

The Depths of Church Life
2nd Sunday after Pascha ~ Apostle Thomas
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When Christ rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples, one of them, Thomas, was absent. When the apostle Thomas returned, the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, but Thomas answered: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." After a few days** the Lord appeared again and said to Thomas: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." And Thomas exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" And Jesus said: "You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn. 20:25-29).

The mystery of the Christian faith is that we come to Christ (having not yet seen Him) because we begin to believe in Him, because our heart responds to His word, because in His Gospel we hear the words of life, and gradually the vision of the Risen Christ opens before us. Gradually, from unconscious faith we come to faith with reason, when the Lord reveals Himself to us and when we are already able to say: "We have beheld the Resurrection," and no longer only that "We have believed in the Resurrection."

The eighth day after Pascha was significant for the ancient Church because that long cycle which was connected with the Mystery of Baptism was completed. For the catechumens, baptism was preceded by long months, and maybe even years, when they gradually began to comprehend the essence of the Christian faith, when the priest or bishop, step by step, led them into the mysteries of Christianity. Baptism itself took place on Great and Holy Saturday. After baptism they went into the church and received Holy Communion. And then, during the Paschal week, when special services took place — when the regular readings and psalms are changed and the people hear only about the Resurrection of Christ, which they have seen with their spiritual eyes — during these days the newly baptized listened not to instructional conversation but lessons in mystagogy, that is to say, the very essence of the Christian faith was revealed to them. It was explained to them: what is Holy Communion, what is the meaning of baptism and how does bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Eucharist.

This entire cycle was completed, namely, on the eighth day after Pascha by means of the rites on the eighth day, which to this day are an integral part of the rite of baptism, signifying that the long path to entrance into the Church is ending, and the newly baptized is now led into the Holy of Holies. As we all know, the churching of everyone who is newly baptized occurs by leading them into the Church of God. If the newly baptized is a male, then he is led into the altar, if female, then she is led up to the Royal Doors. All of this has deep meaning and symbolizes the entrance of a person into the very heart of life in the Church — life in God. After this they go out into the world, no longer doubting, hesitating and subject to all kinds of influences and dangers but as warriors, as apostles of Christ, and they are entrusted with the mission to bear witness to the world about the Resurrection of Christ, which they now know through personal experience and sight.

The meaning of the churching also lies in the fact that we are reminded of the main reason for which we actually come to the Church — for the life in Christ. In the Church, like in the ocean, there is a surface and a depth. On the surface of the Church there can be storms and disorder (which drive many people away from the Church), but all of this is only on the surface. If in the Church the only level that existed was the surface, then it wouldn't be worth becoming a member. However, in the Church there is another dimension: the depth of silence where a person meets God face to face. No matter how great a storm may be, in the depth of the ocean there is always silence. The churching signifies our immersion into those depths of church life from which you should never be thrown back up to the surface, so as not to be tempted by what is happening on it. It is necessary to always abide in those depths where the

Kingdom of God and God Himself are revealed to us, where the operation of the Holy Spirit takes place, where a person's life is no longer dependent upon any worldly storms, conflicts or disruptions.

Let us always remember this, having lived through Passion Week and Pascha, having encountered the Risen Christ and having seen the Resurrection of Christ. Let us remember that we should not remain on the surface of Church life, but immerse ourselves into that depth, which in the language of Christ and the apostles, is called the Kingdom of God, the Heavenly Kingdom.

**Translator's note — It was on the eighth day that the Lord made His second appearance to the apostles.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen