

I imagine most of us are vigilant about ensuring the doors to our homes are locked when we are away, and perhaps we even keep the doors locked when we are home. One way in which people often describe what it was like living in the ‘good old days,’ is by saying “Back then, we did not need to lock our doors. Our communities were so safe and most people so trustworthy that we could leave our homes unlocked and not worry about thieves and intruders entering uninvited.”

Certainly, that is the story of my youth. When I was growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s our house was always left unlocked during the day when my parents were away at their jobs and we kids were at school. The only time during the week I can ever recall the doors to our house being locked was for the couple of hours on Sunday mornings when we left for church. As a youngster, my parents’ practice of locking the house only on Sunday mornings struck me as odd. Perhaps my thinking back then was even the thieves were sufficiently honorable not to rob anyone on Sundays.

But that was then, and this is now, and much has changed. Today we lock up our homes, switch on the security systems, and hope for the best.

That is a change from the past, but something that has not changed is the practice each year on this Sunday, the first Sunday following Easter, of hearing in church the same reading from John’s gospel. It is a terrific piece of scripture. As the passage begins, it is the evening of Easter day, and the disciples are gathered in secret behind locked doors. Jesus recently had been charged with and executed for sedition, and his followers feared that they too might be accused and suffer a similar horrible fate,

Earlier that day, after visiting the empty tomb where Jesus had been placed following his crucifixion, Mary Magdalene had announced to the disciples the remarkable news that “I have seen the Lord.” But the disciples did not believe Mary’s report. How could anyone believe such a nonsensical tale about a body being resurrected from the dead, the stone door to the tomb rolled away, and Jesus alive again? This was beyond the ability of the disciples to comprehend, and who can blame them?

Reading on in the story, we learn that Jesus, who by that point no longer was restricted by physical limitations, suddenly appeared in the same locked room in which the disciples were hiding out and he says to them, “Peace be with you.” Jesus then shows them, as proof of his resurrection, the wounds on his hands and side that he suffered while being crucified. Since the disciples won’t accept Mary Magdalene’s word as truth, Jesus presents the disciples with his body as physical proof of his resurrected reality.

For unexplained reasons, one of the disciples, Thomas, had not been present in the locked room on that occasion. When sometime later the other disciples tell Thomas that Jesus had appeared to them, Thomas is not persuaded. He questions their claim. He doubts. And from that day to this, we refer to a person who is skeptical and refuses to believe something without proof, as a ‘doubting Thomas.’

Thomas says that he will need to see for himself the physical proof of Jesus’ wounds before believing in the resurrection. Therefore, when Jesus appeared among the disciples for a second time one week later, he offered Thomas both the peace of Christ and the proof he had sought. Only then does Thomas believe. To which Jesus replies, sounding less than impressed by Thomas’s reluctance to accept the other disciples’ assurances of the resurrection, “Have you believed, Thomas, because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

And therein is the standard that Jesus has set for you and me: to believe in that which we cannot ever see or prove. To believe in the resurrected Christ. How do you do that?

Let's think for a moment about those disciples who had taken refuge behind locked doors that first Easter evening. Let's try to understand their motivation and see if it relates at all to how we think and act. Would you agree that often the only thing harder than suffering is the fear of suffering? Usually when we experience suffering of any sort, we can deal with it if we can name it, identify it, and mobilize whatever resources we possess to, if not necessarily overcome the suffering, then at least to endure it. Do you believe that is true?

But what cure is there for the dread of suffering, the fear of suffering we anticipate undergoing but has not yet appeared? To dread suffering gnaws at our soul. It does not lead anywhere. It is wasted, uncreative energy. The fear of suffering can immobilize us between an intolerable present and an even more dismal imagined future.

In other words, the fear of suffering keeps us closeted behind locked doors. That was literally the case for the disciples, that first Easter evening. Paralyzed with fear, they dread the suffering that they believe awaits them. Their imaginations run wild, offering up the worst possible scenarios. Will they be caught and crucified like Jesus? Where is Pilate and what is he planning? Does Caiaphas, the high priest who demanded Jesus' death want the same punishment for them? When will the Roman legionnaires break down the door and haul them off to prison?

And what about Mary Magdalene's bizarre report that Jesus was no longer in his tomb? Do the disciples fear that the 'ghost' of Jesus will come and haunt them? Possibly they are afraid of a Messiah who might want to settle scores with a bunch of cowardly disciples who had run off in his hour of greatest need and quite literally left him hanging.

Cowering behind their locked door, the disciples must have been a tormented mess of fear and remorse: after all, having chosen to follow Jesus they had loved and lost, and probably concluded that it was worse than never having loved at all. Why, they might have wondered, had they followed Jesus so impetuously in the first place? Why had the 'kingdom not come' in the way they had hoped for? How had they been so gullible? Why on earth had they left their families to follow Jesus? Why had they walked away from good jobs and businesses? Why had they left lifelong friends? For this? To end up huddled together in a locked room of faithless fugitives.

Theirs was a locked room filled with regret. Filled with remorse. Filled with discontent. Filled with failure and fear. A room filled with self-pity. It is a room that any one of us might find ourselves occupying from time to time, based upon the sorts of twists and turns that life can toss at us. I think it is a room that all of us know something about because all of us have at different points in our lives spent some time inside of it.

Living behind our locked doors can of course instill within us feelings of safety and security. But think about our imaginary locked doors, by which I mean those attitudes and beliefs and feelings and fears and suspicions that all of us possess to some extent and that restrict us from living fully and completely and peacefully in the way God created us to live.

We all have our personal locks that constrain us: things like fear and doubt and anger and resentments, things like our own personal history, our own wounds, our own self-righteousness, and pride, and, of course, our own sin. Christian teachings are intended to build us up and never to knock us down, but Christian teachings also reveal that being fully human involves honestly recognizing that none of us are perfect and all of us have parts of our being that are incomplete, perhaps even broken, and in need of divine mending.

I like the illustration that says we are created with a hole in our souls, a hole in the shape of a cross, and we will never be complete as human beings until that hole is filled with the one thing that fits it. We can never fully fix that emptiness on our own. As much as we might try to fill that hole by relying on another person, or participating in some pastime or program, or indulging in some kind of substance, or buying some new thing that on the

surface makes us feel comfortable and happy or numb and pain-free, none of those alternatives will ever work completely and for the long haul. That cross-shaped hole in our soul can only be filled by the presence of the resurrected Christ in our lives. Easter is our reminder that God comes through the locked doors of our lives and offers us peace. God gives us love and he offers us the possibility of faith and of new life. And it is all a gift—slid under our locked doors.

Finally, how do we know it is a gift? Just look at today's story. We see that the disciples did not do anything noble, heroic, or even mildly admirable to warrant Jesus extending to them his gift of peace following his resurrection. The last things the disciples had shown the condemned Jesus were their backs as they ran away to protect themselves. The last words from Peter, the so-called 'Rock', were three denials that he even knew Jesus. After that, the disciples just hid. That is all they did. They cowered behind a locked door, paralyzed by their fear of suffering. But Jesus passes through the locked door, and he offers them his peace. Even during the week that followed that first appearance, the disciples have kept the door locked and failed even to convert Thomas to a belief in the resurrected Christ that they have witnessed.

Nevertheless, Jesus the Christ comes to them a second time, without conditions, without demands, without recriminations, and without rancor. Even though the door is locked. Even though the disciples still have not done a single thing worth writing home about. Still, the Lord comes to them.

It is a gift, pure and simple. The promise of rest and peace and wholeness and healing that each person needs is offered, for free, by God to anyone who is open to receiving it by taking to heart for themselves the words that Jesus spoke to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

It is a gift. Even when we do nothing, God does everything for us. It is a gift. **Amen.**

**2 Easter**

**24 April 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**