

Needless to say right now, sometimes it can be hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel, much like the apostles in the locked room. We see the suffering all around us, our faith is put to the test. But how do we rise from the depths? How do we see hope? The answer is by realizing that God stands with us as the light in the darkness, and that He sees us through. As we hear in that second reading, God “gave us new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” but we are also told that during the journey, we “may have to suffer through various trials” which can perfect faith. Certainly all of us are going through those trials right now. But for the believer, they’ve been able to look at these challenges they’ve faced, and also see the hope ahead through the trials. It doesn’t mean though the trials do not cause doubts.

Harold Russell lost his hands during the Second World War, and after the war, was cast in the film “The Best Years of Our Lives” that depicted returning soldiers trying to return to life. He won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor despite not having really any acting experience prior to the movie.

In reflecting on how he found his way through his own challenges, Russell wrote a reflection at the time the film was made. He says:

It sometimes takes cold, black disaster to inspire one to achieve the heights of success.

But for his accident he would now be back at his pre-war job as a butcher. Instead, he has been in motion pictures, on the radio, the subject of magazine articles—but best of all, he says, he has had a chance to show other disabled veterans like him that it is possible to bounce back from utter despair to undreamed-of success and happiness.

On a black June day in 1944 when he lay on a hospital bed, looking down at two big bandages where his hands used to be, he thought it meant the end of useful living. What can I do now, he asked himself bitterly? Probably just live out his years on an Army pension.

This self-pity and despair didn't last very long though. There is something, he says, in most people that won't let them take defeat lying down. Call it anything you like, but to him it is faith—faith in God and in himself, faith that

he can always rise from every setback. A man is licked without this he says.

At Walter Reed Hospital there was no funeral atmosphere, as faith and hope in God and in the human spirit were strong. Harold saw that nobody pitied himself or anyone else. A guy with both legs gone was called “Shorty;” a man with but one leg, “Limpy;” and a soldier with only one arm, “Paperhanger.” As for Harold—he was “Hooks.” He says they had to develop a sense of humor, and this was the best way to do it.

His first reaction to the hooks, which were to serve as his hands, was one of dismay. The first day he tried them on, it was worse—it was torture.

Unable to make them do anything, he was ready to give up. But the next day he tried again —and kept on trying until he made them work.

His first experiences out of the hospital were also trying ones. But other people would build him up in little ways. There was a little old lady to whom he sold meat before the war. When she saw him, she broke out with: “Oh, you poor boy.”

Then, realizing that this was the wrong approach, she stopped and chuckled, “No wonder you lost your hands. Goodness knows you sold them to me often enough weighing my meat. They didn’t belong to you anyway; I bought them many a time with my pot roasts.”

He liked that reaction—frank and sassy.

The two chaplains in the hospital were two of the finest representatives of God Harold had ever known. They realized that it wasn’t enough to simply tell them to have faith; they had to be shown how to apply faith in overcoming their handicap.

In their talks with the soldiers at Walter Reed, these chaplains had many a sharp, realistic question fired at them. They never tried to duck the “hot ones.” With patience and understanding they answered everything as best they could—and their best was of real comfort to Harold and to the others.

There were Protestants, Catholics and Jews in their ward, but no one was concerned as to who belonged to what church. There may have been atheists there, though Harold doubts it. However, there were certainly some

who had grave doubts as to God's justice in view of their own calamity.

Harold knows he never gave up on God, and he does not believe anyone else did either.

He says he had found that you can't tell how religious a man is by what he says, or does.

Before his accident he recalls during their combat training that religion never showed much on the surface, but was very much there under the surface. All of the men put up a tough front. They belonged to the school of realism. War was rough, so their actions and talk had to be rough—so they figured. And the paratroops, he can safely say, were the toughest bunch of all.

One man in their company, Big Joe, was the most awesome physical specimen Harold had ever known. Huge in stature, a calloused hulk of muscle, Big Joe swore furiously, drank mightily and was ready to fight at the drop of a hat. He might have been Satan himself as far as the others were concerned, but Harold knew different.

On practice jumps he sat next to Big Joe in the plane and jumped right behind him. As the tense moment arrived just before they were to go spilling out into space, he could see Big Joe's face relax. It grew gentle, serene, and his lips moved in a quiet prayer. At this moment he thinks he felt very close to God. But once on the ground, he was a man of fierce action again, ferocious, grim, the Devil himself, because he knew his mission and had a complete trust in God no matter what was ahead.

Not all soldiers concealed their religion with such camouflage. He knew of one soldier—he called him Steve—who did just the opposite. He was friendly, brimming with good humor, a thorough extrovert in every sense. In the evening just before lights went out, there was always a terrific hubbub ... men coming in from pass, loud arguing, singing and constant traffic back and forth to the shower. Steve was always right in the middle of the loudest argument or the noisiest singing—until he saw time running short. Then he would break away and hustle out of his clothes.

But just before he climbed into bed, he always knelt quietly with folded hands at the side of his bunk ... and prayed.

The noise, the bright lights, the confusion never bothered him. No one ever made fun of him or kidded him for it. In fact, underneath, these hard-bitten men admired and respected him for his open faith. To them it represented real courage in the face of possible ridicule. But Harold actually believed that Steve never felt that he was being conspicuous. To him it was the right and natural thing to do. Again, trusting in God in the midst of war.

The first occasions when he kneeled by his bunk there was no let-up in the noise about him. The men simply took a quick, surprised glance at Steve, then looked away. But after several nights there was a noticeable lull while he prayed. Voices died down, horseplay subsided until he had finished. It simply didn't seem right to be kidding around during those few moments.

Harold mentions these few experiences because he says he had heard so many young were turning away from religion. Nothing could be farther from the truth though he said. Rather he said younger people just wanted to see the men of God roll up their sleeves and tackle such problems like these same ex-servicemen tackled the problem, say, of demolishing an enemy pillbox. Just talk isn't enough. They want action!

Harold's chance to act the part of Homer Parrish in *The Best Years of Our Lives* was one of the finest things that ever happened to him he says. Not because it made him a Hollywood celebrity, but because it gave him a chance to show thousands of other disabled people that a handicap can give them the necessary impetus to achieve more than if their calamity had never happened.

He knows this to be true with many others beside himself. A close friend of his was a great athlete before he lost both legs. This blow changed the course of his life, and he became a brilliant lawyer. He admits that but for this accident his present achievements would never have been realized.

There are hundreds, thousands of similar cases, Harold says. And they were all able to rise from the depths, he feels sure, not only because they had courage, but because they also had a great source of inner power—religious faith.

It's these two things that help us as well to rise from the depths and to run the race of life. As Harold said, people wanted to see people of faith have

faith, but also act. And that's what we see in Thomas and the others, whose doubts and fears are transformed, causing them to leave that room.

If you are watching me tonight, you have faith. But let's face it, that faith is put to the test for many of us, and I know in recent times I've found myself a bit like Teyve from "Fiddler on the Roof," talking to God but also asking him questions about why all these things are happening in the world right now. Harold asked these questions too when he awoke at that hospital and certainly there was doubt that preceded the hope.

Here's the thing though. Doubt, as Pope Francis has said, is a key to a life of faith. He said doubts can be a sign we want to know God better and more deeply. If you don't ask questions, you don't progress in your faith. As he put it, when we have doubts, it's a chance to deepen one's faith.

Sometimes the doubts are with respect to a teaching of the faith. If that's the case, hear the Church out, think about it, do some reading and pray.

Remember faith is a trust in the Church, but it is also a struggle too. Doubt is different than saying I know what the Church teaches and why, but I still reject it. Most of us are trying to understand, but struggle, and that's OK.

But we try to resolve them over our lives with prayer and thinking.

But, other times it might be the doubt that stems from what's happening in our lives. Whether it's Corona Virus, a job situation, trouble at home with family, sometimes when things get tough, we inevitably wonder what is going on here. Thomas is in that situation; he's having a hard time of seeing how the Resurrection could cancel out the sorrows of Jesus' passion and death. The pain is what we hear in those words, 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." The pain is insurmountable for Him. But ultimately, it leads to trust, like Jesus. Jesus certainly did have doubts from the Cross when He says "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." Therein is the struggle of our faith; Abraham had it too struggling to walk in faith as he was called from his homeland. This is different though than rejecting God. When we have faith, we have difficulties. But in these moments, I think it's worth looking at the wounds like Thomas did. We may not touch His hands and side, but we can look at the crucifix and again think about how deeply God loves us. The wounds of Jesus caused His death, but the wounds also resulted in Divine Life for us all. Suffering for us can sometimes transform as well; remember the risen Christ does not pretend His sorrows didn't happen, the wounds are there.

But from these wounds, good came. Blaise Pascal, the philosopher, once said: “The Risen Christ does not want to be touched, except in His wounds. ‘Why? Because it is from His wounds that His saving powers – the seven holy sacraments of the Church – stream forth upon us. And His wounds show us the truth that there is a healing for all sorrows, one which does not pretend they never happened, but a healing which draws us through and beyond all sorrows, which glorifies us and makes us live again in our bodies, unable to suffer or die, and forever able to love and to rejoice.” So out of the doubts which can take over, it’s important to remember that God is with us when we suffer, but also to do what Jesus did on the Cross, and say “into your hands I commend my spirit.” His doubt did not lead to despair, but to trust - and we can trust too that even if we cannot see the other side of the mountain or through the storm, that not only is God with us, but that He also has a plan too. It’s that trust in God that Harold speaks of that helped him move forward with his life.

Part of that plan entails giving us His love and mercy. With respect to doubts, sometimes we can doubt ourselves too. God’s mercy transforms us into the people we can become, the people we want to be; the people of action that Harold speaks about. Besides being the Second Sunday of

Easter, today is also Divine Mercy Sunday, which celebrates the infinite mercy of our Lord. Maybe you have been away from the sacrament for quite some time, and fear going. Or maybe at times, you get frustrated with something in your past, thinking you have to keep it hidden. Well never doubt how much God loves you. Sister Faustina Kowalska, the Polish Saint, had a vision of Christ that led to this feast being established. She wrote that Christ told her: "Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or of angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity. If you've seen the image of Christ based on her visions, in it our Lord is pictured in the act of blessing, with two rays, one red and the other white, representing blood and water, shining from His heart, with the words "Jesus, I trust in thee" placed at His feet. Sometimes we can get down on ourselves, wanting to hide the truth of ourselves from the world. Every one of us has blemishes, and every one of us is a sinner. Cherish the beautiful gift of His Church and the sacrament of Reconciliation, knowing how deep God's love is, and how His love is everlasting. Even though we aren't open yet for public Masses, confessions continue and I've added an extra hour, so I'm here every Saturday at 3 and anytime by appointment too and am always happy to celebrate the sacrament with you.

And lastly, let courage and fortitude help us with our doubts too. Fortitude is a virtue; it is God's gift to us to help us face difficulties with firm resolve. Remember Thomas touches the wounds, and has this proclamation of faith. But after Jesus ascends, he continues the mission that ultimately leads to much suffering and his death around the year 72. Thomas did not stay stuck on his unbelief. He did not stay stuck on looking in the past and thinking about not being there on Good Friday. Nor did he look at the situation before him and say Jesus is now gone, what can I do, I'm a simple man. Instead he went to evangelize to the Parthians, Medes, and Persians. He ultimately reached India, carrying the Faith to the Malabar coast, which still boasts a large native population calling themselves "Christians of St. Thomas." He helped spread the faith by establishing churches, because he trusted in God, but he was also becoming the fisher of men. He acted. Harold Russell went from looking at the hooks that were his hands and seeing hopelessness to realizing there were so many things he could do, from acting to speaking to veterans and he lived a full life, working on behalf of veterans for much of the rest of his life. Life is hard, and it can be easy to focus on what we don't have. But when we combine our faith in God who believes in us and meets us where we are at, just as He met the

apostles where they were at, like Thomas and the others, we can go forth knowing the best years of our lives too may be ahead as we carry out our Christian mission.

Life is hard, and inevitably at times we'll have doubts when the challenges are so great. But from this group of fearful men in a room, the Church grew to the ends of the earth. And God's love continued to spread like a wildfire thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit who works through them. So like Thomas who left the room, and like Harold Russell who left Walter Reed Hospital to carry out his vocation, may we move forward too, never doubting God, who has given us so much, truly has great plans for us as well. May we see not what we don't have right now, but what we do have. May we see the good and hope that lies beyond the locked doors of sin, of fear, of anxiety and let Jesus burst through them, and the Holy Spirit empower us to leave our locked rooms. On our own, inevitably we will fail. But with Him and His grace, He will always lead us safely through the storms of life, for God is truly good, all the time, so let us trust in His love and mercy as together we go forward through life to the heavenly kingdom.