Ancient Commentary

(Second Week of Easter - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

A Selection of Church Fathers on John 20:19-31

Peter Chrysologus: It was evening more by grief than by time. It was evening for minds darkened by the somber cloud of grief and sadness because although the report of the resurrection had given the slight glimmer of twilight, nevertheless the Lord had not yet shone through with his light in all its brilliance.

Leo the Great: He offers to the doubters' eyes the marks of the cross that remained in his hands and feet and invites them to handle him with careful scrutiny. He does this because the traces of the nails and spear had been retained to heal the wounds of unbelieving hearts, so that not with wavering faith but with the most certain conviction they might comprehend that the nature that had been lain in the sepulcher was to sit on God the Father's throne.

Peter Chrysologus: What does this repetition in bestowing peace mean, except that he wants the tranquility that he had announced to their minds individually also to be kept collectively among them by granting peace repeatedly? He knew, at any rate, that they were going to have far from insignificant struggles in the future stemming from his delay, with one boasting that he had persevered in faith and another in grief because he had doubted… Peter denies, John flees, Thomas doubts, all forsake him: unless Christ had granted forgiveness for these transgressions by his peace, even Peter, who was the first in rank of all of them, would have been considered inferior and undeserving of his subsequent elevation to the primacy.

Gregory the Great: The Lord's body that made its entrance to the disciples through closed doors was the same as that which issued before the eyes of people from the Virgin's closed womb at his birth. Is it surprising if he who was now going to live forever made his entrance through closed doors after his resurrection, who on his coming in order to die made his appearance from the unopened womb of a virgin? But because the faith of those who beheld it wavered concerning the body they could see, he showed them at once his hands and his side, offering them the body that he brought in through the closed doors to touch. By this action he revealed two wonderful, and according to human reason quite contradictory, things. He showed them that after his resurrection his body was both incorruptible and yet could be touched… By showing us that it is incorruptible, he would urge us on toward our reward, and by offering it as touchable he would dispose us toward faith. He manifested himself as both incorruptible and touchable to show us that his body after his resurrection was of the same nature as ours but of a different sort of glory.

Gregory of Nyssa: He did not remain in death's power. The wounds that his body had received from the iron of the nails and spear offered no impediment to his rising again. After his resurrection, he showed himself whenever he wanted to his disciples.

Cyril of Alexandria: When Christ greeted his holy disciples with the words "peace be with you," by peace he meant himself, for Christ's presence always brings tranquility of soul. This is the grace Paul desired for believers when he wrote, "The peace of Christ which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds." The peace of Christ which passes all understanding is, in fact, the Spirit of Christ, who fills those who share in him with every blessing.

By showing his wounded side and the marks of the nails, he convinced us beyond a doubt that he had raised the temple of his body, the very body that had hung on the cross. He restored that body that he had worn, destroying death's power over all flesh, for as God, he was life itself.

Chrysostom: Do you see the words issuing in deeds? For what he said before the crucifixion, that "I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you," this he now accomplished in deed. But all these things led them to a most exact faith. For since they had an endless war with the Jews, he continually repeated "Peace be to you," giving them consolation to counterbalance the strife. And so this was the first word that he spoke to them after the resurrection. (Similarly, Paul keeps on saying, "Grace be to you and peace."). To the women, however, he gives good news of joy, because they were in sorrow and had received this as the first curse. Therefore he gives good news to each in their own situation: to the men he gave peace because of their war; to the women he gave joy because of their sorrow. Then having put away all painful things, he tells of the victory of the cross, and this was *the* "peace."

Gregory the Great: The Father sent his Son, appointing him to become a human person for the redemption of the human race. He willed him to come into the world to suffer—and yet he loved his Son whom he sent to suffer. The Lord is sending his chosen apostles into the world, not to the world's joys but to suffer as he himself was sent. Therefore as the Son is loved by the Father and yet is sent to suffer, so also the disciples are loved by the Lord, who nevertheless sends them into the world to suffer.

ON THOMAS:

Gregory the Great: It was not an accident that that particular disciple was not present. The divine mercy ordained that a doubting disciple should, by feeling in his Master the wounds of the flesh, heal in us the wounds of unbelief. The unbelief of Thomas is more profitable to our faith than the belief of the other disciples. For the touch by which he is brought to believe confirms our minds in belief, beyond all question.

Cyril of Alexandria: With good reason, then, are we accustomed to have sacred meetings in churches on the eighth day. And, to adopt the language of allegory, as the idea necessarily demands, we indeed close the doors, but Christ still visits us and appears to us

all, both invisibly as God and visibly in the body. He allows us to touch his holy flesh and gives it to us. For through the grace of God we are admitted to partake of the blessed Eucharist, receiving Christ into our hands, to the intent that we may firmly believe that he did in truth raise up the temple of his body… Participation in the divine mysteries, in addition to filling us with divine blessedness, is a true confession and memorial of Christ's dying and rising again for us and for our sake. Let us, therefore, after touching Christ's body, avoid all unbelief in him as utter ruin and rather be found well grounded in the full assurance of faith.

Gregory of Nazianzus: If, like a Thomas, you were left out when the disciples were assembled to whom Christ shows himself, when you do see him do not be faithless. And if you do not believe, then believe those who tell you. And if you cannot believe them either, then have confidence in the print of the nails.