

Unlocking the Doors

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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.

For nearly all of my adult life, I have had this thing about locking doors, so much so that I once spoke to a physician about it because I was afraid I cared about it a bit too much. I think it began when I was in my mid-twenties and a seminary student living in a not-so-great area of Durham, North Carolina and I walked to the bus stop, only to discover that I had forgotten my keys. I walked three blocks back to my house and found them, sticking out of the lock of my front door.

So I'm always checking doors at church and doors at home. I double-check my car door. For a brief period of time before children, Tracy and I owned a Jeep that we loved to drive with the doors removed. We had the big, heavy, full metal doors, and taking them off wasn't easy. Once, we stayed in a hotel with a little kitchenette which made it affordable for us to go to the beach for vacation. Each morning, we would remove the doors and then use the hotel's luggage cart to transport the doors back to our hotel room, to the quizzical stares of the hotel staff.

One day on that vacation, as we drove in the Jeep, sans top and doors, Tracy remarked, "It's ironic, isn't it?"

“What’s ironic?”

“You know. They way you are with locking doors, and here we are driving with the doors back in the hotel room.”

“Yes,” I replied, “The doors may be in the hotel room, but they are still locked.”

When we encounter the disciples in this morning’s text, this text which covers a week’s time, you can feel the stress and confusion of the disciples. It is palpable. It is still the very first Easter, and Jesus has just risen from the dead this morning. Peter and the Beloved Disciple have just seen that the tomb is empty. Mary Magdalene has just encountered and conversed with the resurrected Christ, who told her to tell the rest of the disciples that Jesus “is ascending to [his] Father and your Father, to [his] God and your God,” and Mary has done this.

However, none of this seems to have assuaged the fear and doubt of the disciples. We do not find them emboldened, out in the streets, in the synagogue, proclaiming the good news of the resurrection of Jesus. They do not even seem to be rejoicing. Two disciples see that the tomb is empty. Mary Magdalene testifies to them that she has seen and spoken to the Lord, and the response of the disciples is to lock themselves together in a house, presumably deciding what to do next.

Perhaps they had trouble believing the testimony of a woman. I have read the work of biblical scholars who suggest that if Jesus wanted to make his resurrection appearance more convincing, he never would have appeared first to a woman. The testimony of a woman was not considered reliable in ancient Israel. I wonder that would have happened if Jesus had appeared to Peter and the Beloved Disciple instead. For some reason, I find it likely that they result would have been the same: the disciples huddled together behind locked doors, wondering what it all meant, wondering what to do next.

When I had my Jeep, I was worried about someone stealing it, especially when I had the soft top installed. Let’s face it, when half the windows are held in place by zippers and can be defeated with a pair of scissors, you are not talking about vehicle built like one of those armored trucks that takes the deposit from department stores. I also discovered, after buying the Jeep, that the hood doesn’t lock, which means that some Jeep owners have problems with their batteries getting stolen. As a result, I purchased a hood lock to protect my battery and a car alarm to protect the car itself, a lock that went on the steering wheel that included an alarm that was powered by a nine-volt battery, a device that could be removed from my vehicle in about fifteen seconds with a hacksaw, after the robber used a pair of scissors to remove one of my windows.

As the home security commercials are fond of reminding us, our locks do not keep us as safe as we think they do. As I finally had to tell myself, it would be a pretty brazen criminal who would walk from front door to front door turning the knob to see who left their doors unlocked. I’ve heard the robbers usually use the windows.

I am not sure from what the disciples thought their locked doors were keeping them safe. John’s gospel talks about the disciples being afraid of “the Jews,” by which John means the

religious authorities. However, we know from the story of the trial of Jesus that the religious authorities had no authority to arrest and prosecute. That fell to the Romans, and they Romans were not the kind of people who would give up and call it a day because they encountered a locked door. Besides, the only one who was trying to get into that house turned out to be Jesus himself, and the locked doors were no match for the one who rose from death.

I believe that there are many ways in which you and I try to lock doors in our lives. We even sometimes try to lock doors between ourselves and God, although as Jesus demonstrates in this morning's text, there is no lock that God cannot defeat, although that does not stop us from trying.

What doors in your life have you locked? Have you been harmed by a relationship, and now your heart is locked? Are you overcommitted, so now your time is locked? Are you trying to face what seems like a hopeless situation on your own, so now your future seems locked? Have you felt betrayed or abandoned by God, so now your spirit is locked? What doors have you barricaded in your life out of fear of risk, fear of vulnerability, fear of loss? For all of the talk of faith being a crutch for the weak-minded, doubt can be as well, because it allows us to stop listening, stop seeking, and stop expecting the presence of the God of life in our midst.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, the king learns that his daughter is cursed to die by pricking her finger on a spindle, so he forbids everyone in the kingdom from using or even possessing a distaff or spindle, to no avail, for he learns what we, if honest with ourselves, already know, that it is impossible to hide all of the needles. C.S. Lewis writes, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket- safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable...the alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be safe from all of the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell."¹

This is why being a Christian, living one's faith openly, being intentionally invitational to others, giving of one's time and talents for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and its outpost on earth, the church, is so important, and why the excuse that the life to which Christ calls and sends us is too difficult and too dangerous is not enough. In this morning's text, Jesus tells these confused and skittish disciples "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The proper place for disciples of Jesus Christ, then and now, and for faith, then and now, is not locked in safe seclusion. It is out in the world that Christ partners with us to save, even in the midst of risk and doubt, Christ sends us with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is a life of love, and love is inherently full of both blessing and risk, but were it something we could do on our own, we wouldn't need God.

¹ Lewis, C.S., *The Four Loves*, p. 169.

When I was pastoring three country churches at once, two of them did not believe in locking their doors. In a strange way, I found this relieving, because you cannot worry about whether or not doors are locked if you do not know how to lock them. One of my churches, the smallest of the three, was in an area that, at night, was almost completely dark.

One day I received a letter from our insurance company who had somehow caught wind of this practice and who was threatening to cancel our policy if we did not start locking our doors.

Concerned, I brought this letter to the next meeting of the Board, who instantly and unanimously decided to ignore it. They reasoned that they could find another insurance company (the fact that an insurance salesman had just joined the church didn't hurt either). They went on to say that many cars travelled up and down that highway, and you never know when someone needed a place to pray or to just be alone with God. They even said that they knew, on good authority, that sometimes people with no place to stay actually slept in their sanctuary, and since the stranger might be Jesus, we wouldn't want to lock him out, would we preacher?

Sisters and brothers, if we did not trust at least *part* of our lives to Christ, we likely would not be here this morning. Yet we are. So if we can trust God with parts of our lives, sometimes even the "big picture" stuff of life and death, what other doors can we have the faith to unlock here and now? Perhaps our fear is not that God is not with us, but that God is, calling us, pushing us, leading us to a richer, more abundant, but riskier life. Perhaps the uneasiness and dissatisfaction we so often feel in our lives is really Jesus calling us to unlock our doors, and to believe that the one who on Easter opened the tomb really is with us, calling us to the deeper faith and life that you and I were made to have.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.