

“The Doors Were Locked”

John 20:19-31

It’s strange when you think about it. The disciples spend the evening of Easter Day in self quarantine—behind locked doors. Peter and another disciple have seen the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene has spoken with the risen Christ, and she has told the disciples about it. You’d think they would be celebrating or announcing to anyone who would listen that Jesus is alive again. Instead, they hide out. They act more like disciples whose friend and teacher is still dead.

On the other hand, protecting themselves makes perfect sense as, in our case, is the stay at home order from government officials because of the pandemic. In a recent conversation, a friend and I agreed that this Easter will have been much like the first one—Jesus’ friends, holed up in a room for fear of death, grieving deep loss and not knowing what lies ahead. It was only a couple days earlier that they were traumatized by the death of their leader on a cruel cross. They know that just as he was apprehended and executed, they could be also. And so, they wait behind locked doors, as quiet as they can be, fearing every footstep in the street below. In full disclosure, due to their association with Jesus a number of them *will* die, some sooner and some later. Therefore, the room contains many of the first Christian martyrs.

Whether or not their attitude is justified, fear is what dominates them. John describes their situation this way: “*...with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders.*” That puts them in the same category as so many people today. Those dominated by fear include some of the people we see abruptly moving from aisle to aisle in Giant Eagle or those driving hurriedly to get where they’re going on sometimes empty streets. Jesus’ disciples have plenty of company on the evening of the first Easter day when fear keeps them behind locked doors.

It is to his fearful disciples that the risen Christ chooses to appear. He has passed from life through a gruesome death to a life greater than we can imagine. Why does he appear to people such as these? It might have been out of anger, disappointment, or a desire for revenge. After all, these disciples deserted him. As he hung for hours on the cross, most of them were nowhere to be found. He might have wanted to fix a steely gaze on them and chew them out for their cowardly behavior.

But nothing of the sort happens. He comes back, not concerned for himself, but for them. He senses their profound fear. So he speaks his peace to them. He shows them his wounds, still apparent on his glorified body. Their fear dissolves, and they rejoice to see him alive again. Then, he gives them his peace and their mission. He breathes the Holy Spirit on them (often called the “Little Pentecost”), and tells them to forgive sins with his authority. This action is an early Pentecost, a commissioning of the disciples for active ministry. Their assigned business is forgiveness, the reconciliation of humanity with God and each other. The prototype for this work is to be the forgiveness he has given to them. From this upstairs room, forgiveness is to spread like wildfire. Second chances, like the one Jesus gives Thomas, will free them from fear. Then they are to go out to help set others free.

I don’t remember an Easter like the one that has just past. We face an ongoing pandemic, an economic recession and restart, and an upcoming presidential election. As we look forward with uncertainty, it is vital that we maintain our connection with the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into his purpose with joy. The

Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*, the same word for breath. The Holy Spirit is to be the air we breathe, the essential lifeline of our souls. If we are surrendered to him and dependent upon him, he will lead us into an otherwise uncertain future. If we are not, he cannot. Such submission often involves sacrificing what we wanted or thought we needed. Some of us are learning how to do that through this pandemic.

Isn't it remarkable that death could not hold Jesus? It's equally remarkable that fear could not hold his disciples. We too are given the promise of our own resurrection at the end of time, and the reality of reconciliation with God and others here and now. Like the first disciples, we experience Jesus risen from the dead, freeing us from the fear of death and freeing us from all the other deathly fears that plague us today. What might these fears be? Some are announced in the headlines: a deadly virus for which no cure is known, a faltering economy, deception and criminal attempts to con us, wars and rumors of wars. Other fears are more personal, more private: a bad medical report, a broken marriage, a career that crashes.

We feel fear when there's no money to pay the mortgage; when our child's report card is a disaster; when we come back to find our home burglarized, our possessions rifled through and items stolen. When fears flare up in our hearts, it's easy to forget God, yet it's a good time to remember God. The disciples forgot for a time, there in that upstairs room. We may forget also, but Christ does not forget us. He comes to us with vivid reminders in his feet and hands and side that death, the source of so much fear, has been conquered.

The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. When in the midst of fears that we can name, and some that we can't name, we recognize the Risen Christ here with us, and we too can rejoice. It's not that fear is easily swept away; but rather that fear no longer dominates our lives. There is one who has shown himself more powerful, and we acknowledge him as Lord. The Lord is with us!

The resurrection stories that conclude the four gospels are a bit of a scramble, testifying to how people come to faith in very different ways.

- The beloved disciple believes when he sees the empty tomb, but it's not clear exactly what he believes.
- Mary Magdalene believes when the Lord speaks her name, even though, according to Mark's Gospel, her report is not accepted by the others.
- The disciples believe for themselves, including Thomas, once Jesus physically appears alive among them.

People come to faith in different ways. They did then and they do now. Thomas is another example of this. As Jesus prepares to go to Jerusalem to face the cross, Thomas says, with a note of bravado, "*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*" Nothing subtle about this guy. And so when he hears from others that Jesus is back again, he makes his outrageous demand. He refuses to believe that Jesus is alive unless he can *see and touch* the wounds of his crucified leader.

Then, one week later, Thomas gets his chance in the upstairs room. Jesus enters, and invites Thomas to examine his wounds. We don't hear in the Gospel account that he accepts the invitation. We hear instead

the boldest statement about Jesus in the Gospel of John, maybe in the entire New Testament: “*My Lord and my God!*” shouts Thomas.

Jesus returns to promise resurrection for the rest of us. He comes back to reconcile us with God and to make us instruments of reconciliation in the world. He comes to break the chains of fear. We all have different ways of recognizing him.

We can meet Jesus in Scripture and in the Sacrament. We can meet Jesus in the love shown to us by other believers. We can meet Jesus as well in the depths of sorrow, sometimes at the time we least expect it.

Will you personally welcome his greeting of “*Peace be with you?*” Will you personally trust in the One who was crucified but is risen indeed? Jesus may come to you when you least expect it, as the angel came to Joseph in Egypt, while he slept, or to Mary in Nazareth, to shock her with news about a son.

Jesus often startles us, as he did those fearful disciples in the upstairs room. And one week later, he shocked Thomas. He may come to you when you least expect him, even to the hidden depths of your soul.

Dearest friends, this Easter season the Lord Jesus comes to each of us to set us free. We should extend to him the chains of fear that hold us, because he will break them by the power of his resurrection. Glory to God! Amen.

(Thanks to Rev. Charles Hoffacker for passages from his sermon ©2008)