

“Life in His Name”

John 20:19-31

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Many Christian traditions celebrate saints and other significant people throughout the year. The calendar of saints is a traditional Christian method of organizing a liturgical year by associating each day with one or more saints and referring to the day as that saint's feast day. According to Wikipedia, different Roman Catholic groups celebrate today the feasts of Saint Emma, George of Antioch, Expeditus and Alphege. According to an Orthodox website I visited, today is the feast of 11 different people. I won't name them all.

Well, in The United Methodist Church, we don't have this same tradition of feast or festival days, with one exception. Several times a year, usually the Sundays of Memorial Day weekend and Labor Day weekend and the Sundays after Christmas and Easter, you know, those Sundays when attendance is usually at its lowest, or the Senior Pastor wants to take a vacation. On those days, we celebrate what some have called the “Festival of the Associate Pastor.”

Now, I want you to know that from the very start, Bill made it very clear that this was not how he envisioned us working together. In our first meeting where we discussed our preaching schedule, I remember assuming that I would get the standard “Festival of the Associate” Sundays, but Bill said, “No, that's not how I want it to be for you.” I really appreciate that about our relationship.

So, it truly is happenstance that this past year I have preached the Sunday after Christmas, and today, the Sunday after Easter. But I really like it this way. I like preaching these Sundays. You see, for me, everyone, non-Christians and Christians alike can celebrate the spiritual mountaintops of Christmas and Easter. The true mark of discipleship for me is committing to a life of faith, living one's life in Jesus' name. Discipleship is about what we do the days and weeks after Christmas and Easter. Discipleship is about what we do after the mountaintop spiritual experiences.

A Sunday school teacher asked her class to write one sentence each on “What Easter Means to Me.” One pupil wrote: “Egg salad sandwiches for the next two weeks!” For me, it hasn't been egg salad, it's been all that leftover ham and Easter chocolate. But my fear is that egg salad or ham or chocolate is all that lingers about Easter for too many Christians. That's why I relish this opportunity to preach the Sunday after Easter!

Our Gospel text this week talks about that first week after the first Easter. The story starts on Easter night – the evening after Jesus rose from the grave. On that night, the disciples were gathered together, and they had locked the door of the place they were out of fear. They were afraid that the people who had crucified Jesus might just come after them next, so they huddled in a safe place behind locked doors.

On that night, Jesus appears to the disciples, saying “Peace be with you,” breathing the Holy Spirit upon them, and saying, “As the father sent me, so I send you.” But there was someone missing from the group that night. Thomas wasn’t there. And so I’d like to spend a little bit of time getting to know the disciple Thomas.

We don’t know much about Thomas. He’s only mentioned once each in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and the book of Acts, and each time he’s simply named in a list of disciples. John’s Gospel tells us the most about Thomas, but it’s still not very much. In John’s Gospel, Thomas is only mentioned three times. The most extensive story of Thomas is today’s text, but he’s mentioned in two other verses that come before today’s text.

In both of these earlier verses, we learn that Thomas is fairly straightforward and pragmatic. In the first verse, it appears that Thomas really understands the implications of what Jesus is saying, because Thomas encourages the other disciples to follow Jesus, saying, “Let us also go, so that we may die with him.”¹ Thomas knew that following Jesus was fairly certain to lead to death, but he was willing to go, and encouraged others to go with him.

In the other verse, Thomas asks Jesus a question that leads to one of Jesus’ most famous statements. Jesus was talking about the fact that he had to go somewhere to prepare a place for the disciples, and that the disciples would know the way to the place where he was going. So Thomas, ever the practical one, pipes up and says, “Lord, we do not know where we are going. How can we know the way?”² Jesus replies with that famous verse, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”³

One last thing about Thomas before we get to today’s text. In a couple of places in John’s Gospel, Thomas is referred to as “the one who was called the Twin.”⁴ As the parent of twin boys, I have a special place in my heart now for twins, and for Thomas. That’s one reason we gave our son Robert the middle name of Thomas. What is interesting is that Thomas’ twin is never named, and so we are left to wonder who that twin is. One of the most compelling thoughts I read recently was the idea that perhaps there is a side of us that is a sibling to Thomas. Perhaps the twin is never named because we are Thomas’ twin. The more I learn about Thomas, the more I like that thought.

So that’s what we know about Thomas as we approach today’s text. Remember, Thomas wasn’t there with the disciples on that night after the resurrection of Jesus. The text doesn’t say why Thomas wasn’t with them, and so we are left to wonder. William Barclay proposes that Thomas just needed to be alone with his grief. He couldn’t meet the eyes of men because he was so broken-hearted.⁵ I think this makes a lot of sense.

¹ John 11:16

² John 14:5

³ John 14:6

⁴ John 11:16; 20:24

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Volume 2*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p. 275.

So as the story continues, Thomas eventually comes back to meet the other disciples, and they tell him that they have seen the Lord, but Thomas would have none of it. Jesus is alive? No way. Just doesn't make practical sense. Thomas says, "Unless I see some evidence, there's no way I'm going to believe you." So, a week later, during the first festival of the associate, the disciples were still holed up in their safe house, and Jesus appears again. This time, Thomas is there, and he gets the proof he needed, so he believes.

This chapter of the Gospel of John closes with the statement, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."⁶ Through believing, we might have life in Jesus' name. How does this work? Well, I think there are a few lessons that we can learn from our good friend Thomas about living our lives in Jesus' name.

First, as often happens to each of us, Thomas made a mistake while living his life of faith. The mistake, as described by William Barclay is this: "He withdrew from the Christian fellowship. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. And because he was not there with his fellow Christians he missed the first coming of Jesus. We miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try to be alone. Things can happen to us within the fellowship of Christ's Church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow comes and sadness envelops us, we often tend to shut ourselves up and refuse to meet people. That is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of Christ's people, for it is there that we are likeliest of all to meet him face to face."⁷ We need to keep regular fellowship with others. Christianity is not a solo venture. Community is an essential part of our faith experience. We can learn from Thomas' mistake.

But I also think he had some good character traits that we could emulate as we seek to live life in Jesus' name. There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. He was not the kind of man who would rattle off a creed without understanding what it was all about. William Barclay wrote, "There is more ultimate faith in the [person] who insists on being sure than in the [person] who glibly repeats things which he has never thought out, and which he may not really believe."⁸ The nickname "doubting Thomas" has become well known in our culture, but I think it is an admirable character trait to be certain of what we believe, to give it some thought and time and energy rather than just blindly assenting to whatever you think people want you to think.

The call to discipleship today is for each of us to make a decision whether we want to live our lives in Jesus' name. Do we want our faith to be something more than just Christmas and Easter celebrations? Do we want our faith to be something that is still living and

⁶ John 20:30-31

⁷ Barclay, p. 276.

⁸ Barclay, p. 277.

meaningful on the Sunday after Easter, or the Monday after that, or a Thursday or a Friday? Do we want to be a part of a movement that Jesus started, and that has sought to bring the Kingdom of God to bear here on earth? Do we want to live our very lives in Jesus' name?

Today is a powerful day here at Maple Grove. We have a family bringing their child to be baptized, saying "Yes, we want to live in Jesus' name, and we want our child to be a part of that as well."

And then we will celebrate the confirmation of our youth. Over the past thirteen weeks, our 8th grade youth have taken the time to think about what they believe, to learn about the Christian faith and the United Methodist Church, and they have made decisions about whether they want to live their life in Jesus' name. They will be taking vows this morning, saying, "Yes, we want to live in Jesus' name, and we want to take those vows that were made on our behalf at our baptisms upon ourselves."

But they're not the only ones with the opportunity to make vows this day. Each of us has a chance to make or renew our own vows to live life in Jesus' name. I invite you to turn in your hymnals to page 48 to see exactly what those vows are.

In a few moments, after the youth have taken their confirmation vows, we will respond with these words. "With you we renew our vows to uphold it by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ that, surrounded by steadfast love, you may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal."⁹

This is our day to proclaim to one another and to the world that Jesus has an impact not only on our Sunday morning lives, but on our Tuesday morning lives, on our Thursday afternoon lives, on our Friday night lives. This is our day to proclaim to one another and to the world that we have claimed the way of Jesus as an essential part of how we want to live. This is our day to proclaim to one another and to the world that Jesus has something to say about life, and we want to live our lives in his name. Let us do so!

⁹ The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 48.