

Life in His Name

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"My Lord and God," Jesus and Thomas, by Ronald Raab

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, help us
turn our hearts to you
and hear what you will speak,
for you speak peace to your people
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: John 20:19-31 (NRSVue)

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he

breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin^[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue^[b] to believe that Jesus is the Messiah,^[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Life in His Name



Our passage this morning contains one of the two great kisses in Scripture.

The **first great kiss** is in Genesis where God breathed his Spirit into Adam and he became a living being.

The **second great kiss** is in John's gospel where Jesus breathed into the disciples new life. This kiss of life was Jesus' way of restoring the relationship after the disciple's desertion and denial. It was also Jesus imparting his Spirit to his disciples, so they could continue his mission on earth.

John tells us it was Easter evening—the darkness still seemed to have triumphed over the light. The disciples still didn't grasp that Jesus was alive—even with Mary Magdalene's testimony that she saw the Lord. Fear of the Jewish authorities had led the disciples into living a "behind locked doors" existence.

It's important to remember that it wasn't too much later in history where there was a role reversal. As Christianity grew, it soon was the Jews who would be behind locked doors, fearing the Christians. Much of Christian history is a sorrowful record of our horrific treatment of the

Jewish people. Our task is to repent and reverse that unfortunate record, and to seek reconciliation and relationship.

Well, the disciples boarded up the doorway and piled up the furniture behind it. They were afraid they're going to suffer the same fate as Jesus on the cross. Fear has a way of paralyzing us and locking us up. But the disciples forgot—Jesus is the man who can't get boxed in, either by death or by fear or locks.

Jesus miraculously appeared and said not once, not twice, but eventually three times, *"Peace be with you."* Last week the angel and Jesus said to Mary Magdalene ... *"Be not afraid."* Now Jesus says, *"Peace be with you."*

John tells us Jesus came in the midst of the disciples. Right in the center of the disciples. Jesus wants to be in the thick of our lives.

- Tax collectors and sinners were drawn to Jesus like a magnet.
- Jesus died between two thieves.
- Now Jesus is in the middle of the disciples.

Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am, says Jesus. In every Christian gathering, there Jesus is in our midst.

- *Where is Christ in your relationships?*
- *Where are you in your relationships?*

Jesus then showed the disciples his healed wounds. The wounds of Christ speak to our wounds. Our Scarred Savior finds us, seeks us out, even when we're scared, hiding, or avoiding him. In the presence of Jesus, our fears melt away. He takes our panic and paranoia and gives us peace. The disciples were overjoyed at Christ's presence. His peace is life-giving. We encounter grace in Christ, and then we can extend it to others. It's contagious. Christ's peace frees us to face our fears. *"Peace be with you . . . As the Father sent me, so I send you."*

Disciples – you have a task. A mission. A calling. And it's to carry on my work—not to be holed up in this room. I'm handing you the mantle of God's forgiveness . . . now extend it to others. Proclaim my forgiveness. Lovingly caution others to be unbelieving no more. Be not afraid—I'll work through you and with you. Then Jesus drew close to the disciples . . . and he breathed on them . . .

Whoooooooooooooo. Receive the Holy Spirit. Fill your lungs with the breath and wind of God. Breathe deep the breath of God . . . and go forth in peace and joy and life and authority and mission and power—all in my name.

It was Pentecost Part One. The Spirit is kind of like the Second Coming of Christ.

"I will ask the Father," says Jesus, *"and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."* Jesus hands the baton off to the Spirit. The Spirit then continues through us the mission of Christ. *"As the Father sent me, so I send you."*

Receive the Holy Spirit. Receive forgiveness . . . then extend it.

Immanuel. Let's be a people who are open to the Spirit of Christ. Who welcome the Spirit in our hearts and in this place. The Spirit of Christ gives us the energy and the courage to continue to do what Christ did . . . even in the face of fear.

This is the good news: By God's grace and the Spirit, we're made living sequels to Christ's ministry. Third testaments. Fifth gospels. The Spirit is our second, third, 283rd wind. And the life-giving, breath-giving power of the Spirit never runs out of steam.

And so no disciple has ever doubted since Jesus' apartment encounter with the disciples. Right? WRONG. Enter Thomas. Thank God for Thomas. We need Thomas to ask the questions we're too afraid to ask. I love what the early church father Gregory said of Thomas, "The unbelief of Thomas is more profitable to our faith than the belief of the other disciples."

We learn an intriguing thing—Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared. *Where was he?* Was he on vacation? Running to the grocery store for the disciples? Was he at the coffee shop sipping a latte and reading philosophy? We don't know, but it's fun to imagine. But we do know this: Thomas stayed in community, in the midst of his doubts and unbelief. He worked through his faith struggles in a community of faith. He was accepted by the disciples, and he accepted them. Jesus respects Thomas and honors honest doubt.

I always want Immanuel to be a place where we can ask questions and be honest with our struggles. This is the best environment for faith. We all have different ways of working through our faith—we see this even during Easter. Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Christ, but it wasn't until Jesus said to her, "Mary" that she saw it was Jesus. The disciple John believed in Christ's resurrection when he saw the empty tomb. The disciples needed both the witness of Mary Magdalene AND the appearance of the risen Jesus before they believed. Thomas needed both the witness of the disciples, a little more time, and the second appearance of Christ. And then there is us—we haven't seen the resurrected Christ, but we believe based upon the apostle's witness. We have different ways of coming to faith. Thomas wrestled *with* God. He didn't wrestle away from God. What I respect about Thomas is that he longed for first-hand information about Christ. Thomas put his finger on it—he wanted an experiential, interactive, and engaged encounter with Christ. *"Unless I see and put my fingers in the nail holes and my hand in his side—I will not believe."*

Back to the story—it was a bit of *déjà vu*. It was a week after Jesus last surprise visit. This time Thomas is there. The disciples are hunkering in the bunker once again because of their fear and doubts. Then, wala—Jesus appears again. Jesus repeats himself: *"Peace be with you."* Then he looks at Thomas and speaks to him. *"Reach out and touch me, Thomas"*. Jesus doesn't give Thomas the silent treatment—doesn't give him the cold shoulder. Instead Jesus gives Thomas his hands, his side, himself.

"Thomas—come to me. See—my hands and my side?"

Jesus loved Thomas where he was . . . and he also loved him too much to keep him in his place of doubt.

Jesus gives beautiful gifts here:

- The gift of peace.
- The gift of forgiveness.
- The gift of presence.
- The gift of his scars.
- The gift of the Spirit.
- The gift of mission.

Jesus offers the gift of life—life in his name. With life, there's no more denial or dread of death. With life, shame and guilt are lifted from us. With life, the emptiness of life is filled up. There's joy and laughter. We're given purpose. We don't have to feel distant or alienated from God. Life is found in relationship with God.

Thomas experienced this first-hand, saying the most profound and personal thing you can say about Christ, *"My Lord and My God."* Not just Lord and God, but MY Lord and MY God.

We've come full circle in John's gospel. In the beginning verses in the gospel we hear: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* Now in the closing verses of John we hear Thomas, *BELIEVING* Thomas proclaim, *"My Lord and My God!"*

And then we get to the thesis statement, the very purpose of John's Gospel:

"This book was written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you have LIFE in his name."

To all our Thomas's. To all our doubters and deep thinkers out there. To those grappling with questions and fears. To our rationalists, realists, intellectual wrestlers, philosophers, and card-carrying members of the Glass Half-Empty Society—Christ invites you to himself. Don't stop at navel gazing or shoe gazing. Christ invites you to be a Palm Gazer. A Side Gazer. In fact—don't just look. You can touch Jesus too. Jesus is approachable, relatable—and sturdy. And Jesus is the key to set you free from your worries, your doubts, and your fears, and your uncertainties.

He won't answer all your questions—but he'll give you peace to face what's ahead. Jesus will give you new questions and better questions to ponder. Life would be pretty boring if everything got figured out this side of heaven—we wouldn't need faith. This is the beauty of trust in God. It challenges us to go outside of ourselves. As Jesus said: Happy and blessed are those who believe—without seeing. It's Jesus' last beatitude.

I think Thomas probably always remained a bit of a skeptic. But he changed after Christ's death and resurrection. He took seriously Christ's words,

"As the Father sent me, so I send you."

Church tradition says that Thomas went as far as India to establish the church there.

Immanuel, Jesus is still unlocking doors and walking through walls. He's pushing us out of these four walls of the sanctuary to our mission field. He's filling us with peace, joy, forgiveness, and life. And he wants us to share and show this good news to others in the power of the Spirit. Don't stay in peace. Have an "out there" faith.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*My Lord and God*," Jesus and Thomas, painting by Ronald Raab

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