

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Sermon for April 19

THE TWO SIDES OF THE COIN

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Two things happen in our gospel reading for today. The first is the resurrected Christ breathing his Spirit into His disciples. And the second, a week later, is Christ convincing one of those disciples, forever after known as Doubting Thomas, that He has in fact been resurrected and is still alive. And those are the very last things John tells us before concluding his book with these beautiful words:

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

20:31 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.

And that certainly seems worth paying attention to and thinking about, doesn't it? John doesn't tell us anything about what happened in the week between these two events, and he doesn't tell us how the gathering of the disciples that second time concluded or what happened after that. He instead brings his gospel to a close with these two events, separated by a week. And I think it's therefore safe to conclude that in these two events John saw something that must in some way have brought to a perfect focus the message of the gospel.

So let's think about them in turn.

It's the evening of the first day of the week, that is to say, Sunday evening. Their teacher had been crucified and buried on Friday. And now suddenly, miraculously, he's back among them again. And what does he do?

In the same image first given in the creation story in Genesis of God breathing his own spirit into Adam and Eve and then giving them dominion over and responsibility for the world, so John describes Jesus breathing his spirit into his

frightened followers, and thereby giving them the responsibility of their new lives. Let's read the crucial verse again:

20:21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

And isn't this quite amazing. The text makes it clear that Jesus is sharing his spirit with them for a reason, and the reason is to encourage and strengthen them in carrying on the work of Christ.

St. Paul beautifully captures this same assignment of responsibility in his perfect image that he comes back to time and again of the Church as the body of Christ. The point is that Jesus Christ needs the church. Jesus had come with a message for the world of his age and all of the ages to come, but now he was returning in body to his father, and would not longer dwell physically with them. In the world of his age, he could only begin the work. From now on they must be his eyes and his feet and his hands and his voice. He would be the seed, which must die into the earth in order to produce fruit, and they would be the fruit. They would be the fruit that would feed others, before they themselves died into the earth, to produce more fruit, and so on and on until the world was filled, and then the end, a new age, the New Jerusalem, would be upon us.

But notice that immediately after giving them their assignment, Jesus tells them how to go about it. And that's what makes it personal to us.

20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is the key. Those earliest disciples and St. Paul occupied a place in the viral structure of spreading God's message throughout the world that we of a much later age don't. But in anticipation of that, Jesus provided the one essential instruction that all must follow, everyone, in any age, in any place, if they are to be useful coworkers in carrying forth his message, in spreading the one true faith. And what is that message? To forgive.

As we've argued from this pulpit in the past, the special responsibility of every follower of Christ is the responsibility to forgive. It is the responsibility, because it

is the one and only cure for the human disease of pride. Pride is the root source of virtually every variety of preventable human conflict, from the smallest to the largest, from tiffs with your neighbor to wars between nations. The spread of forgiveness throughout the world is its only lasting cure; any others are illusory or ephemeral.

That's the true message of Christ, that virtually nothing of heavenly significance can be accomplished in the world or in an individual in the absence of forgiveness. All the beatitudes are various ways of talking about forgiveness: poverty of spirit, true mourning, meekness, a hunger after righteousness, mercifulness, the desire for peace, purity of heart: all these are, in their essence, different manifestations of forgiveness. When Christ concludes his list of beatitudes, he sums it all up by saying, "For if you don't forgive others, how can your father in heaven forgive you?" He's not threatening here to withhold heavenly forgiveness; what he's saying is that the work of heaven begins with you, and your forgiveness of others.

And that's exactly the same message he's offering to his disciples and to us in this amazing appearance after the resurrection: As my Father sent me, so now I'm sending you. I'm sending you to carry the message and practice of forgiveness into the world, the same assignment my Father gave me.

This is one side of the coin of the gospel, of the good news of Christ, that we, as Christians, have the honor of doing Christ's work in the world, of being vehicles of heaven's forgiveness into a fallen world, of being the body of Christ. The one side of the coin is responsibility.

And the other side of the coin is found in what happens to Thomas a week later.

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 just is 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 consolation. 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 friends, found the old apartment all cleaned up and still unrented, and moved back in with his 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.

But now his 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. If Jesus is alive, then everything else he said was true. There is justice, there is mercy, there is 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.

And that's the other side of the coin of the gospel, of the good news: 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.