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An image of Jesus of Divine Mercy and the "Angels Unawares" sculpture are seen in St. Peter's Square as people wait for Pope Francis to lead the "Regina Coeli" April 24, 2022, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Mercy. What are we asking for when we ask for God's mercy? Because we use the word during the penitential rite in our Eucharist, we often think of the plea for mercy as a petition for forgiveness, but that's not at all what the Scriptures tell us.

Not only that, but the word mercy (eleos in Greek) is nowhere near as common in the Gospels as we might think. While John never used the word, Luke might be its champion with about 10 references to the mercy of God and Jesus or the good Samaritan and the prodigal father. In today's Scriptures, the only time we hear the word is in 1 Peter which praises God for showing us mercy by giving us new birth through the Resurrection.

What it comes down to is that mercy is an action, not an emotion. If we look to Luke's human examples, we first see mercy was what the Samaritan did as he risked his life and put his goods at the service of a person in need. In the father and son story, the father practiced mercy by embracing his son and throwing a party for him. (Although the wayward son talked about sin, the father said absolutely nothing about sin or forgiveness — that was the role of the older brother.) Mercy is thus a concrete and generous response to another's need. This leads us to ask what today's readings tell us about divine mercy.

## **Sunday of Divine Mercy**

[April 16, 2023](#)

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 118

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Today's Gospel takes place on the evening of the day of the resurrection when Jesus appeared in the midst of the disciples. Although classical artworks depict this scene with Jesus and the 11, there is no reason to assume that the group, like that at the Last Supper, did not include other women and men. John takes care to remind us that it was evening and the doors were locked. It was as if, after seeing Jesus' empty tomb, the disciples had made a sepulcher of their own meeting place. They who had mourned his death had become like the living dead, ashamed of their cowardice, afraid, and unable to believe Mary of Magdala's announcement that she had "seen the Lord" ([John 20:18](#)).

John tells us that Jesus came and stood among them. Earlier, Mary of Magdala had sought him. Now Jesus sought out the disciples. To Mary, he had said, "Do not cling to me ... but go and tell my brothers 'I am going to my Father and your Father.' " By saying this, Jesus handed over his mission, authorizing Mary as the first Christian apostle. Later, when he came to the disciples, the mission he handed over was more than a simple proclamation: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit."

Whether in the garden cemetery or the locked room, Jesus' appearances were not just revelations of the resurrection; they aimed at transforming disciples into apostles. Jesus expressed his active mercy by breathing into them the Holy Spirit, the vital principle of his own life. Jesus mentioned nothing of their failure to stand with him, rather, like the father who restored his wayward son as an heir, Jesus gave them his mission: specifically, a mission of forgiveness.

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This tells us not only about mercy, but also about forgiveness. If we think about it, Jesus never focused on sin. He mightily criticized people who denigrated or excluded others, but sin was never his focus. For Jesus, acts of mercy restored people, empowering them to live the fullness of their potential. In the long run, that asks much more of people than simply being sorry for sin.

Where does this leave us on Divine Mercy Sunday? Peter seems to summarize it as he tells us, "Rejoice in the God who gives you new birth to living hope." It's too easy, almost egoistic, to dwell on our failings and feel sorry. The God who proclaimed that

sacrifices "have become a burden to me" ([Jeremiah 6:20](#)) has no need or desire for our sadness, but beseeches us, "Let justice surge like a river" ([Amos 5:24](#)).

On this Sunday, Mary and the other disciples would probably tell us, "Be careful about asking for God's mercy! It comes with the uncomfortable grace of a vocation." After the Resurrection, the church is irrevocably called out of hiding and into mission. Pope Francis tells us to abandon fear of mistakes, but instead to fear "remaining shut up within structures ... rules ... habits ... while at our door people are starving" ([Evangelii Gaudium](#), 49).

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, can we be bold enough to ask for and act out divine mercy?

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