

Today we are given a powerful glimpse of the Church in its earliest days. In the Acts of the Apostles, we behold a Church that is vibrant, united, and truly alive. In the Gospel, that same Church is gathered in fear, uncertain of what the future will bring. Yet in both moments—whether in courage or in fear—Jesus stands in their midst, offering His peace and the mercy that restores and sustains His Church.

In the Gospel, His presence is obvious. He appears physically to the apostles. And then, a week later, He comes again—for one person in particular: Thomas. The Lord does not abandon him in his doubt. He returns, and Thomas becomes a believer. In that moment, the Lord adds Thomas to the faith of the Church.

But in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus is no less present—only now His presence is mediated through the life of the Church itself. He is present in the teaching of the apostles—what we would call the doctrinal life of the Church. He is present in the communal life, the fellowship of believers. He is present in the breaking of the bread, the Eucharist. And He is present in the prayers of the Church. And because Jesus is truly present, something happens. Luke tells us: “Awe came upon every soul.”

The Greek word St. Luke uses is φόβος (“phobos”). We usually translate it “fear,” but that can be misleading. This is not fear in the sense of being scared or anxious. This word has a deeper meaning. It describes the human response to the undeniable presence of God breaking into ordinary life.

It is what happens when people realize: God is not distant. God is here. Throughout the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, this word appears repeatedly. When Jesus performs a miracle, when the apostles preach with power, when the Church lives in a way that cannot be explained merely by human effort—people are seized with φόβος. Not terror, but something like holy awe, a kind of reverent astonishment. It is the awareness that we are standing on holy ground. The early Christians are aware that they are living in the presence of the risen Christ. And so “fear”—that is, awe—comes upon every soul.

We can be tempted to think of the early Church as something distant, almost idealized—something that existed back then, but not now. We might look around today and feel discouraged. We see people leaving the Church. We see division, confusion, weakness. And we can begin to wonder: Is Christ still as present as He was then?

The same Jesus who stood in that upper room stands in His Church today. He is present: in the teaching handed on by the apostles, in our communion with one another, in the breaking of the bread—the Eucharist we celebrate here, and in the prayers we offer.

And just as in the days of the early Church, the Lord is still adding to His number. Yes, some are leaving, as some have always left (we are reminded of the betrayal of Judas) —but many are also coming. In the Archdiocese of Atlanta, we welcomed a record number of converts at the Easter Vigil last week. The risen Lord is still seeking out His people. He is still coming back for the “Thomases” of our time—those who doubt, those who hesitate, those who are searching.

If Jesus is just as present now as He was then... where is φόβος in our lives? Where is that sense of awe? Where is that awareness that God is truly here? It is possible to be very familiar with the things of the Church—to come to Mass, to hear the Scriptures, to receive the Eucharist—and yet to lose that sense of wonder. Everything can begin to feel ordinary, routine.

But the early Church reminds us: What we are doing here is *not* ordinary. When we gather as the Church, the risen Christ stands in our midst! When the Scriptures are proclaimed, He speaks! When the Eucharist is consecrated, He becomes truly present! When we pray, we are drawn into the life of God Himself!

The question is not whether Christ is present. The question is whether we are aware of His presence. Do we come to Mass expecting to encounter Him? Do we approach the Eucharist with reverence? Do we recognize that here we are drawn into the very life of God, sharing in the

divine? Because when that awareness begins to grow, so does φόβος—that holy awe. And that awe does not push us away; it draws us in. It deepens our faith. It transforms how we live.

Which brings us to Divine Mercy Sunday. Because if we are honest, there is a reason we sometimes lack that sense of awe, that φόβος. It is not just distraction or routine. Sometimes we are afraid of what it would mean if God were truly present. Afraid because we know our sins. Afraid because we know our weaknesses. Afraid because to stand in the presence of God is to be seen completely. *And if I struggle to accept myself as I am, how could I possibly believe that God accepts me—let alone loves me?*

The first words Jesus speaks in today’s Gospel are: “Peace be with you.” He does not come with condemnation. He comes with mercy. And then He does something remarkable: He breathes on the apostles and gives them the authority to forgive sins. In other words, He ensures that His mercy will remain present—not just in that moment, but in His Church for all time.

So yes, Christ is present in His Church. Today we are reminded that He is present in a very particular way: He is present as mercy. Jesus who stood in the upper room is the same Jesus who absolves sins in Confession, who feeds us in the Eucharist, who speaks peace into our hearts.

The awe we are called to have is the awe of realizing: I stand in the presence of a God who knows me completely... and loves me anyway. That is Divine Mercy. That is what transforms fear into worship. That is what allowed Thomas to move from doubt to faith: “My Lord and my God.” *And that is what begins to heal even our own hearts—so that, little by little, we can learn to receive ourselves as loved.*

So as we continue this Mass, we ask not only for a deeper awareness of Christ’s presence, but for the grace to recognize how He is present: not as a distant judge, but as the Risen Lord who stands among us and says,

“Peace be with you.” And when we begin to believe that—truly believe it—then, like the early Church, a holy awe will come upon our souls, and we will know that we are standing in the presence of Divine Mercy itself.