

“No Lock too Large”

Introduction: I mentioned at last Sunday’s sunrise service that one of the things I’ve come to appreciate about that early morning Easter worship is that it reminds me that Easter didn’t begin with a loud fanfare of organ and bells and drums, with the followers of Jesus running around shouting “He is risen!” Rather, it began in darkness, both literal and metaphorical. The primary emotions described of those first followers of Jesus were bewilderment and disorientation and fear and confusion, all sentiments I can experience as the alarm rings while it’s still black outside and I stumble around to try to get my act together to lead that 6 a.m. start time at the Point!

Our gospel reading today takes us to that emotion of bewilderment and fear and darkness as it shows us the followers of Jesus, following news of the resurrection, hunkered down behind locked doors like a bunch of frightened rabbits. They had gathered together and locked themselves in, not to celebrate or to praise God, but “for fear.” And yet, in the midst of such fear, the good news of Easter is that Jesus is not only risen, he also comes looking for us. Like no stone was too heavy to keep him in, no lock is too large to keep him out, to prevent him from breaking through our locks, healing us, and calling us to join him in his on-going work.

I. The God Who Breaks through Locks

A. Let’s begin behind the locked doors of the disciples. Our text tells us that they had locked their doors for fear of the Jews, that is, the Jewish leaders who, in concert with the Roman authorities, had put Jesus to death. If they did that to him, the disciples reasoned, they might quite easily begin a kind of sweeping up operation in which they went after his followers. So they hid, and locked themselves in. I can’t say that I blame them! There are a couple of other reasons I can think of which might have added to the mix. One was to hide from the possible scorn and ridicule that these disciples might have been getting from their friends and family. Certainly, they had left all to follow him for the last three years. Certainly, they had talked him up, sharing about how wonderful he was, maybe even sharing their understanding that he had come to redeem Israel (cf. Lk. 24:19-21), restoring her to her former glory. But his horrific death would seem to have put an end to those hopes and perhaps brought forth the taunt, “Some Messiah! Where is your Lord and Savior now?” I could see wanting to hide from those folks too. Another possible reason to hide behind locked doors might have been their fear of Jesus. Over the last three days, they had all just basically denied or abandoned him. If he really was alive again, then they might be fearful of the possibility of his seeking retribution.

B. Now, locks can come in all shapes and sizes, and are not just found at the hardware store. So let’s take a minute to ponder how it is that we might, either intentionally, or unintentionally, lock Jesus out of our life. Like the disciples, we can lock our doors out of fear of the world, and what we believe the world might try to do to us. We can also lock our doors to Jesus as we stay away from worship, or avoid joining a Bible study, or stay home from that retreat, or watch TV instead of praying, or keep the conversation with our neighbor or co-worker on the level of the weather and the Red Sox, or hold back from offering forgiveness, or thinking that our foibles and failures somehow disqualify us from being loved by, and working for, Jesus. What happens is that through these various locks, we keep Jesus at a distance, at arm’s length, and so we risk locking out what Jesus might want to do in us and through us.

C. However, the good news of Easter, which it took the disciples several Sundays to learn, is that our various locks are no problem for Jesus. Our fears, our failures, our forgetfulness, our frustrations, aren't stronger than him. Jesus, in his resurrected state, simply passed right through that first set of doors, without knocking, without picking the lock, and stood right there right in the midst of his friends. And he can do the same with our locks. Importantly, to Jesus these first disciples were still friends, no matter what had happened, or what they had done, or what they were afraid of. He didn't chew them out, as chumps who failed to stick with him. Nor did he begin with that very tempting phrase, "I told you so." Instead, he greeted them with the words, "Peace be with you!" While it was the conventional Jewish greeting of the day ("Peace" translates "Shalom"), as Jesus used the word, and as the NT writers used the word, has to do with an overall state of well-being. It is a word that compliments his last words on the cross, "It is finished." As Jesus went on to show them his wounds, it reveals that through his death on the cross, Jesus has brought us a peace that reconciles and brings healing to our brokenness, our brokenness with God, with one another, with ourselves, and with creation. It is not something we can earn but must simply receive. Jesus breaks through our locks with his grace, with his undeserved favor. The result for us is God's healing peace.

II. The Gardener of God's New Creation

A. Now, hold that picture of Jesus bring peace, and combine it with one we get earlier in the chapter from earlier that Easter morning. Among others, John tells us about a woman named Mary Magdalene who was the first to the tomb of Jesus and saw that it was empty. After she had run back to town to tell Peter and John, she returned to the tomb where she lingered, wondering what was going on. As she lingered, she got into a conversation with a man she thought was the gardener. On one level she was wrong as it turned out to be Jesus who she eventually recognized when he spoke her name. But on a deeper level she was right on. She was right on because Jesus had been sent by the Father to make things new, to usher in the dawn of God's new creation, to repair the damage done by all who had come before him to the world and its people that God has entrusted into our care.

B. Listen for the Genesis echoes in the last days of Jesus' life. On Friday, the sixth day of the week, Jesus completed his work, declaring "It is finished." On Saturday, the seventh day, he rested. On Sunday, the first day of the week, he rose in a new, eternal state, one that could pass through locked doors but still be recognized, and even eat. He was no ghost, but had come to bring order to a garden, to a creation that had gone awry. He had come to uproot the weeds and thorns and thistles of our self-centered existence, and replace them with blossoms and flowers and fruit of lives that are lived out of love for others. This picture of Jesus as the gardener of God's new creation is another way to think about the healing peace that he has brought and offers to us.

III. Co-Laborers with Jesus

A. But Jesus doesn't stop there. Jesus, we learn, didn't come to work the garden all by himself. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you," he informs his followers. Having received the hospitality of Jesus, they were not simply to hang out and enjoy it for themselves. Jesus was commissioning his followers not just to gaze at the blossoms and flowers and fruit, but to deliver it to the places where they lived and learned and worked and played. The church, as it was forming, was to be the means by which Jesus would bring healing to the brokenness in the world.

B. To be sure, that is a high, holy, and challenging calling! How can we begin to carry it out? Well, let's think for a moment about the phrase, "As the Father has sent me . . ." How was Jesus sent to us? Well, he came into our world as a servant. He did not hide, or withdraw, or consider himself to be above us but spent time, as it was often observed, with tax collectors and other sinners (Lk. 15:1-2). In this regard, I was struck by the experience **Jane** had while visiting her son in Richmond VA during Easter, and I've asked her to share a bit of that with us....

C. As we think about how Jesus was sent, we can also observe that he wasn't alone but came in the power of the Holy Spirit, an empowerment that he shares with us. His breathing of the Spirit on the disciples was likely a symbolic act that pointed forward to the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It also harkens back again to Genesis where we read that it was the breath of God which brought the breath of life to men and women (2:7). What is important here is that just as Jesus promised in the upper room, he does not leave us as orphans but by his Spirit, he walks with us and empowers us to live out what he has called us to do.

I promised something similar to **Susan** as she was pondering taking on the role of church moderator in the year ahead, wondering if she could do it. I promised that we would not leave her hanging out there alone. I said that Jud, our past moderator, would be available to answer any questions. I said that George would help her to walk her way through Robert's Rules of Order. And I said that I would be there to assist in the running of church council meetings. She would not be alone. Neither, says Jesus, will he leave us alone.

So in this season of resurrection, may we be led to recognize the various locks in our lives by which we may be, knowingly or unknowingly, keeping Jesus at a distance. When he breaks through with his healing presence, may we receive his peace, and enjoy it fully by seeking to extend it to others.