

The Doors Were Locked

**A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 19, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

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. (John 20:19-31, NRSV)

The doors were locked.

The events of that horrific Friday were now an un-erasable memory. Their dreams were over. The forces of chaos, of danger – that were always near, but seemed small whenever Jesus was around – now were all they could think about.

All that remained was to stay alive, behind these locked doors, within these solid walls, which shielded them from those who would threaten them.

It had all changed so fast. Jesus had taken them on a grand adventure. From that first day when Jesus stood on the seashore and called to Peter, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people” ... they truly had *lived*. At the beginning, tired and smelling of fish, how could they possibly have known what was in store?

Surely, they could remember back to the beginning, when Jesus stood in that synagogue, read the scroll of Isaiah, and declared that word fulfilled in his listeners' hearing. The home folks almost tossed him off a cliff, but somehow, he passed through the crowd. It seemed to go like that often when Jesus was around.

This Jesus had invited them into contact with lepers, the unclean, and outcasts. He had sat at table with them in the company of tax collectors and prostitutes. He had shown them a way of radical grace and generosity and trust.

They might have remembered these days when their lives were lived out in the open, and they weren't afraid ... Lives not held back by expectations or traditions ... Lives which were wild and precious and free.

But now, all of that must have seemed like a lifetime ago. And so here they are. We know from the passage just before this one that the disciples have been told of the resurrection, but they don't know what to do with what they've been told. It may seem like a strange place for them to be – huddled together behind locked doors after receiving this good news of Jesus' resurrection. But there they are, afraid and hiding from the authorities who had just killed their beloved leader and now might be coming after them.

Sounds sort of familiar doesn't it? We are staying in our homes, not just for our personal safety, but at least as much out of love for our neighbors. But like those first disciples, it may feel like we're trapped, not able to step out and do very much. The knowledge that we must do this for at least some time longer may be a source of real anxiety.

But then, Jesus suddenly appears inside the locked room. The one who had loved them and given himself for them, suddenly appeared before them. His purpose was not to scare them, still less to amaze them with some magic. His purpose was not to condemn them for hiding from people who wanted to kill them. His purpose was to empower them in the midst of their trouble, to give them the courage to hope again.

"Receive the *Holy Spirit*," Jesus said. It was as if he had said, "Receive into yourselves the wild wind of life." In both of the primary original languages of the Bible – Hebrew and Greek – the word we might translate "Spirit" also means "breath" or "wind." In Biblical terms, the spirit is the dynamic life at the heart of all things. It is *movement*. It is the action verb at the center of Reality. It is the drawing out, the luring, the driving, the inspiring, the stirring up, the bringing together at the deep heart of all that is. And so, in the words of a beautiful contemporary hymn, we will sing,

*Spirit, spirit of gentleness,
Blow through the wilderness, calling and free,
Spirit, spirit of restlessness,
Stir me from placidness,
Wind, wind on the sea.*

And that's it: The Spirit is *restless*. The Spirit is *on the move*. The Spirit would not and cannot be contained. Any efforts to hold it back are met with invincible resistance. The Spirit may suffer fools, but it will not suffer locked doors.

When they are so visited, this huddled-together mass of anxious disciples begin a journey towards becoming a band of brothers and sisters whose lives would never be the same ... and it all starts while sealed up inside a room.

And so with us. Even now, the wild winds of the Spirit are blowing into *our* closed, locked rooms and are stirring souls ready to hear and receive. In this self-imposed exile, as we seek to find meaning in our days and look out for others, may we find that we are not alone – that in the power of the Spirit, the living Christ is present with us, standing before us, even behind locked doors, to empower us and give us hope that *new* life awaits us: Not a return to "normal" life as we knew it, because "normal" wasn't working for far too many.

The world needs so much more than "normal." It longs for *new* life – for lives filled with more wisdom and compassion than ever before, directed towards a fuller peace, because they seek a peace with justice. This is my prayer for myself, and for us all.

To the glory of God. Amen.