

“Beyond the Doors Locked for Fear”

Rev. John C. Duff

Reflection for the 2nd Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020

St. Paul's, Hamilton

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

The Gospel: 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.

This Gospel reading comes every year on the Second Sunday of Easter, in the Revised Common Lectionary's three-year cycle. The same words have been spoken year after year. This year, we may speak them aloud ourselves as in our homes we read them from a screen, or from a printed page.

But it is one thing to speak, and another to hear, as Jesus concluded when after telling a parable saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9, 23). He was fully aware that not everyone would comprehend his words in the same way. Some would be deaf to his

meaning, and some would have the insight to discern in their hearts something true for them in the words of Jesus' parable.

Biblical scholarship has recently become more conscious that hearing the Word of God is a transaction between speaker and listener, and that the life setting for this speaking and listening is key to true hearing.

Preachers are called to be conscious of their own life setting as well as that of their hearers as they do the work of interpreting Scripture in a sermon. But there is also work for hearers to do as they listen.

What will be different about our hearing of the Gospel in this Easter season, different, perhaps, from every other Easter season we have known?

Some words will stand out for us that may not have stood out in the same way before.

This year, the words, **“the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear . . .”** may impact us especially. The disciples had turned their house into a fortress, a place of protection against dangers outside. The hatred and brutality that first exposed their master to jeers and death now seemed to be lurking at their very doorstep, so they tried to lock it out. Our homes are becoming places of protection also, in these days of the Covid-19 virus that began as a deadly peril for a few, and far away, now spreads everywhere in the world, and comes all too close to us. A few blocks away from the church where you would usually be gathering today, a residential care home has been invaded by the virus, many have been infected, and too many have died. The tragic story of that place is being repeated in Stoney Creek, Hagersville, and too many other places across Canada where frail and vulnerable people live, where the boundaries between patient and patient, among staff members who care for them, and between the staff and the community where the virus lurks, are far too thin, and resources for responding to the extraordinary danger too sparse.

In response to the admonitions from Public Health, but also to our own sense of imminent danger, we stay at home, and may lock our doors. We may work out ways to get food that don't have to involve us walking through crowded supermarket aisles, and we connect with extended family and friends through electronic means.

This year we come closer to understanding that fear drove disciples to not only lock the door but also, in their own way, to shut out the news. In the verses that precede today's reading in John's Gospel, and in various ways in the other Gospels, the first day of the week brought news that in one way or another grieving disciples huddled in that upper room didn't have ears to hear.

All of the Gospels report women going to the tomb early in the morning impelled by a sense of duty to offer some dignity to Jesus in death that was strong enough to overrule their fear. They report that when the women came to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away, and the tomb empty. A messenger from God tells them, “You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here. He is risen”. Most report that the angel gives the women a mandate to go and tell the disciples what they had witnessed, and that Jesus is going before them to Galilee.

Mark reports the angels' words, and then, in the oldest and best manuscripts of his Gospel, ends his whole book with these words:

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8).

Some commentators believe that a final page in a very old manuscript of the Gospel must have been lost; others believe that Mark, in breaking off his Gospel in this abrupt way, is giving testimony to the reality, well known to his readers, that Mark could not neatly wrap up the end of the story of Jesus, because the story of Jesus was still being written, and is still being written in the lives of readers in every generation empowered by Jesus' living presence.

Luke reports that the Risen one appeared to the women as they returned to tell the disciples,

“But these words seemed to them like an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:11)

Luke reports that one disciple, Peter, ran to the tomb to see for himself.

John also reports the Risen One meeting Mary Magdalene, near the empty tomb, and the conversation with her that enabled her to discern who was really speaking to her.

In John, both Peter, and “the disciple whom Jesus loved”—a phrase widely understood in this Gospel to refer to the John after whom the book is named—run to the tomb. Peter sees, but John “saw, and believed.” (John 20:8).

All of these reports came back to the twelve, but at the end of that first day they were still huddled behind locked doors in grief and fear. That terrifying day, they did not have ears to take in the good news.

Now in the face of the Covid-19 virus, we too are grieving, and we may also be afraid. We grieve the inability to gather in person with extended family, or to meet friends, or go out for the activities in the community that normally fill our days. We may be afraid for ourselves or for family members on the front lines of service, not only in health care, but also in other essential services that bring workers in direct contact with the public. We may be touched too closely by the deaths of friends or family from the deadly virus. We may grieve the inability to grieve as we have always grieved, gathering together and upholding one another with gestures of caring and words of comfort.

Let us recognize ourselves and people around us in the confusion, doubt, denial, grief, and pain that accompanied the breaking in of the best of good news on that first Easter Day.

Our news sources highlight the numbers of cases and deaths in our city, province, and country, and tally the numbers all around the world. We could either let the news play on and let our eyes glaze over by it or turn it off because the very scale of the tragedy, added to our personal sense of loss, just makes us anxious, depressed, or afraid.

Yet always we as Christians are called to look for signs that the Kingdom of God is breaking in as the human story unfolds. Especially in a time such as this, it is important to keep our eyes open and our ears ready to listen for such signs.

If we may go for a walk these days, we should. We may experience people offering us a smile and speaking a word of greeting. Before, as urban people, we may have been accustomed to people walking past us, turning their eyes neither to the left nor to the right, or perhaps to the screens on their devices, and saying nothing. Now we may more commonly experience gestures of mutual recognition of our humanity, and of the boat we are in together. In some neighbourhoods we may see encouraging symbols, like candles or rainbows, in others' front windows.

If we know people whose vocation is health care, we may hear through them of a loving determination to continue to work to bring healing and comfort to patients, fully aware that even with the best precautions, the virus could find its way to them.

Though we sometimes hear of caregivers so overwhelmed they abandon their posts when news comes of a virus outbreak in their place of work, we also hear about others who bravely stay with the residents they have come to love, and of new workers who join their ranks to share in the caregiving.

We see musicians giving concerts outside on the lawn to bring comfort and joy to residents inside places they cannot enter, and husbands and wives drawing as close as they can to one another through the glass of a ground-floor window. We hear of nurses in intensive care units setting up FaceTime conversations between gravely ill patients and family members outside who deeply love them. Online we find a myriad of expressions of love, caring, support, music and also humour, to sustain us through long days of staying inside. We may catch in the news truthful and compassionate words from leaders who show that their first instinct is to keep their people safe, and to support families as daily life goes on.

In such good news we may be able to flesh out meanings for that ancient Easter verse and response:

“The Lord is risen!”

“HE IS RISEN INDEED!”

In the upper room, the Risen One came, on that first Easter evening, in spite of the doors of fear that had been locked against anyone coming at all.

First of all, Jesus said,

“Peace be with you.”

That was a word of comfort and assurance for his grieving friends.

Then he showed them his hands, and his side. In this way he revealed his true identity.

He was not a deceitful leader such as the prophet Jeremiah describes:

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace’, when there is no peace”. (Jeremiah 6:14)

He himself

“was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5)

And through his cross has earned the right to speak peace to us, worried as we are, here and now.

Next there is a word of commissioning:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The resurrection invites us to go, not back to where wrong began, but rather forward to where things can be made new. These words from Jesus call us to be people who reach out, even from our own wounds, to heal the wounds of others around us.

At this particular time in the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic, the next words Jesus speaks as he breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples on that first Easter night may leap out at us:

**“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”**

We are at a point in this pandemic unlike any in living memory when it is tempting to become impatient with the assignment to, as the Nova Scotia premier says,

“Stay the blazes home!”

We may let go of our solidarity in engaging the challenges of the present and be tempted to look back, dissect the words and actions of past months, and blame someone—politicians, scientists, officials, or journalists--for letting this powerful, deadly, unpredictable but amoral virus get to our doorstep.

The reality is that none of the actors in this terrible drama has acted perfectly. Many have done the best they knew how to do, and most are learning from experience with this particular monster, how to do what might help next.

For some the reach of blame may be much closer to our own homes. We may take on guilt for not summoning strength to care for aging parents at home. We may feel guilty for staying at home as we’ve been told while others are taking risks to serve us or our loved ones. We might blame other family members for not picking up their share of a burden, or castigate people clustering close together in parks for ignoring the distancing that could keep the disease from spreading.

Now is a time, I believe, for us in the power of the Risen One to forgive ourselves, first of all, so that at the end of the day even if our epitaph does not read,

“I did everything right”,

it may be said of whatever we tried to do, as was spoken of the woman who anointed Jesus before his death,

“She has done what she could.” (Mark 14:8)

And then we are called to offer the forgiveness Jesus sends us out to offer, so that those around us at whom we might easily have pointed the finger of blame, and leaders whose past decisions may have worsened the wounds inflicted by a deadly virus, might with us be enabled to become agents of healing and life.

Let us, in this time, make the prayer of St. Francis our own:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;*

*O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

AMEN.