

[Readings: Acts 4:32-35; Ps. 118; 1 John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31]

Why do you think believers believe? Do you think it's just always been a part of their family and that makes it easier? Or maybe it was important to have a friend who inspired them along the way, or a great priest or a good teacher or maybe a great book? It's a good question, isn't it?

Let me ask you another question: why do YOU think God wants YOU to believe? The answer to that question comes in the last line of today's Gospel reading. God wants you to believe, "so that you may have life in His name." That's the goal. It's what you and I were made for: life in His name. In other words, Jesus desires great things for you and me. In fact, that very last line says that the Gospels are written "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief, you may have life in His name. In other words, you were not made for an ordinary, mundane, run-of-the-mill, unenthusiastic life. You were made to have life in His name. God did not make you and me to be some second-rate-version-of-yourself. You were not made for comfort. You and I were made for greatness, not to be lackluster, half-hearted, stumbling, bumbling, and fumbling. He created you to have life in His name. That's exciting.

After all, as He does in the Upper Room on that great Easter evening, Jesus has breathed His breath on us. He has pronounced, "Receive the Holy Spirit," right on top of your head at your baptism and at your confirmation. And because of that, you are capable of far more than you know. You can be braver, stronger, more patient, and more peaceful than you can even see right now.

For Bob, he hated his job. Most folks would say it was a great job. It was a high-tech job, software design, and good pay. He was really good at

it, but he found himself slogging through the day, drudging through life with no joy. And he knew, because of the restlessness inside of him, that God had something else in mind. He knew he was made for greatness, and it wasn't doing this.

So at age 45, in the middle of his career, as a husband and father of three kids, Bob quit. He scaled back the life of his family dramatically, and he went back to school got a degree in teaching. And two years later, he became the middle school, social studies, and history teacher at the local parish school. And he's never looked back. Bob believed and has found life in His name.

For Julie, greatness came in a different form. By the time she was a teenager, she was already an out-of-control alcoholic destroying anything, anybody, and any relationship in her path. But slowly, over time, as she came to believe in Jesus and surrounded herself with other people who also believed, Julie turned her life around. She grew into a healthy relationship with her husband and four children.

She began organizing, and still does every week, a group of women in her hometown who get together to encourage each other in faith, and to hold each other accountable for their behavior and decisions in trying to stay clean and sober. Fourteen women and their families now look very, very different because Julie found life in Jesus' name. Instead of destroying, Julie now encourages and a builds up.

But believing isn't easy, is it? Just ask Thomas.

At first he doubted, and that's usually why we remember him. We forget that when Jesus was ready to return to Jerusalem to encounter His passion and death, Thomas was the only Apostle to say, "Then let us go with Him, so we can die with Him." If there's one thing I hope you take away from the story of Thomas, I hope it is this: your future is not

determined by your past. Thomas moved from doubt to trust, and that trust propelled him outward across the world to share what he had discovered, establishing the Catholic Church all the way in India. The full title of Thomas should be: Doubting, Pouting and Shouting Thomas!

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday. Jesus gave the Divine Mercy Devotion to St. Faustina Kowalska almost 100 years ago in Poland, before the outbreak of World War 2. Jesus also gave her instructions on painting an image of the Divine Mercy which we have hanging on the wall here in our sanctuary.

I think we can honestly say that whatever we are experiencing right now is, in some mysterious way, a gift of God's mercy, however severe it might feel in the present moment. Sr. Faustina calls it "God's severe mercy." When my two closest friends were taken away from me last year within two weeks of each other, I called it God's cruel will.

It stings, and as such it is natural for us to focus on the question of "why?" And so we ask: "Why, God?", "Why now?", "Why them?", "Why me?" But, as I have learned from almost 70 years of life and of faith, "Why?" is the wrong question to ask.

If you and I are truly interested in moving forward and not getting stuck, we need to remember that on this side of eternity we "see indistinctly, as in a mirror" (1 Cor 13:12). We do much better to ask the more spiritually productive questions of "What?" and "How?" "What is God asking of me in the present moment on this Divine Mercy Sunday?" And then to ask ourselves "How?" "How is God going to get me through this?" Jesus says to us, "Behold, I am with you always!"

How do we begin to answer the questions, "What?" and "How?" I would like to suggest three answers.

First, God wants exactly from us what He wanted from St. Faustina: greater trust! He wants us to trust in His Divine Mercy, to trust in His providential plan, and to trust in His unfailing goodness in the face of our sufferings. In her diary, St. Faustina wrote, "Suffering is a great grace; through suffering the soul becomes like the Savior" (No. 57). Jesus, help us to trust in You that this is true. Help us to trust in You, so that we might continue to become more like You! Trust.

Second, God is inviting us to [persevere in prayer](#). Turn to the Chaplet of Divine Mercy once again and pray it for those who have died because of war and terrorism, violence and abuse, natural disasters and catastrophic accidents. "Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world." Pray.

Lastly, I believe that God is asking each of us to discover new and creative ways of practicing the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. Remember those? We take our trust, we take our prayer and we transform the world by putting them into action!

Unbelief can be transformed into belief, fear can be turned into courage, and weakness can be turned into greatness. If God can do that with a middle-aged man named Bob, with a recovering alcoholic named Julie, with a reformed fisherman named Thomas, and with a humble religious sister in Poland named Faustina, just imagine what God might be able to do with you and me!

Trust. Pray. Do works of Mercy. AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 3:13-15; 17-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 2:1-5a; Luke 24:35-48]

What happens when little kids fall down and hurt themselves? They would usually run to their mommy or their daddy to show them their “boo-boo.” And mommy or daddy would swoop them up in hugs and kisses and tend to their bruised egos as well as their skinned knees. For a child to show his or her wound is an act of trust in a moment of vulnerability. It’s also a chance for the parent to respond with concern, love, and care. It’s a moment that captures the humanity of both the wounded and the one who cares. Last time this happened to me and my parents, I was about ...27 years old!

When the four of us kids were in grade school, one warm summer evening, when we were sitting with our parents on the front porch steps, three of us older kids decided to have a contest to see who could run the fastest – backwards! Of course, two of us fell onto the sidewalk trying to do this, scraping our knees and hands. Running to our mom for sympathy, she had one rule of thumb when it came to injuries: “If you’re not bleeding, you’re fine!”

Then, to distract us from self-pity, mom said, “Check the sidewalk. Is the sidewalk OK? Do you know how much it costs to fix a broken sidewalk?” No more pain! No more self-pity!

Jesus shows His wounds to the uncertain disciples who had been confused since they first heard about the empty tomb. In showing His vulnerability, He reverses the usual roles. He is taking care of them, tending to their doubts and to their wounded hearts so full of fear that they had lost Him.

In showing His wounds, Jesus makes that which had seemed incomprehensible somehow understandable. As long as He remained only a spirit, they would have no way to understand that He had risen from the dead. He uses these physical ways to manifest His presence.

Another way He makes His real presence known is by eating with them. Our God has wounds and our God eats with us. It seems as though Jesus the Christ would fit naturally into any family I know.

How many of you have a friend in St. Anthony? Most of us know him as the patron saint of lost items. Not only do I invoke him when I misplace something, I now invoke him when I have lost my train of thought! Doesn't it happen almost instantaneously that when we invoke the name of St. Anthony that we find what we have lost?

Behavioral scientists say that it is not a minor miracle at all. They say we are guilty of "selective vision." Our focus is limited to a certain field of vision. Once we de-stress, we easily find what we have lost. I think I'll stick with my original assumption that this is a minor miracle!

"Selective vision" is what happens to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and to the disciples gathered in today's Gospel passage.

I wish we could hear the whole Emmaus story, the 35 verses that precede today's Gospel, as it is my very favorite Gospel passage! Anyway, the disciples' vision was limited. Their belief was narrow. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. So Jesus needs to make clearer for them what they are looking at.

As the rabbis say, the whole Bible can be boiled down to four words: We sin. God saves. Those last two words transform our human history into salvation history. Luke's accounts of Jesus' Resurrection appearances include Jesus in the role of "Bible teacher." The disciples on the road to Emmaus and those in the upper room experience Jesus in bodily form and also in His role as rabbi, as a teacher. He helps them "connect the dots" of their Jewish tradition so they can see that the Resurrection was the fulfillment of all that their ancestors had hoped for.

Easter helps us locate ourselves. God's grace is not only for biblical times but also for our times. We are not included as an afterthought, but as the intended beneficiary of God's grace since the beginning of time. We are His disciples here and now, in this time and place. "You are my witnesses to all of these things."

How does a person become a disciple of Jesus? The First Letter of John has an answer: You first have to know Him. And how do you know Him? By keeping His commandments and "His Word."

His commandments are more than just the Ten Commandments. Check the Gospels to see what Jesus says about “the commandments,” including the greatest commandment: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

The Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are you when you do this. When you do that.

The Last Judgement in Matthew Chapter 25: “Whatever you did to these least ones of Mine, you did it to Me.”

Our Second Reading from the First Letter of John says quite bluntly that those who do not follow the commandments or “His Word” are liars.

Here are some questions to ask ourselves if we are being honest with our truest selves.

How do my experiences challenge my faith?

What do I see and still not yet believe?

How has forgiveness moved me to repent?

This week, reflect on those sinful tendencies that still enslave us. What will we do this week to turn them over to Christ? Is Christ real for us, or is He still just a ghost in our imagination? Why are we troubled? Touch Him in this Eucharist and see, and let Him touch us and heal our lives. AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18]

Today is “Good Shepherd Sunday” as well as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. We dedicate this one day each year to pray for church leaders: those we already have, and those we need for the future. If you love the Church, pray for those who lead her. If you don’t like the way the Church is headed, if you have disagreements with certain decisions and pronouncements, then you may have to pray twice as hard! I’ve had to do that a lot recently! But more than that: You might consider that your dissatisfaction may itself be a call to service if not to leadership.

It could easily be called “Good *and* Bad Shepherds Sunday” because there’s almost as much in the readings about bad shepherds as well as good ones. In the bad category are the leaders and elders of the people. Saint Peter accuses them to their faces of not recognizing what was plain as day: Jesus is the Messiah and through Him alone comes salvation.

The Letter of John ups the ante by implicating “the world” in not knowing Christ. And Jesus Himself says the hired shepherd really doesn’t care about the sheep and abandons his protective role at the first sign of danger -- and thereby St. John condemns the same authorities St. Peter would later have in his sights.

Which brings us to the good -- the ones who like Peter and the first disciples obeyed God and not men; like the early believers who knew Christ and thereby became children of God and members of the flock the Good Shepherd tends and for which He lays down his life.

What kind of shepherds people need and what kind of flocks they will be are good questions to ask. In the Good Shepherd story, forget about the hired man, the sheep, and the wolf. We know the wolf will attack, the hired help will bolt, and the vulnerable sheep are in danger. Those characters play to type predictably. As in a movie, the bad guy moves in for the kill, the working stiff saves himself, and the victim is exposed.

The good shepherd, meanwhile, does the courageous thing: risks his life for the sheep that belong to him.



In the movie version, we'd expect this too: The hero would put himself or herself in harm's way because someone is in need. We'd expect the hero to win, or it wouldn't be a satisfying movie. Yet sometimes the hero dies in rescuing the vulnerable one. While this makes the ending bittersweet, self-sacrifice is a recognizable part of the code of good storytelling.

The most curious detail of this story isn't about the wolf, hired man, flock, or even the shepherd's sacrifice. It is about those other sheep that don't belong to this fold. The sacrifice of Jesus is not just for the flock in plain sight, but for these mysterious others too.

Scholars have identified the mystery sheep as future believers – like us. Before we were born, Jesus accepted death for our sake. These “other sheep,” however, might also be the non-Jewish Christians who came to faith after the time of Jesus.

Though the mission of Jesus was mostly limited to His fellow Jews in His lifetime, the Church evolved into a Church of Gentiles in ages to come.

It's also possible that the “other sheep” refer to believers who, by the generation of this Gospel, were already out there, sharing the faith of the apostles but separate from the ways of the community of St. John.

Most importantly, the “other sheep” could include other groups who live Christ-like lives outside the boundaries of the formal Church. The Good Shepherd may well have plenty of flocks we have not yet approached! Maybe that is why Jesus is so inclusive of people who are outcast and living on the fringe.

There are so many alien voices calling out to vulnerable sheep. Some of those alien voices are evil voices disguised as soft, harmonious voices in our movies, in our television programs (except for the Eternal Word Television Network and Catholic Television Network of Detroit which always tell the truth!), in biased print and Internet journalism, and even in some of the novels we read.

Those voices are so convincing we don't even know that they are speaking a message of lies. The challenge for you and me is to recognize the

voice of the Good Shepherd (through the Church), follow His lead (read and follow the Bible), and have an eternally happy ending to our earthly pilgrimage.

Regarding today's Responsorial Psalm -- Have you ever been the "odd man out?" I remember how badly it stung. The kids in the neighborhood were choosing up sides for a sporting event game, and I was usually the odd man out. Rejected. Told to sit on the sidelines. Sports were not my strong suit. Whatever sport I tried ended up looking like comedy relief! So, I became the class clown and the class nerd!

And then there was another time when the kids were gathering for a game when an older kid who was creative took charge. Again, we had one too many players. Again, someone was going to be left out. This time it was another kid. But then the older kid said, "Hey, don't leave. You can be the official cheerleader for both teams." And so began a tradition where no one was left out of the game. No one was rejected. Everyone either played the field or cheered from the sides.

Maybe it was because Jesus knew He would be the "stone the builders rejected" that made Him passionate about inclusion -- seeing Himself as the Good Shepherd who would not rest until the lost sheep was brought back.

You and I are both called to know and to be "Good Shepherds." The title is not limited to Jesus Christ alone, nor is limited only to popes, bishops and priests. It means each one of us who has responsibility over others: at work, at school, at play, even in the marketplace. Wherever the providence of God has put you, you are challenged to be a Good Shepherd to those around you. As a spouse, as a parent, as a grandparent, as a brother or sister, as a professional or semi-professional. People become good leaders based on their experiences, on what life teaches them in good times and in bad. Look into your heart on this Good Shepherd Sunday: Have you gained wisdom? Do you have a light you've been hiding under a bushel? Are you the leader we've been waiting for? AMEN! ALLELUIA!