

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year A

Acts 6:1-7

Ps 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19

I Pt 2:4-9

Jn 14:1-12

Mark A. Garrett, O.S.A.

Men don't ask for directions, they say. They even quip, That's why it took Moses forty years to get to the Promised Land.

Well, that doesn't apply to the Apostle Thomas. Listen to him. "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" Where are you going? How can we go there? That man was asking. Thomas wanted to know.

He wasn't bluffing either. Remember, when Jesus said he was going up to Jerusalem and would be killed there, Thomas was the one who said, "Let us also go up, to die with him!" [Jn 11:15-16] He was certainly willing to follow Jesus' way. Maybe we could say he was naïve, considering how he stayed out of sight when Jesus was finally condemned to die. But initially, at least, he was willing.

But he didn't know exactly what Jesus meant. Maybe if Jesus had told him more exactly, Thomas would have been too frightened to follow. In fact, maybe that was it: maybe Jesus wanted to let him grow in courage before he found out what all would be required of him. I think the Lord does that with us, too, sometimes.

So Jesus doesn't give any more specifics in answer to Thomas' wonderment about where he is going – and where we, Thomas and all of us, are to be with him. But he gives a very specific answer about the way that leads there: "I," he says, "am the way." Absolutely clear! But that still leaves Thomas – and us – able to say, We do not know where you are going.

True. We don't. It's beyond our sight, out over the horizon somewhere. We hope and we believe, but we do not know. We might be standing on the road, but the end of the road we cannot see.

That applies, for example, to the many rooms in the Father's house: we don't know just what they look like. That part of life – the part that lies beyond death -- is something we cannot know. Some people report experiences of the first steps beyond the threshold of death, but no one tells us what comes after those very first steps. We have St Paul's assurance that eternal life and the risen body are quite different from the present version of those realities. But Paul doesn't say exactly what that difference will be like. We do not know precisely.

Stephen Weeke heads the NBC News Bureau in Rome and has traveled often with Pope John Paul II. He has covered many of that pope's world travels. He reported on John Paul's funeral as well. He said, "It felt to me like this really was another pope trip, but this one was different. It really was the last one, because he was going home, and we couldn't go with him."\* Where he was going, we could not follow – yet.

We don't know even what tomorrow will bring.

The second reading today told about those chosen by the early Christian community to be deacons. Think of Stephen there. He was honored and perhaps encouraged at being chosen deacon. By now, we know how his story ended, but as we hear about him in today's reading, Stephen didn't know exactly what his life was taking him toward. He likely had some inkling of the fate that awaited him, and maybe had to muster his courage to accept the office. But he did not know – did not know the end. But he did know the way: Christ is the Way, and Stephen followed Christ and stayed open to the Lord's Spirit. He could speak, therefore, God's own word. And, because of that, remember, he met his death -- the first to give his life for the risen Christ.

Think of the Pope – the one we knew for almost three decades and the one whom we will grow to know over the next few years. Think of that first question they ask him: “Will you accept election...?” They don't ask, “Do you have any idea what you're getting yourself into?” If they did, we might never have a pope. I'm sure, when he answered the question, John Paul II could not have foreseen just what the next 28 years would hold. I wonder, what will be said for Benedict XVI some 20, 30 years down the road? What does the future hold for him?

Some of us here remember Pius XII. When he answered that question, “Do you accept...,” back in 1939, I'm sure he did have some idea – a rather frightening one. By the end of the year Europe would be overtaken by war; most people could see that, and he, a long-time diplomat, I'm sure, was among them. Nazism had taken over Germany, and Fascism Italy – the two nations he knew best. Atheistic Communism was winning converts all over Europe and beyond. And there sits Cardinal Pacelli; they have just said to him, “Will you accept election as Supreme Pontiff?” With thoughts much like what must have been in Stephen's mind, in Thomas' mind, in Jesus' own mind, he answered, “I accept it – as a cross.”

His worries were not ill founded.

So too, for the one who was first to say an explicit yes to the coming of Christ Jesus. Mary, his mother, must have had fears, but she had no real knowledge of what all awaited her when she unreservedly placed herself at the service of whatever it was that God would want from her. Where would all that take her? She had no idea. Was she willing to walk that road anyhow? Absolutely yes.

Imagine what that all seemed like to her, years later on that Friday when she stood on a hill beneath the cross where her dear Son was dying a horrible death!

But Mary had not been shy about recommending her own course of action to others. Remember that beautiful instruction she gave to the waiters at the Cana wedding? She never specified the goal, she just indicated the way. “Do whatever he tells you,” she said [Jn 2:5], as though that were so simple.

I think for her it was simple. That was the way she lived her whole life. How old was she then? Jesus was about 30; his mother must have been about 50, give or take 5 years or so. She had a half-century of practicing that same advice herself: whatever God asked of her, she did. Yes, by age 50 she probably saw it as so very simple: Just “do whatever he tells you.”

Her Son stated that same thought from a different angle: “I am the way,” he said. Even when you don't see exactly where the way leads, follow me. “Do not let your hearts be troubled”; you can trust that the Way leads to a life that will never end, never disappoint, never sadden. “Otherwise I would have told you,” he said.

There is a very good chance that you and I will not meet the same fate as Stephen before we gather here again next week. But our upcoming week might not be any more predictable than

Stephen's was. We do not know precisely where we will be going; indeed, it may not be completely within our control. Stoning is unlikely – in this time and place – but death can come for us and be as untimely as it was for Stephen.

We're not likely to be crucified either. Maybe that's why Mel Gibson's movie had to work so hard to let us see how unmitigatedly horrible Jesus' death really was. Not crucifixion, but there are sometimes murders almost as horrible reported in the news.

How on earth can people face such horror – Stephen, Mary, Jesus? Sometimes maybe we ask ourselves, How can we face the future, the unknown? -- the unknown of death or the unknown of next year, maybe next week.

Lord, we say, where are you leading us? Thomas wonders, Lord, we do not know where you are going. Stephen wonders, I do not know if the crowd around me here at Jerusalem's Damascus Gate will accept what I tell them about Jesus. Even the waiters at Cana could wonder, We don't even know why we should do what this woman's Son is telling us – why bother with stone jars filled with plain water?

We do not know what lies beyond tonight's sleep. What will tomorrow bring? We do not know what lies beyond death; we do not see the clouds parting as they did for Stephen at the end. How can we go on – and go on in peace, in that wonderful Easter Shalom of Jesus' greeting?

Thomas asked about goals and directions, but there were none to be had. Stephen? We don't know what he asked; we only hear what directions he gave – to his persecutors, who didn't want to hear them.

Mary it was -- Mary -- who was willing to walk on, with no assurance but faith, no direction but "whatever [the Lord] tells you." And, till the joy of Easter, she walked with precious little consolation but the sheer conviction that God's, the Lord's, Jesus' Way was always the way to go.

Stephen stayed on that way. Thomas, too, though without all the answers he had wanted. Pius XII and John Paul II had no more certainty about the future than Thomas or Stephen – or us – but they knew the Way, and they, I'm convinced, stayed on that Way. Now, of course, the clouds have parted for them and they know the goal; they know, finally, where Jesus was going and where he prepared a place for them – and for us. They are good examples for us.

Mary is the best, the one who always simply said yes, who always walked the Way. Even when the way became frightfully sorrowful, dolorosa – the Via Dolorosa of her son's passion and crucifixion -- she was there on the way, never deserting her Son and her Lord. She is the best example. She, though, like her divine Son, is a terribly strong example, a very steep way to climb. I think it's nice we have also the others: Thomas and Stephen and Pius and John Paul – and thousands more – who can remind us in very human terms to stay on the Way – no matter what our questions, what our wonderments, to stay simply on the Way.

Jesus -- as clear as can be: "I am the Way." "Follow me." And the risen life that is mine will be yours as well.

\* Internet item, "NBC Notebook -- Through History with John Paul," MSN, April 15, 2005.