

Second Sunday of Easter

April 3, 2016

[Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 150; Rev 1:4-8; John 20:19-31](#)

Unlocking Doors

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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."

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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

Our story for today opens the way many of them do, by locating us in time, "evening on that day." It's such an understated beginning that it can slip right by you, until you remember what day John is talking about. This isn't just any day. This is the evening of the day that divided all time into before and after – the time of Jesus' life on earth, which ended in torture and death on Good Friday, and the time after Jesus breaks out of the sealed tomb. This is the evening of the first Easter, the first day of resurrection life.

In the book of John, the disciples are at the raw edge of that new life of resurrection. That morning, they received the amazing news from the first witnesses of the resurrection – that the tomb was empty, and Jesus was alive again. But it seems they don't quite know what to make of it. Shocked, confused, afraid, they huddle together, behind closed doors – locked in.

John tells us first “the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews.” Did that surprise you? It doesn’t make sense, does it, since of course all of them were Jews and so was Jesus. But John is writing as a witness of a divided community – on one side, the Jewish leaders who had Jesus arrested and tried in their religious court; on the other, the Jews who believed or hoped that Jesus was the one they had been waiting for, the holy one of Israel.

The disciples are afraid, and no wonder. They have ended up on the wrong side of church and state, the wrong side of the powers of this world. They are Jews in colonized Palestine. They have seen with their own eyes how a community under pressure – their community – maintains its uneasy alliance with the imperial power of Rome. They have seen with their own eyes the terrifying spectacle of crucifixion – the demonstration of the power of Rome, the mighty empire with the power and the resolve to compel obedience by any means necessary.

And now according to this gospel of John, Mary Magdalene has seen the Lord, and told the others about the good news. Peter and the beloved disciple have run to the tomb to see for themselves. And yet...that amazing good news has not yet set them free, for this night, they gather in a locked room, filled with fearful questions. What will become of them now? And who will they become, in this strange new world of resurrection?

Locks. How many times a day do you use a lock? Lock the door behind you when you leave home. Unlock the car door, lock it when you get out. We use locks to safeguard our valuables, our medicines, our guns. We use locks to protect our privacy. We lock up our churches – we have to; how many years has it been since you were in an American city where you could just walk into a church?

We lock up to keep ourselves and our property safe, but that safety comes at a cost. It takes time and energy to keep track of our keys, for one thing. You know what I’m talking about – I’ve already seen those clipboards holding the dozens of keys you use here at St Stephen. And then, those times when you end up on the wrong side of a locked door – that awful feeling, when you slam the door behind you and realize your keys are still inside the house, or hanging from your car’s ignition – locked out.

Other people lock themselves **in**, becoming almost like prisoners of their own security systems. Maybe you know somebody who worries constantly about locking up, checking the windows and doors again and again when they are at home, and then checking them all over again if they venture out. Or maybe you’re that person, yourself.

And then, there’s more than one way to lock yourself in. Maybe you’re a prisoner to the past, locked in by anger or regret over what can’t be changed. Maybe you’ve locked yourself in out of pride or shame – you don’t want anyone else to see your wounds. Maybe there’s some part of you that you have tried to lock up even from yourself, something you don’t want to see or touch. Or maybe you’ve locked up your heart; you’ve been hurt before, and you don’t want to take that chance again.

At the other extreme, there's our former bishop Jerry Knoche who famously refuses to lock up. He left his car unlocked with keys in the ignition on his pastoral calls through every neighborhood in Baltimore. And yes, his car did get stolen, once, with all his bishop's gear inside, when he left it for ten minutes right in front of one of the churches he was visiting. Now I'm guessing most people would change their ways after that, but not our bishop...he refused to become someone who worried about locking up.

Most of us work out some kind of balance between taking precautions and becoming obsessed with safety, but however we do that, locks bear witness to a broken world and a wounded community, a place where we don't and can't trust the people around us. Here in our country, where we cherish freedom, we lock one another up – the biggest prison population in the world. As refugees around the world flee violence, terrorism, poverty, some countries, overwhelmed, are locking up their borders; here, in our nation of immigrants, we too hear talk of building walls, locking out the stranger.

That first Easter evening, the disciples had locked the doors, for fear of the Jews – their own community.

Maybe they were a little afraid of meeting Jesus again too, remembering how they had failed him when it mattered most.

So, on that first evening of resurrection life, they are locked in.

The good news for them and for us is that Jesus doesn't wait for us to unlock the doors. He comes to us, through every locked door.

When I got my keys to this building this week, the one to the outside door didn't work. It unlocked the door. But it wouldn't lock the door again.

Well, of course I got rid of that key and got one that would lock the door. But when I read the gospel for this Sunday, I thought about that key, and for me it's a kind of sign of what's happening here. Over these last few years you have been unlocking the doors, opening yourselves to the neighborhood. Unlocking your minds and hearts, to find to a new way of being church.

Are you doing that perfectly? Is everybody ready to unlock the doors and go out to the neighborhood? I'm guessing not.

The good news is, we don't do this by ourselves. Jesus comes to us, through all our locked doors.

He knew their fears, that first evening of the first day, and he knows our fears, this day. So his first words are, "Peace be with you."

Then he shows that wounded community the raw edges of his own wounds, the punctures of the nails, the gash of the sword in his side.

He gives them an assignment. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

He gives them what they need to do it, breathing the Holy Spirit on them.

So speak Christ's own words of peace to those around you, and come to the table, where we get what we need to do what we're sent to do, and to become who we're meant to be.

Peace be with you.

The Reverend Barbara Melosh  
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