

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**O**pen a bible at the center of your group, place a recent newspaper or the globe of the world beside it, and light a candle.

**LEADER:** Who waits to see God's face and goodness?

**ALL:** *Whose hungers need food, whose families need shelter, whose confusion or anger awaits healing and faith?*

**LEADER:** *(All extend hands toward the globe or the newspaper.)* Risen Lord, bless all who have not seen but believe.

**ALL:** *Transform us into people others can see and believe in you. Amen.*

**L**ilies abound in our churches on Easter morning as the Church throughout the world hears the story of the beloved disciple, the ideal believer, who sees the empty tomb and without hesitation believes Jesus is risen. The lilies are losing their luster a week later. The disciples to whom Jesus appears on Easter evening lack lustre, too. They are more like us, struggling with what to believe.

One wonders if the disciples fear Jesus' enemies or perhaps Jesus himself. They gather, suspended between the numbing horror of Jesus' death and Mary Magdalene's news, "I have seen the Lord."

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

Along with the news that she has seen Jesus risen, Mary Magdalen brings his words, "I go to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Their relationship with Jesus will last. He entrusts them to one another as his brothers and sisters.

Yet on this evening of the first Easter, Jesus' followers make no moves. They stay safe in their own company within their own walls. It's so much easier than embracing the new.

**M**ost of us know this place, the safe circles where we share values and express bewilderment at those different from us. They may wear veils or cook smelly food or accept same-sex marriage or love tradition and insist on long-held rubrics.

Church scandals and backpeddling have disturbed some of us. Some have to seek God anew.

Perhaps this Sunday is time to pray with the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins a line near the end of his poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland." It asks the risen Jesus to "easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east."

The risen Jesus disturbs and reinvigorates a community teetering between old and new, fact and future. Jesus breathes Spirit into them and sends his disciples to carry on his mission from the Father. He forgives them and authorizes them to become a reconciling community. What Jesus does for them he entrusts them to do for others.

● *When have you felt suspended between old and new realities?*

● *What do you want to easter in you?*



# GOSPEL

## Jesus empowers his disciples to forgive.

**NARRATOR:** On the evening of the first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them.

**JESUS:** Peace be with you.

**NARRATOR:** When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. At the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced.

**JESUS:** Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

**NARRATOR:** Then Jesus breathed on them.

**JESUS:** Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound.

**NARRATOR:** It happened that one of the twelve, Thomas (the name means twin), was absent when Jesus came.

**OTHER DISCIPLES:** We have seen the Lord!

**THOMAS:** I'll never believe it without probing the nail-prints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail-

marks and my hand into his side.

**NARRATOR:** A week later, the disciples were once more in the room, and this time Thomas was there with them. Despite the locked doors, Jesus came and stood before them.

**JESUS:** Peace be with you. Thomas, take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe!

**THOMAS:** My Lord and my God!

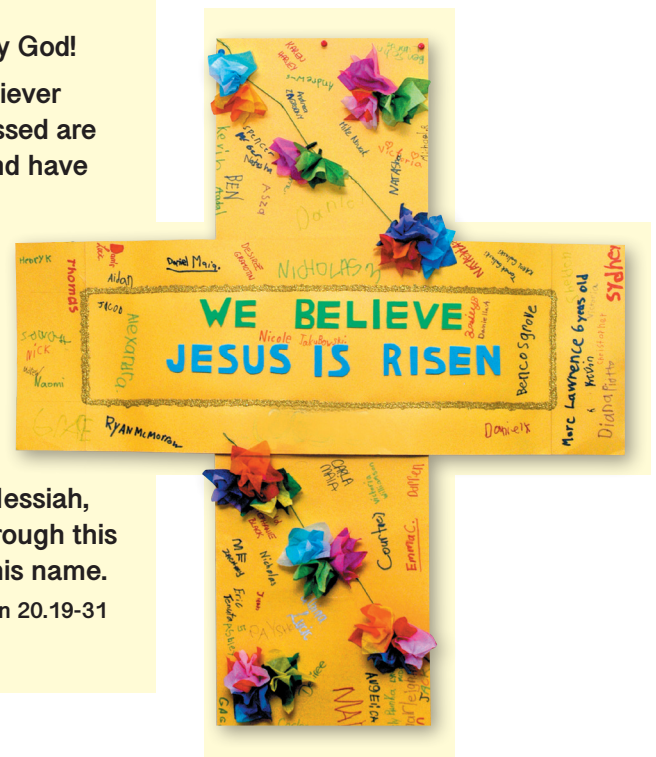
**JESUS:** You became a believer because you saw me. Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus performed many other signs as well—signs not recorded here—in the presence of his disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name.

John 20:19-31

The community that gathers in Jesus' name 60 years later at the time the gospel is written also has good reason for fear. Their faith that Jesus is the messiah has led them into conflict with their neighbors—conflicts such as the man born blind experiences.

The risen Jesus takes the initiative in Sunday's gospel. Locked doors cannot keep him out. He stands among his disciples and shows them the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. The one who was crucified, God has raised up.



## Jesus sends forth his friends in peace.

**O**n the first Easter evening Jesus' disciples gather and lock the doors. The gospel says they fear "the Jews." In John's gospel "the Jews" refers to the religious officials who wanted Jesus put to death and also to those who oppose his followers at the time of the writing of the

gospel, some 60 years after Jesus' death.

Jesus' earliest disciples have good reason for fear. Their leader Jesus has been executed. Perhaps his cruel death still seems unbelievable to some of his closest friends. How can they believe Jesus is risen?

His presence transforms his disciples' fear into rejoicing. He wishes peace to these disciples who deserted and denied him in his suffering.

● When have events in your life left you too numb to believe?

● When have love or forgiveness come unexpectedly?



Jesus leads his fearful followers not only to joy but into action. Jesus sends them as his Father sent him. The Greek word for *send* is *apostlein*, from which we get the word *apostle* or its Latin version *missionary*.

Jesus does not send this fearful community forth alone but breathes the Spirit upon them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says. Jesus breathes on them as God breathed life into the first human and as the Spirit stirred the watery chaos at creation in the stories of Genesis.

The word *ruah* in Hebrew means *wind*, *breath*, and *spirit*. God’s Spirit brings all creation to life; Jesus breathes forth his Spirit to bring forth a new creation in the community of his disciples.

Easter is about transformation and action. Jesus hands over to the community the work that God sent him to do. They go forth to bring God’s love, forgiveness, and healing to the world and their divided community.

In John’s gospel, to believe is not only to share in the life Jesus receives from God but to be sent from God as Jesus was, to live in the world in the power of the same Spirit. The gift of love and forgiveness which Jesus gives his followers becomes their mission to others.

- How can you continue the first disciples’ mission to love and forgive?
- What new life and mission is the Spirit breathing into you?



Thomas belongs to the community that journeys through fear to joy, faith, and mission, but he is not with them to experience Jesus’ risen presence. Skeptical Thomas must make his own journey through doubt to faith.

The scene seven days later also takes place in the evening of the first day of the week—our Sunday. Again his disciples find Jesus standing among them. This repeated Sunday setting suggests that we recognize the risen Jesus is with us when the community gathers at the Eucharistic meal, “the breaking of the bread and the prayers” as Acts calls it.

The risen Easter Jesus breaks through Thomas’s doubt as

easily as through the community’s fear. He comes, invites Thomas to put his fingers in his wounds, and challenges him to believe. Thomas touches Jesus for himself and completes his faith journey.

Jesus prays for all of us who must take the word of others as the basis of our faith. Yet, the word of believers, Jesus insists, can lead others to a personal relationship with him. Life in Jesus’ name is as available to us as to the first believers.

This experience of Thomas can remind us that Jesus often comes today as mysteriously as he did then to Thomas, through unlikely and unbelievable circumstances in daily living.

- What do you need to touch and see for yourself in order to believe?
- What wounds in people have you touched that helped you see whom you love and believe in?

## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Act like Thomas, who puts his hands in Jesus’ wounds. Experience impoverished people’s needs firsthand by volunteering to make meals at a Loaves and Fishes program, to tutor immigrants in English, to work with uninsured folks at a clinic, or mentor young people.



## Faith in Jesus creates a community.

Sunday's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes a shared community life as a manifestation of faith in the risen Jesus. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus gathered disciples, a community joined by faith in him rather than the blood relationships of family. Faith in Jesus and the one who sent him creates community on earth as in heaven. Christians share prayer, goods, life.

### The ideal community.

The brethren devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. A reverent fear overtook them all, for many wonders and signs were performed by the apostles. Those who believed shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one's need. They went to the temple area together every day, while in their homes they broke bread. With exultant and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2.42-47

The community this reading from Acts pictures is letting go of fear and disbelief and sharing their faith,

gifts, and goods. They share all they have, so no one is needy among them. Imagine a world or community today in which all who owned property or houses sell them and donate the proceeds to be distributed to all according to their needs. The first Christian community makes the breaking and sharing of bread not just a ritual meal but a total way of life.

The Church has never abandoned this scriptural ideal. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls us to a common life in our time. Earth is a shared inheritance that God intends to benefit everyone. "The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct" (93).

The Second Vatican Council defines the common good both as it applies to families, the basic cell of society, and to societies as a whole. The common good is "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment" (*Gaudium et Spes* #26).

Pope Francis sees an ethical imperative in the common good, "a summons to solidarity and the preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters." Every human person has dignity and the right to basic needs—food, shelter, family, education, health care—that allow the person to develop.

Could the Spirit of generosity and care for all, especially the needy, be the appeal of the early community? Was their sharing of spiritual and material goods what

drew women and men of all social classes, especially slaves, to the gospel and membership in early Christian communities? What about our communities today?

- How attractive in our society might a Church be that is known for work to end poverty?
- What Christian common life do you experience in your parish?
- When has breaking and sharing bread in communion led you to sharing your goods with people in need?

## PRAY

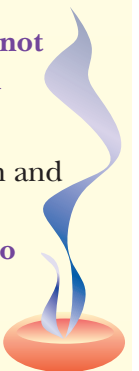
**LEADER:** Let us think of people in the news, in our neighborhood or parish, in our families who await God's Spirit of love and forgiveness or who await generous Christians who share their material and spiritual goods. *Allow a minute or two of silence.*

**LEADER:** Praise be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us a new birth into hope that draws its life from his resurrection.

**ALL:** Though we have not seen him, we love him and believe in him.

**LEADER:** May our faith and love in action give life.

**ALL:** Transform us into people others see and believe in Jesus. Amen.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of *SUNDAY BY SUNDAY*, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.