

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” ²² Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus,^[a] one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

²⁶ After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them.

He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!” ²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

³⁰ Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

What’s In a Name?

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the high priest commanded Peter and the other disciples, “In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in Jesus’ name.” What’s that about? What’s in a name?

My mother was baptized “Margaret Erma Richey”. All three names were family names. She was the first of two daughters. Her parents really wanted a boy to name “Gaylord”, another family name, whom they never got. At age 21, my mother officially changed her name to “Margaret Erma Gaylord Richey”, keeping the Gaylord name alive. When she got married to my father, she took on his family name, so she was Margaret Erma Gaylord Richey Montgomery. Then when she applied for her first passport, she had to get her birth certificate which showed the name, Margaret Irene Richey- so, whenever someone asked me, “what is your mother’s name?” I would say, “Margaret Irene Erma Gaylord Richey Montgomery, but I just call her Mom.”

What’s in a name? Names are important. Names help us make connections- help us get rooted. I am proud to present to you for the first time “The FPCBGO Not ready for Prime-Time Players” presenting, “Name Tags Save the Day!”

<SKIT> two members not remembering names of other members until they all have name tags!

Thanks- please, pick up and wear your name tag, and look at the name tags of those you meet. I have known some people who are embarrassed that they don’t want to be caught looking at their name. That’s what it’s for! Look at it- handle it if you need to. Names help build relationships, build connections. Next week as we meet the PNC’s candidate to be our next called and installed pastor, wear your name tag. Let him know your name.

In my church in Louisville, we had a wonderful, old, Dutch woman who would hobble up on her cane to any visitor or anyone she didn’t know and say, “Hello, I don’t know you and I don’t think you know me. I’m Katy. What’s your name?” What a great way to break the ice and greet someone. Then later, call them by name. What’s in a name? It’s the building of a relationship. It’s a way of reaching a depth in the other person, connecting on a deeper level.

Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson’s opening statement for her confirmation for the Supreme Court, began with these words:

When I was born here in Washington, my parents were public school teachers, and to express both pride in their heritage and hope for the future, they gave me an African name; "Ketanji Onyika," which they were told means "lovely one."

This woman sat before the Senate and named herself. Naming — especially self-naming — announces agency, authority, and identity. Those simple words, “they gave me an African name; ‘Ketanji Onyika,’” which “means ‘lovely one,’” were a way of saying to the senators, “I am Black and proud. I am neither your victim nor your prize. I am loved and lovely. I am fully human.” So we asked, how do you want to be known? What name? What pronouns best tell others who you are?

Born Isabella Baumfree, do you know that name? one of the most famous women in American history would later say, of her self-naming: *“The Lord gave me ‘Sojourner,’ because I was to travel up an’ down the land, showin’ the people their sins an’ bein’ a sign unto them.*

Afterwards, I told the Lord I wanted another name 'cause everybody else had two names, and the Lord gave me 'Truth,' because I was to declare the truth to people.” Sojourner Truth: an unforgettable name. How do you want to be known?

Look at the texts- in Acts Peter and the others were teaching “in Jesus’ name” which drove the authorities to throwing them in jail. There’s power in the name of Jesus. Teaching in “Jesus’ name” means recounting his love, his compassion, his way of living. Teaching in “Jesus’ name” means looking beyond just the words as he taught with parable to deeper meaning. Teaching “in Jesus’ name” means acknowledging him as Lord, Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is Lord.

And in John’s Gospel, Thomas has a bum rap. We’ve given him the name “Doubting Thomas”. That couldn’t be further from the truth. Just look back in John 11:16 when Lazarus has recently died, the apostles don’t want to go back to Judea for they know the authorities were scheming on how to kill Jesus.

It is Thomas who says, “Let us also go, so that we may die with him.” What’s in a name? Thomas has been given a bad name. He is “willing to die Thomas”, or “bold Thomas” or “faithful Thomas”.

He is inquisitive. He needs assurance. Who of us take everything on blind faith? Many times in the Gospels the disciples are “afraid to ask Jesus about it.” But not Thomas. Thomas wants a real relationship, a deep relationship, from the heart- so in John 14, Jesus says he was going away to prepare a place for them. It is Thomas who speaks up- “I don’t know the way”. Without Thomas we would not have the familiar quote from Jesus, “I am the Way!” I am- that’s another powerful lifegiving name of God.

Remember Moses? There was a moment when Moses had the nerve to ask God what God’s name is. God was gracious enough to answer, and the name God gave is recorded as “I Am” (First person singular, to be) in the original Hebrew as Y-H-W-H. Over time we’ve arbitrarily added an “a” and an “e” in there to get YaHWeH, presumably because we have a preference for vowels.

But scholars and Rabi’s have noted that the letters Y-H-W-H represent breathing sounds, or aspirated consonants. When pronounced without intervening vowels, it actually sounds like breathing. YH (inhale): WH (exhale). Try it- YH...WH... YH...WH. So a baby’s first cry, her first breath, speaks the name of God. A deep sigh calls God’s name – or a groan or gasp that is too heavy for mere words.

Even an atheist would speak God’s name, unaware that their very breathe is giving constant acknowledgment to God. Likewise, a person leaves this earth with their last breath, when God’s name is no longer filling their lungs. When I can’t utter anything else, is my cry calling out God’s name? What’s in a name? What’s in God’s name?

Peter is thrown in prison for teaching in Jesus’ name. Jesus wasn't starting a new religion, or even criticizing an old one. He was teaching a spiritual practice: the practice of radical kindness and trust in God. That's all. That's it. That's Jesus' teaching and ministry in a nutshell. Sounds nice and benign, huh?

But if you practice radical kindness to everybody, including the poor, sick, outcast, foreigners, incarcerated, sinners, enemies, EVERYBODY—well, it will overturn all of society. So, yeah. Religious and political authorities had reason to get rid of Jesus. Holy Week reminds us: love is powerful, and love is revolutionary, and people with worldly power will resist it. But love will win. Love, in the name of Jesus, will win.

And Thomas, when he recognizes Jesus as his Risen Christ, he calls out, “My Lord and my God.” May we be so bold and may we have such life overflowing – in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Rev. David M. Montgomery
First Presbyterian Church, Bowling Green, OH
2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C
April 24, 2022