

Sunday Sermon
April 8, 2018
John 20:19-31
“Through Locked Doors”

Introduction

The community where I was serving as a pastor was experiencing quite a bit of crime—break-ins, robberies, shootings, drug deals, gang-related incidents—even in the blocks around the church. So we were struggling how to open our doors to those around us yet be responsible to the safety of those who came to worship, the children, youth, and adults.

In that little town, church prospects were rare. There were not that many newcomers to the area. Yet we had a new couple with three sons worshipping regularly. They were busy professionals, but they were making it a priority to have their sons in church. And you can believe we were making it a priority to make them feel welcome.

Advent came, and we invited the boys to be a part of the 5 PM program on Christmas Eve. They were excited; I was excited. This is going great, I thought. But then Christmas Eve came and time for the program, but no family. I kept watching the door; they never showed.

The next Sunday the family was in worship. I said, “We missed you on Christmas Eve. We were sorry you could not come.”

“Oh, we came,” they said, “but we were running late, and we could not get in. We saw the cars in the parking lot, the lights on in the sanctuary, and the candles in the windows, we could not get in.”

I could not understand what they were talking about. I checked with the head usher. “Oh yeah,” he said. “It was Christmas Eve. I could not get enough ushers to help. So I just decided that once it was 5 o’clock, the safest thing for me to do was go around and lock all the doors.”

I

If you had come looking for the disciples on that first day of the week after the crucifixion, you would have found all the doors locked.

John says they were hiding from the Jewish authorities, afraid. Of course they were afraid. Their leader had been charged with blasphemy, tortured, mocked, and then crucified.

But I think the disciples were hiding from something else as well. Notice in the accounts where Jesus first appears to the disciples after his resurrection, their first reaction is not joy. No, their initial reactions are fear and embarrassment.

You see, when the disciples buried Jesus, they buried the hopes, the dreams, and the promises they had seen in him, the love and care he had shared with them,

and the teaching and vision he had given them of a kingdom of God on earth as in heaven.

But that was not all that they buried. Along with that, they also buried their weak faith, their competition as to who was to be the greatest in the kingdom, and their other petty jealousies. They buried their impatience with Jesus and how he was bringing in the kingdom, their ugly scenes of betrayal and denial. All this buried with Jesus.

No wonder they were overcome with fear when Jesus appeared to them. All these feelings, these memories were alive again. They could no longer try to forget them; they had to face them.

II

In a recent children's video from my former church, I was relieved to see the boys of that visiting family. They had stayed at the church. In a survey where people were asked what they look for in a church, the number one answer was "friendliness." Number two was, "bold, interesting preaching." (Yikes.) Nobody said, "Locked doors and frightened members."

Tom Long says of those disciples gathered behind locked doors, "What kind of slogan would they put in the paper or on their website to attract members? "The friendly church where all are welcome?" Hardly. "The church with a warm heart and a bold mission?" Not quite. No, they were the church of sweaty palms and shaky knees.

There have been times when I have served communion in a congregation and people refrained from taking it. For some reason, they felt ashamed or embarrassed or guilty, and they did not think they should be receiving from the Lord's Table.

I want to remind you that in that locked room were the same individuals, except for one, Judas, who were with Jesus at the first communion service, the supper in the upper room. The one who denied knowing Jesus, the ones who argued and competed, the ones who fell asleep when Jesus asked them to please stay awake and watch, the ones who got scared and gave up the cause.

And into that room filled with embarrassment, guilt, and shame, through a bolted door, came Jesus. We expect him to say, "Shame on you! You call yourselves a church?" But instead he says, "Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit."

III

I remember on the first Holy Week after 9/11, my husband said, "You know, some people are speculating that Easter morning services may be the object of terrorist attacks." For the first time in my life, I experienced the fear of being in danger for being a Christian. My first thought for my church was "let's lock the doors and secure the building against strangers."

I wondered, "Should we put the service times in the paper and on the website?"

Maybe we should not advertise; just pass the word to those we know.” “We’re going to gather in the sanctuary around 11:00 am, but don’t make a big deal of it. We’ll get inside with everyone we know, and then we’ll shut the doors. ”

But how do you gather in secret on the biggest day of the year? How do you keep quiet the biggest news of all time that our Savior has come back from the dead? Into that room where the disciples were hiding came Jesus, through locked doors, bringing a word of peace. The one who had returned from the dead, the one who brings it all back to life again, who allows no burial, no forgetting, comes right through the door and gives a word of peace. And with his word, embarrassment, fear, guilt, turn into joy.

He blesses. He forgives. And then he commissions: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” You go out into the world, and you share my forgiveness and peace.

Conclusion

There is nowhere you can go where Jesus cannot find you. You can be locked up in a prison cell, praying in total isolation, and Jesus will come to you. You can be locked alone in your bedroom, in pain or grief, and Jesus will find you. You can be in a city of thousands, locked in fear behind the deadbolt of your front door, and Jesus will come through it.

Jesus will come, stand before you, reach out and say to you, as he said to the disciples, the believers and the doubters: “Peace be with you. Receive the Spirit.” He will find you, forgive you, bless you, and commission you to share with others.

The peace of Christ, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that overcomes fear and guilt will say, “Do not doubt but believe.” And you will find yourself confessing, like Thomas: “My Lord and my God.”