual moral disintegration of Jean Valjean, a common laborer who is sentenced to five years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. Once released, Valjean's descent continues, as no one will give him work or even sell him food or shelter because of his criminal record. Hopeless and exhausted, he stumbles into the house of an old bishop, who greets him courteously and treats him as an honored guest. Valjean, ever the hardened realist, is confused by his host's generosity, and, unwilling to believe and accept the genuineness of such treatment, he steals the silver plate from the bishop's cupboard and flees into the night. The next day the police arrive at the bishop's house with the captured criminal and the silver. Valjean is utterly depressed at the sure prospect of returning to prison. Confronted by the man who returned his generosity with treachery, however, the bishop astonishes both the thief and his arresters: "I'm glad to see you," he says. "But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring 200 francs. Why didn't you take them along with your plate?" Forced to release their captive at the bishop's insistence, the police depart, and the bishop hands Valjean the candlesticks, holding them just a moment longer before sending him freely on his way with this blessing: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts, and I give it to God." In that moment, the old Valjean dies and is reborn.

Valjean's story is a modern twist on the disciples' encounter with transforming grace in the form of the risen Jesus. It had been a frightening, dangerous, and grief-filled week for the disciples, culminating with their abandonment and cowardice at the trial, conviction, and crucifixion of Jesus. Following all these tragic events, the disciples had secluded themselves, in secret, behind locked doors to avoid getting arrested by the authorities and suffering the same fate as Jesus. So here they were hiding behind locked doors to keep the threatening world out, but they were also locking themselves in, ashamed and afraid of what they had done or failed to do, leading to paralysis. Everything was so uncertain! A few years ago, there was the movie, *Panic Room*, where a mother, played by Jodie Foster, and her daughter, barricade themselves in a steel encased impregnable high-tech bunker, complete with closed-circuit televisions, computers, and back-up generators, all designed to provide safety while burglars try to break in. Well the disciples had gathered in **their** own version of a panic room, locked off from a hostile world, which threatened their safety, but also kept them from any hope. **Jesus** may have risen, but the disciples had **not**! Yet suddenly it is the living Jesus who breaks through their locked **panic** room and appears to them, shattering their fear and shame. He offers them peace, which might be translated as Relax, Don't Worry, Be Happy, I have risen! He breathes on them and they become new creations living by the Spirit of God. He is not out to settle old scores, nor criticize or judge them for their moments of infidelity, desertion, betrayals, and denials. Rather he confirms his choice of them as his cherished ones, revealing his forgiving love for each one, when they had the

right **only** to expect condemnation. **Jesus**, releases them into the world not as a group of frightened and confused individuals, but as a courageous, tight knit community with a mission to reveal the merciful, compassionate, and forgiving God they had experienced. Transformed by the Holy Spirit, they are sent out into the world to love people as Jesus loves them.

In the Celtic Daily Prayer, there is this simple exchange, Question: What are the only human-made things in heaven? Answer: The wounds in the hands, feet, and side of Christ. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples not as the powerful one but as the wounded one. We **need** a God with scars. Jesus' familiarity and solidarity with our human condition did not end with his death. Injured and scarred like us, this is a God who knows what we are going through and understands our dilemmas. Scars are physical reminders of hard struggles we have endured, bodily and emotional. They are part of the healing process. The scars of Jesus dignify the pain of all of us. If the disciples become like Jesus, they can go out and show that every person in the world is precious and beautiful to God, even if that beauty is scarred or locked behind layers of fear, chaos, and sin. It is by revealing our common woundedness, our brokenness, not our strengths or talents, that we can touch one another with the healing rejuvenating power of God's love. Of course, none of this makes sense in the **Board Room**. Donald Trump presides over a reality TV series called *The Apprentice*, in which, each week, individuals and teams are tested for their competence in entrepreneurial skills. When they don't meet the demands of business, Trump takes pleasure in saying, "**You're fired!**" But **rejection** is the substance of reality TV and viewers seem to love it. Men or women get to eliminate one by one, those who don't measure up in an entertaining survival of the fittest. It's called reality TV because it **is** the way of the world. Even 80 year old astronaut legend Buzz Aldrin was booted off *Dancing With the Stars* last week. Jesus knows that only those who realize they have failed, been forgiven, and granted a second chance, have the courage and the resources to go and talk to others about what forgiveness means. So we **can** believe in a God who reuses rejects, and, having freed people from their past and possessed by the love of God, can serve faithfully again.

We might ordinarily think that Jesus only comes when we get our lives straightened out, when our faith and confidence is strongest. Rather the risen Jesus seeks to address us in our needs, trials, and moments of failure, even if they are self-inflicted. We know how it feels to fail and it haunts us, striking fear in our hearts, whether it be failure in business, in school, in relationships, in parenting. Failure undermines our self-image and cuts down our self-confidence. It rips apart our facade of strength. We work hard to succeed and avoid failure. We try, as the old proverb, counsels us, to make lemonade when life gives us lemons or learn some important lesson from our failure. But a failure is still a failure and it **hurts!**

Yet amidst our discouragement, self-doubt, and uncertainties, the risen Jesus appears at the door of our locked panic rooms of defeat and says Peace, I'm here! He comes, **not** to turn our failures into success nor to make us immune to failure, or even take away the danger of failure. He looms at our side **in** the hurt, to empower us **in** our discouragement, to strengthen us **in** our self-doubts. It is worth noting that after the disciples had been visited by the risen Jesus and received his peace and the Holy Spirit, one week **later** they have once **again** locked themselves away behind a closed door, still **not** living as an Easter people. The disciples have not warranted a second visit by Jesus,

but they get one and a renewed gift of his peace. Jesus comes **again** and **again** to these scared and confused disciples, because freedom from fear, especially fear of death, is the great achievement and challenge of the resurrection. Jesus put death to **death**. Americans sometimes act as if death is optional, hoping one can delay it indefinitely or avoid it altogether, if you really try hard. Otherwise it becomes your own fault. Woody Allen summarized this attitude writing, “It’s not that I’m afraid of death. It’s just that I don’t want to be **there** when it happens!” By conquering death, Jesus shifted the focus away from trying **not** to die, to learning how to live fully **now**. Because Jesus lives, we too may live, free from the fear of the past which has been redeemed and having gone ahead of us, we know he safeguards the future. Jesus accepts us where we are, but also gives us the strength to get where we need to be. And so he will offer himself to us, not just once, but **over** and **over**, always being there for us, to forgive, to empower, to comfort us even when we are tempted by fear and despair to give up on ourselves. He is forever surprising us with his presence, keeping us off balance, by making it impossible to know when, where, and how he will appear. He materializes in the words and gestures of friends, in the comfort and guidance of a loved one, in the random act of kindness of a stranger.

And **yes**, Jesus journeys alongside us through the continuing sexual abuse of children scandal and cover up surrounding the Vatican. During the heat of the moment and anguish at continuing shameful revelations, we are **tempted** to applaud the statement made by Gertrude Boltz, a 63 year old woman visiting St. Peter’s Square from Austria on Easter, when replying to the question posed by a *New York Times* reporter on how the scandal had impacted her own personal faith, said, “To think of Jesus Christ is one thing...to think of the Vatican is **quite** another.” However, our Gospel passage reminds us that in spite of our personal and institutional failings, the risen Jesus is **not** abandoning us **or** our church. God will continue to come to us and help us open **all** our locked doors. When we recite the line, I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, in the Nicene Creed, it’s not so much that we are saying we believe **in** the church, as that we believe that God is always present and at work **in** the Church. Christ **will** liberate us when we are trapped behind the barriers of fear and sin. Though the repercussions of this scandal are painful, they may give rise to the birth pangs of a new reform, a reverberation of the Easter message, that we are **continually** becoming a transformed people. Easter isn’t just a celebration, it’s a way of life. As those who follow the path of Jesus, we are directed to bring the good news into the midst of the world’s suffering, violence, and brokenness, **even** when it exists in our own church. But the resurrection assures us that Jesus will appear in our dark moments of failure and humiliation, during those times when we feel lost, forsaken, and beaten down, whose love can heal our deepest wounds, **even** when they are self-inflicted. We look for a **new** outpouring of the Spirit, a spirit breathed forth from the present day crucifixion of innocence in our church, just as Jesus breathed on the defeated disciples and resurrected them as bold, triumphant witnesses. We pray for the repentance, renewal, and rebirth of our wounded Church in the same way we cry for our own repentance, renewal and rebirth. Already the scandal has left some scars and more are undoubtedly on the way, **but** being the Church of Jesus Christ **Superscar**, we should expect no less. The same power that brought Jesus out of the grave and saved Valjean is available to **each** of us. The peace of Christ will sustain us and help us to do what we thought there was no way in the world we **could** do. William Barclay,

the Bible commentator, once defined this peace as “May God give you **every** good thing.” Jesus does not **stop** the chaos of the world or in our church, yet he becomes the calming and abiding presence within it, most notably in the Eucharist. Jesus **has** overcome the world and the Church in all their flaws, redeeming them both, so Relax, Don’t Worry, Be Happy—He is Risen!