

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Sermon for April 16, 2023

LIFE IN HIS NAME

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses

Today is the first Sunday after Easter, of the year 2023. We've done this math before, but I always enjoy it. If we assume that the first Easter Sunday took place in what we would reckon as the year 30 AD, that means that one thousand nine hundred and ninety two years have passed since then. Last week was the one thousand nine hundred and ninety-third Easter, and today is the one thousand nine hundred and ninety-third first Sunday after Easter. Isn't that something? And seven more years will bring us to an even two thousand. I wonder if God has something special planned to celebrate that anniversary? I'm sure there will be doomsday predictions in some corners of Christianity as the year approaches, but I personally suspect that God, if He's got anything at all in mind, will make it something truly wonderful and surprising, perhaps as wonderful and surprising as the risen Christ's appearance was to his disciples, first to the eleven on Easter Sunday, and then to Thomas on the following Sunday, the one that happened one thousand nine hundred and ninety three years ago today.

Another way of thinking about these dates is that we might call it the age of the Gospel, in the same way we might speak of my age or your age. I am thirty-nine years old.... In the same way, The Gospel is now one thousand nine hundred and ninety three years old. The Gospel was born on that Easter Sunday so long ago. Why do I say that?

The word 'gospel' is just an old English word for *good news*. And if you read the writings of the earliest Christians, Saint Peter, James and others not included in our

Bible, you discover that whenever they spoke of the ‘gospel’, that’s what they were referring to: the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead, that Jesus was alive.

Suppose you’re watching TV one evening when they draw the lottery numbers, and you’ve got your ticket in your hand, and you’re looking back and forth between it and the TV as they pull out the little ping pong balls, and one after the other they pull out your numbers. You’re getting more and more excited, and you wait there with baited breath as they pull out the last one, and, sure enough, it’s the same as the last one on your ticket. You let out a whoop, and immediately grab your phone and call your children to tell them...what? The good news. You are spreading the gospel among your children.

Well, that’s exactly what the earliest disciples were doing, spreading the good news that Jesus was alive. That’s what they saw as their job, their mission: to spread their eye-witness reports that Jesus was alive.

Our Gospel reading – our Good News reading – for this morning, tells us about each of those two occasions in which the disciples became eyewitnesses, to almost all of them on Easter, and then to one particular holdout on the first Sunday after Easter.

So let’s read the account together.

John 20: 19-31

For today, I’d like us to focus on the second of these two appearances, the one involving Thomas, known forever after as Doubting Thomas because of the way he conducts himself here.

We meet Thomas on a few other occasions in the Gospel accounts, and when we do, we get a picture of someone who is essentially a pessimist, who always fears the worst, who demands certainty and understanding before he will proceed. And that speaks, I think, not only to the way he behaves on the Sunday when he meets Jesus, but also to the fact that he was the one disciple who was missing on the preceding Sunday, on Easter, the day of the resurrection.

Where was Thomas? And why wasn’t he there?

Let’s think for a moment about what the death of Christ must have meant to his closest followers.

These disciples had believed in and followed their master for the last two or three years. They had given up their own lives, their own jobs, their own homes to dedicate themselves to him and to his teachings. And now they had seen their teacher tortured and hung naked on a Roman cross before a jeering crowd. They had seen the spear thrust through his side. They had seen him buried in a tomb.

What that meant for them was not just that they had lost their leader. What it meant was that everything he said and promised them was a delusion. There is no justice, there is no mercy, there is no grace, there is no hope. Life is just what it appears to be, a poor thing, a short, brutish and nasty thing, a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Pessimism is a heavy burden. It weighs a person down and eventually wears a person out. It excludes generosity and trust, and thus makes friendship impossible. Pessimists are always lonely.

And so we find on the night of the resurrection, when all the other apostles are gathered in the upper room – heartsick with fear and disappointment – there's one who's not with them. And that's Thomas. Thomas is somewhere alone. He's checked into the motel called loneliness. That's where pessimists go for company. Because for a pessimist, no one can be trusted. Thomas, now bitter and resentful and alone, is the one apostle to whom Jesus did not appear that night.

Jesus told a parable once about a man from whom a devil had been evicted. The devil left the man and wandered about for awhile, and then came back with some demon friends, found the old apartment all cleaned up and still unrented, and moved back in with his demonic friends.

Thomas' natural pessimism had almost been evicted during the years he spent in Christ's company. He had seen the kindness and goodness and power of Jesus, and it had given him hope. Perhaps what Jesus was saying was true. Perhaps goodness wins, perhaps forgiveness can overcome evil, perhaps there is a better world than this. Thomas had been this close, so close, to joy.

And then Jesus was crucified.

Now Thomas' awful cynicism was back, and now it would not just characterize him, it would consume him. There's no one more difficult to change than a cynic who has been proved right.

So John tells us (v. 25) that even when the other disciples eventually find him and tell him what had happened in that locked upper room a week earlier, he didn't believe them. To the true cynic, there is no good news, only bad news in disguise. So Thomas says (v. 25) *“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”*

That's the ultimate end of pessimism: When you believe no one except yourself. But even to pessimism that profound, Jesus provides the answer. A week later, we're told, (v. 26) Jesus appears to the disciples again. This time Thomas is with them, and Jesus singles him out for his special attention. “Put your finger here; see my hands,” He tells him. “Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

And Thomas, a new man now, his pessimism now gone forever, cries out: “My Lord and my God!”

That's what the living Jesus meant to Thomas, and what he means to us all; and that's what we celebrate and cry hallelujah about on this first Sunday after our 2023 Easter, two thousand years or so to the day after Thomas learned the same thing on the first Sunday after the first Easter. If Jesus is alive, then everything else he said was true. There is divine justice, there is divine mercy, there is divine grace, there is a better life awaiting all who seek it through Him. No matter who you are, no matter what trials you're going through, no matter how hopeless the future looks, no matter what others say: He lives. He lives. Christ Jesus lives today. And we in turn can live in His name.

And that's the good news for us, as it was for those earliest followers: Jesus is alive. And he's alive today, here, in this world, in this community, in this church, and in every Christian's heart. That's the cure for pessimism. That's the justification of hope and the reward of faith. That's the proof of a better world and an everlasting life beyond the grave. That's the all-sufficient reason for joy.

And so our prayer this morning, Father, is for a rebirth in our faith in the resurrection life of Jesus, and a renewal of our commitment to carrying Christ's message of forgiveness into the world. Let his Spirit breathed into us become one with our own, and so give us clarity in our thinking, strength in our commitment, honesty in our relationships, and depth in our love. We ask for the joy of Thomas as we cry out with him *My Lord and my God* to the living Christ, in whose name we pray.