

SECOND SUNDAY IN EASTER

John 20:19-31

Peace Be With You

Some of you may be familiar with Edgar Allen Poe. I'm guessing many of you had to read him in high school, or are having to read him in high school, or will have to read him in high school. One of his most famous stories is *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The narrator murders an old man and then hides his body under the floorboards in his house. It's a real heart-warming story. No, it's quite the opposite of that. It's a troubling look into the human psyche, something Poe was very adept at providing.

The narrator had gotten away with the murder. Yet, while he had gotten away with it, he couldn't get over it. He swore he could still hear the old man's heart beating under the floorboards. His guilt consumed him. Eventually, he invited police officers over to inspect the house, to see if they would hear it. They suspected nothing. Yet he continued to hear the heart of the old man beating. He was overwhelmed and confessed his crime.

Guilt can do horrible things to us. It can throw us into depression, begin a nasty string of lies, or even change who we are. While the sin itself may come easily, what follows is by far the opposite. We fear being caught, wonder who might know what we've done, or how someone might find out about it. What will they think of us? What trouble will we get in? We're ashamed of who we've become, embarrassed we have to work so hard to hide things, sick at the thought of how much we've let our family, friends, or coworkers down, mulling over during sleepless nights what it would do to them if they knew. And then, to top it off, there's the simple knowledge that we've not only wronged another, but God Himself as well. Guilt can do horrible things to us, because sin is a horrible thing.

None of you may want to line up to share with us what has brought you such a load of guilt, but you've all felt it, and if you haven't, perhaps you should recharge your conscience sometime, because if you've sinned but not met guilt, you haven't met repentance either.

When I was in Germany this last time, I had a day all to myself to wander around Munich like a vagabond. It was raining, and so I ducked into a statistics class at the university and more than a few churches for shelter. Out of curiosity, when I saw that Old St. Peter's had a Latin Mass, I decided to stick around for it, just to see what it was like, never having seen a Latin Mass before. I sat in the back so I wouldn't stand out, since I had no plans of participating.

The church was freezing. I was cold. And I had to keep dealing with the ever-so-dorky issue of my glasses fogging up. Finally I took them off altogether. Then I saw someone moving up front and squinted to try to see what it was. I hadn't before realized how huge the chancel was. An altar boy was climbing what seemed to be an endless set of stairs to light the candles on the altar.

Two things struck me. First, I was grateful we don't have stairs like that. I'd have to play a lot more basketball to get in shape or I'd have had an asthma attack climbing them. Second, imagine the impression such a set of stairs must give to the people in the pews. God was far away. Approaching Him was an intimidating task. He was up there with all the heavenly grandeur adorning the altar. We were down here in the freezing cold in the hard pews with fogging glasses. Had I not known the gospel, what a little ant I would have thought myself to be in His sight.

Guilt leaves us feeling like we're in Old St. Peter's. Approaching the neighbor we've wronged, the loved one we've wronged, seems impossible. How can we face them? Even more, approaching God seems nigh impossible, an intimidating task for which we don't have the breath, let alone the guts. What must He think of us, after all?

That's why our Holy Gospel is such a treasure today. God is not up there in heavenly grandeur while we're down here squinting in the cold. God comes to us. He calls to us through the Word and His pastors. He invites us to the altar. He even tells others to carry us, even kicking and screaming in our Huggies, to the font. He doesn't want us to run away in terror. He doesn't want us to be intimidated. No, quite the opposite. He comes to us through locked doors, even the locked doors of our hearts.

Jesus didn't tell Thomas tough luck, didn't wait for Thomas to somehow find him. He came to Thomas, showed him His hands and side. Just before this, He had told His Apostles, when Thomas wasn't there, ***"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*** Now He shows them how to do it, as He forgives and restores Thomas. He doesn't call Thomas' sin ok. In fact, he commands him to give it up. But He does call his sin forgiven. Why? The answer was in His hands and His side. He had died for that sin. He had died for Thomas.

Are there any heartbeats under your floorboards? Hiding guilt and sin won't do any good. Holding it in won't bring you peace. No, only forgiveness can do that, forgiveness from Jesus, for Jesus' sake. Hear Jesus' absolution, even when it sounds a lot like my voice. Stuff your sins in His wounds, and receive the love that flows from them in the Sacraments. That where we find peace, the peace He bids His disciples.

God is not far away. Asthmatics need not worry. He's not way up there with the heavenly grandeur. No, He's come down here in the freezing cold to the hard pews for those with fogging glasses.

If you're worried about what He might think about you, you need only look at His hands and side, at the crucifix. He loves you. He wants you to know His peace. And that's why you need not find Him. He's already found you, right here, right now.

"Peace be with you," He says. It sounds good to me. It won't keep you up at night like guilt will, but it will put the Psalmist's words in your mouth: ***"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."*** Amen.