

## **HAVE YOU SEEN THE RISEN CHRIST?**

**JOHN 20:19-31**

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This Easter season we have been reading from Mark and the gospel of John. You may have noticed that John's Gospel ends in a series of three resurrection stories. The part of the story I would like for us to take closer look at this morning has to do with the fact that the disciples were locked behind closed doors. They were still trying to get a grasp on the idea of a risen Christ.

The opening verse of today's text sets the tone. The disciples are hiding behind locked doors and we are told that they are locked in because of "*fear.*" You remember that problem of the disciples when Mark ended his gospel with the story of the women going to the tomb, being told by the young man that the Christ was not there he was risen and told them to go and tell the others but they fled in fear and with so much fear they did not get around, in Mark's gospel to telling the others.

The message that I hope you will hear today is contained in two points: 1) The disciples of Jesus continue to react to his crucifixion with fear, cowering behind locked doors; and 2) Jesus seeks out those fearful disciples right after his resurrection. He comes to them, appears to them and empowers them to do his work.

How many of us after hearing of some crimes in our community remember to lock our doors when before we were not so diligent about it. If we hear noises outside we run to lock the doors. We become overwhelmed by fear of the possibility might happen to us. Often we limit where we will go by our fear of the environment.

A number of years ago I served a parish in the metro east area of St. Louis. And it was not uncommon for me to make trips into East St. Louis, which was even at that time definitely a city in decline. Some of those calls would be at night in places of the town I was not all that familiar with and were the least desirable places to live.

Frankly, it was not something I looked forward to. The buildings were dark and uninviting. But what I remember the most and what I like the least was that when I stood before the apartment door and knocked on the door, there would be a voice from within who would call out, "*Who is it?*"

I would announce myself as "*Rev. Annable, I talked with you on the phone earlier.*" And then the clicking would begin. I could hear first one lock unlock; then the chain; then the deadbolt; then the other lock; and finally, a fumbling with the doorknob. This "*click, click, click*" sometimes seemed to me a rebuke of my efforts to visit. Here I was, risking life and limb, to come over and visit in a none-too-appealing situation at their request and I was met by locks to keep me out.

(But, I must hasten to say that once the locks were unlocked, and the door was open, I was always given a warm greeting. And I was always glad I went after the visit.) Because I know the locks were designed to keep out the folks who might do them harm—but I could not help thinking that they were there to keep me out as well. (Think about that as we think of the disciples locked in that room that day John talks about.)

I heard on TV one day about a man who was telling about how his "*security business*" had skyrocketed

after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. That seemed rather strange to me because this man's security business was limited to locks, burglar alarms, things like that—not ways to keep terrorists from blowing up buildings, cars, etc. But he said, *"For some reason, after September 11, everybody needed to go out and buy a better set of locks, a better set of security alarms."* Of course, none of this offers any protection in the least from a terrorist. But those terrorists put us in a mood where we desired security above all else.

While still in Cahokia pastoring, the trustees decided to install a new set of deadbolt locks on the church, reacting to what was going on near the church. The police chief, a member of my church said to me, *"Preacher, unfortunately those locks are mainly for you, not a potential thief. Any serious thief has got lots of ways to get around those locks. If it makes you feel better, fine."* And they did make me feel better until he said what he said!

And it turned out that he was right. Sometime after our new locks were installed a young man broke into the building by going around the locks and breaking some sturdy stain glassed windows and while inside set the church on fire. I watched helplessly as it burn to the ground.

But may I suggest for our consideration this morning that locks come in all shapes and sizes and are not found just in the hardware store. It is quite natural when you have suffered some trauma in life, when you have been violated by some injustice in life, to lock yourself away.

A teacher at an inner-city school said her greatest challenge was, day after day, looking into the eyes of her high school students and seeing students who had simply shut down. They had failed so often, had experienced too many times the door slamming in their faces, that they had withdrawn; they had locked the door and thrown away the key, so to speak.

Her comment was: *"My whole teaching is involved in desperately searching for some key that can unlock that mind and give me some entrance into their souls,"* she said.

Now I've got all of this on my mind because of this Sunday's scripture. Here, on the Second Sunday of Easter, our Gospel tells us about a group of people who are cowering behind a locked door. But this isn't just any group of people—it's the disciples of Jesus. It is night, a dangerous time in nearly any city, but the city of Jerusalem, after the weekend of terrible violence worked against Jesus, his disciples have lots of reasons to be fearful.

As a Christian—a person of faith—in our day and time I can identify with that sort of fear. There are plenty of people in the world who do not share my Christian commitment. They do not see the world as I see it. In fact, they think that my Christian view of the world is downright silly. And some of them say so. It would be easier for me to stay in my home behind closed doors. Just wait for those who believe like I do to show up. Stay with those who share my suppositions—that would be the easiest way. Click, click, click.

Which brings us back to the Gospel for today? It is no small matter that those who have closed the door and locked the locks are Jesus' own disciples. This is not a story about all the ways the world locks its doors against the claims of the Christian faith. This is a story about the way that those of us who are Christians lock our doors. And in locking our doors out of fear of the world and what it might do to us, the irony is we have locked our doors to Jesus, and what He might do to us. The irony of the Gospel today is that it was not the soldiers of Caesar who were trying to get to the disciples, it was not their critics among their friends and family who were attempting to get the disciples in order to mock them—it was *Jesus* who was trying to get to

them in order to bless them; in order to give them peace; in order to forgive them and empower them.

The Good News I would announce today is that our securely locked doors are not a problem for Jesus. That is the good news of Easter. Just as death could not hold him in the tomb, so our various locks cannot keep him from getting to us.

Several years ago, Ernest T. Campbell, then minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, published a book of sermons entitled Locked In A Room With Open Doors. He had borrowed the title from a chapter in Hans Sachs' book, Masks of Love and Life. In the book Sachs describes an interchange between two brothers, one wanting to break the other's absolute dread of open doors with the threat, "One day I will lock you up in a room with all of the doors open"

"Locked in a room with open doors", this is a challenging image. What is it that keeps people locked in spaces when they can be free? Why would someone want to place themselves in that position? Fear is the biggest reason. The disciples locked themselves in the house for fear. They were afraid of what those who had engineered the crucifixion of Jesus might do to them. They were also afraid of the news they were beginning to take in, that Jesus was not dead. They wanted to believe what Mary had told them, but it was impossible. You know the old saying that there are only two things certain in our world, death and taxes. If death is no longer certain, everything is up for grabs. They were filled with fear. They did not want to go out into this uncertain world. Resurrection changes everything, and change is disturbing. Sometimes we would rather lock ourselves away from it and pretend nothing has changed even though everything has.

But this Jesus gets through the locked doors. He shows his wounds and scars from the cross to them. He says to those who may be fearful of the possibility of his retribution against them, "peace be with you."

There is thus a traditional irony here. The doors have not only been locked against the possibility of intrusions by the governmental authorities or locked against the unwanted mocking of family and friends, the doors have been locked (albeit unintentionally) against the intrusions of the risen Christ. However, the risen Christ will not be locked by death in the tomb, nor will he be locked away from his people, the church.

Isn't it often the case that when we begin to shut each other out we also find ourselves shutting out our Lord?

I expect that all of our attempts to lock Jesus out and to secure ourselves against his incursions are unintended. You see, we didn't know that we were locking him out when we stayed away from church, when we avoided signing up for the Bible study, when we found other things to do rather than pray, when we decided it was someone else's job to teach, to serve. But we were.

We didn't know that we were locking him out when we kept our faith safely tucked away within ourselves, when our religion became something that we practice only in the safe confines behind the closed doors of the church, rather than out in the world where we work and spend so much of our lives. But we did.

However, in the last part of this sermon I want to make sure I am attempting to be faithful to this Gospel text, not with an exhortation for you to unlock your door, to throw wide the portals of your heart, to let Jesus into your life. No, my sermon ends with a promise. Here is the good news. Just as the risen Christ was not stumped by the locked doors behind which the disciples cowered, so I promise you that the risen Christ will not be deterred by any locks that you have put on your doors. Our God is wonderfully resourceful, imaginative, persistent, and determined to have us. Even in our lost-ness, even in our betrayal, the first thing

he does at Easter is to come out to find us—not to condemn us but to save us—to forgive us.

I believe even now, even in this sermon, in this service, here at this church, and as we go forth in our daily lives, he is coming out to get us. There is no sure defense against Jesus. There is no way to secure ourselves against his intrusions. He is coming. There is no locksmith that can make us safe from the intrusion of the Spirit of Christ that comes constantly to claim us and redeem us.

Jesus says to the disciples huddled in that house in Jerusalem, *“As the Father has sent me, so send I you,”* which, paraphrased, sounds something like *“Get out of here and do what you have been empowered to do.”*

The sermon title asks the question, “Have you seen the risen Christ?” We are so often like Thomas who says unless I see the scars, the nail pierced hands I will not believe. He needed to see it with his own eyes before he would believe.

The Charlie Brown cartoon had this one story of Charlie Brown bragging to Lucy that he all A’s on his report card and she says the same thing. “Unless I see the report card with my own eyes I will not believe.”

Just as Jesus provided what Thomas needed to believe, he continues to do that today for us. He knew there would be the day when others, like us, would have to believe the unbelievable and so he gave us the Church. It is through the church that I have seen the risen Christ over and over again. What eventually brought many to faith was what they saw the church being and doing. There was a member of First United Methodist here whose wife had died and although he did not know me because he was not a member of the church he called to ask if I would be willing to provide the memorial service for his wife. I went to his home and we talked about his life with his wife and I began to work on a message of hope and comfort and then offered the church and our people to him to provide a meal following for his family. That man saw the risen Christ in acts of the love of a church and believed and learned how to run the commercial dish washer in or kitchen and insisted on washing dishes for all our funeral meals.

When we are willing to allow Him the Risen Christ will find ways to gain entrance through our locked doors.

Again, our message for this week, as last week, is Jesus Christ is risen! And he is the grand locksmith. We have been given a mission, by this Christ, to leave the security of our locked doors and go and tell and show others that He is risen indeed!!