[**Acts 5:27-32**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=134#hebrew_reading)

[**Psalm 150**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=134#psalm_oth_reading)

[**Revelation 1:4-8**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=134#epistle_reading)

[**John 20:19-31**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=134#gospel_reading)

THE SPIRIT OF GRATITUDE Sermon for April 28, 2019

By Reverend Dr. Don Algeo

Many years ago when I was still young and footloose, I would occasionally visit a friend of mine from college who along with his young wife lived in New York City. They had a little girl, and I particularly remember one occasion when I showed up with a present for the little girl when she was probably about two or three. It was a just a rag doll, but I can remember her reaction when she opened the box and took out the doll. Her eyes got big and round and her smile went from one ear to the other. She hugged the doll to her chest and started waltzing around the room with it in her arms, saying something like “O I wuv you! I weawy wuv you!” She was in seventh heaven, and it was almost certainly the best received present I ever gave in my life, before or since.

But what I also remember is how the girl's mother, after a few seconds, took her by the shoulders and steered her back to stand in front of me. “Now what do you say to Uncle Donald?” she asked the little girl. And the girl said something like: “Fank you wery much, Uncle Donut.”

That came to mind while I was reading our Gospel passage for this morning, because it illustrates something I think the passage teaches us about the nature of thankfulness. The little girl's gratitude to me was manifested by the look on her face, by the way she grasped the doll to her bosom and floated around the room with it, by the baby gibberish she murmured into the doll's raggedy red hair. The actual words she finally came up with at her mother's prompting were nice, but they were by and large just the girl learning to perform a piece of social etiquette. The few seconds before that had contained the reality of her spiritual reaction to my present.

And I think the same might be said of Thomas' reaction in our reading. Thomas is mentioned a couple of other times in the Gospels. On one occasion, he displayed great courage and loyalty. When the other disciples tried to keep Jesus from going to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead because of the danger from those in the area who had just earlier tried to stone Him, Thomas said to them, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" ([John 11:16](https://ebible.com/query?utf=8%E2%9C%93&query=John%2011%3A16&translation=ESV&redirect_iframe=https://www.allaboutjesuschrist.org/bible.htm)). Thomas also asked Him one of the most famous questions. [John 14:5-6](https://ebible.com/query?utf=8%E2%9C%93&query=John%2014%3A5-6&translation=ESV&redirect_iframe=https://www.allaboutjesuschrist.org/bible.htm) says, "Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

These brief mentions help us fill in his character a little, but certainly what we find in our passage is what most people remember when his name comes up, so much so that he's passed into popular parlance as Doubting Thomas.

Because he refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead on the testimony of the other disciples and said that he had to be convinced by his own eyes, most people picture Thomas as a hard-headed skeptic, a I'm-from-Missouri-so-you-have-to-show-me type.

But I don't think so. Remember how when Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas wasn't among them? Then where was he? My own speculation is that he was so devastated by Christ's death that he couldn't bear the company even of his friends. He needed to be alone to grieve,

And when he refused to accept his friends' testimony, I suspect it was because he could not bear the possibility, however remote, of experiencing that devastation again. Of course he hoped they were right, he hoped that Jesus was again alive, he hoped it so ardently that a second blow to that hope would destroy him. His soul was so committed to the truth of the resurrection that another disappointment would be unendurable. And so he required proof. He required reality, not simply testimony.

Even if you're not golf fans, most of you probably realize that Tiger Woods won the Masters a couple of weeks ago, after a full ten years of personal and physical disasters, after falling so low that it seemed impossible that he or anyone could ever recover from them.

And if you were watching the telecast of the final few holes, even if you aren't a fan of Tiger Woods, you would have sensed and perhaps shared the almost fearful apprehension of the crowd. As he took each shot, the tension increased until it became almost unbearable. The closer the realization of the hope came, the more dreadful, almost, the feeling was. Any small mistake would bring the whole thing crashing down. And because the hope was so tremendous, and its realization so close, for something to go wrong now, right up to the last short putt, would have been devastating. The crowd was afraid of its own hope.

And then of course the last putt dropped in. They say it was the loudest roar ever heard at the Augusta golf course.

I suspect that roar was very much the same reaction as that of Thomas, when he at last cried out, “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas' cry, the roars and jubilation of the crowd, the little girl toddling around the room holding her doll...these are all the true expressions of gratitude. True gratitude is a response of the whole being, not simply a form of expression.

The psalm we read together this morning is a song of thanksgiving, and it is bursting with activity.

***Psalm 150*** *150:1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!
150:2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
150:3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
150:4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!
150:5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
150:6 Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!*

And it’s not just a psalm about energetic gratitude, it was itself probably also what’s called a ‘processional psalm,’ meaning it would have been sung by people as they proceeded towards the temple to worship on some festive religious holiday, waving palm branches and shaking tambourines and dancing like David did when he first brought the ark to its permanent resting place in Jerusalem.

In its most fundamental spiritual meaning, our Sunday service is an expression of gratitude. And that gratitude is manifested not just in the words we say during this hour, but much more so in the fact that we leave our houses and travel to gather here, that we cease our normal activities and instead arrange ourselves in pews, we stand and sit and lift our voices in harmonious concert, we pay attention, we exchange fellowship, we offer physical tokens of appreciation, sometimes we share a communal meal. All these are movements and activities of our whole being, even if we don't normally think of them that way, and those movements and activities themselves ***are***our gratitude. They ***are*** our thanks to God that he has answered us and become our salvation.

I think the lesson here for all of us is that being thankful isn't just a matter of saying a few words. It's not so much an activity of our mouths as it is of our whole being. And on this first Sunday after Easter, that's a message we need particularly to remember, because what Easter itself really is is a gift that God has given to each of us, the greatest imaginable gift, the gift of our own salvation and freedom through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Remember the story of the ten lepers. They were waiting alongside the road one day when Jesus was passing through and they called out to Him for help. He told them to go up to the temple in Jerusalem and present themselves to the priests. And as they were doing so, all ten were completely healed. Nine of them continued on their way, but the tenth came back and threw himself at Jesus' feet in gratitude.

Were the other nine thankful? Probably in some sense they were. They probably told each other how great this was, and how they owed it all to that guy back there.

But one of them stopped, turned around, redirected his life and threw himself down at Christ's feet. His gratitude wasn't just an expression of his thoughts, but an expression of his whole being.

We all live in the aftermath of Easter. The first Easter happened two thousand years ago, but each year we relive it, as we did last week, and in reliving it, we resurrect it, just as Jesus was resurrected, and he appears to us again as he did to Thomas, appearing once again to renew and strengthen our faith just as Thomas' faith was renewed and strengthened.

In the aftermath of that great gift, let us commit ourselves to being thankful, not just in words but also in the full reality of who we are.

What does that mean in practice? Well, since each one of us is different, I suspect it must mean something that is individual and unique to ourselves. But here's a way to begin to think about it.

Just as we interrupt the usual flow of our lives for an hour every Sunday to express our gratitude to God in a visible way, a more than verbal way, one suggestion might be to set aside a few minutes each day to do the same thing. In the aftermath of Easter, after all, each day becomes a new gift from God. Why not steal a moment or two of those twenty-four hours and step out of our normal routines. Do something to show our gratitude?

And what might that be? Who knows? It might be something different every day. It might be writing a card, making a call, doing a favor. It might be taking time to really appreciate the smell of coffee or roses, and to think of them as what they are: not just pleasurable experiences, but as gifts.

I think that's really the key. We often hear pious talk about life being a gift, each day being a gift, the small good things each day brings being gifts, and so on. We hear that talk and nod, but do we actively take steps to cultivate an attitude of genuine – not just verbal – gratitude towards those things?

The important thing is not so much what we do, as that we really make the effort of thinking about what to do, and then doing it. However insignificant that might seem, each time we are planting a seed, laying a brick, taking a step.

Life itself is a gift, but the Christian life, the life made possible for us by Christ, is a project.

And so, gracious God, our sermon prayer this morning is that we be strengthened in gratitude. That we be strengthened, not through magic, but rather in the same way habits and muscles and friendships are strengthened, through regular and repeated exercise. Help us remember each day, not just to acknowledge in theory, but to express in activity, our awareness of how much we have received from You, and from Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.