

Sermon John 20:19-31 Second Sunday of Easter April 3, 2016

Last on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the authorities, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then He showed them His hands and side. The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated His greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent Me, I send you." Then He took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," He said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master." But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in His hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in His side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, His disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then He focused His attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine My hands. Take your hand and stick it in My side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe." Thomas said, "My Master! My God!" Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing." Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way He personally revealed it."

Last Tuesday morning I walked in here and all the balloons were on the floor... all those "Alleluia" balloons we'd released on Easter that had shot upwards to the ceiling... were lying limp on the floor. In the Luke's gospel story of Easter morning several women had gone to the tomb, and seen the stone rolled away, and angels spoke to them. In John's gospel the risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene, and He spoke to her. We've heard both of these Easter stories recently, one at a memorial service and one last Sunday. In all four gospels the women were first to hear the good news and the eleven disciples (presumably those who were closest to Jesus and knew Him best) refused to accept it.

In today's gospel the disciples have locked themselves behind closed doors out of fear. Fear is itself a locked door. I know this because when I'm afraid I can't do much and my whole being seems to go into "lockdown." Lockdown is what happens in times of crisis to prevent people from escaping or from coming in. My friend Katie recently posted on Facebook she couldn't volunteer in her 5 year old's class that day because the school was practicing "lockdown" in a case a gunman came on campus. Katie was beside herself that her 5 year old was having to practice "lockdown" (which is actually a prison term) in case someone with a gun came onto her son's elementary school campus.

When you're afraid and feel threatened your natural and God-given response is to hide, to protect yourself with "flight or flight," or "duck and cover," or "lockdown." The disciples were on lockdown because they were so full of fear. Crucifixion as a capital punishment was meant to put the fear-of-God into criminals and dissidents. It was a humiliating public exhibition and excruciatingly painful way to die. Everyone who'd

followed Jesus - His closest disciples - had left Him when He was arrested, for fear of guilt-by-association, for fear of suffering the same death.

This story is called “doubting Thomas” as if the other disciples didn’t have doubt. But all the disciples heard the women say that they’d seen the Risen Christ, or that angels had confirmed the resurrection... and none of the disciples believed it. Thomas wasn’t any more doubting than the disciples were, that Easter happened and that the rules of life and death had changed. Thomas wasn’t any more doubting than they were... or than we are... that Easter has happened and that it changed the world.

Today is the second Sunday of Easter and the “Alleluia” balloons have fallen down. I read on Tuesday afternoons with Corbin Maxwell, and last week before we started our work, we came into the sanctuary with scissors and popped the balloons... and there was almost no “pop” left in them. Today we find the disciples in lockdown, full of fear. It’s almost as if Easter hadn’t happened. This is another gospel story about faith and mystery, and it’s about fear, which is what I think speaks most loudly on this second Sunday of Easter. Easter is obviously a day, and less obviously a season of the church year, and even less obvious and more difficult to believe... Easter is an attitude. Jesus’ friends - those who saw Him, or who spoke with angels about Him, or who were told about His resurrection - reacted with faith and doubt. Mature believers know that faith and doubt aren’t opposites like rocks and bananas. Doubt and faith are siblings. They’re related to each other, they know each other well, and they teach and influence each other. But it’s hard to remember that faith and doubt are related when you’re in lockdown. It’s hard to have an Easter attitude when you’re full of fear.

Easter Sunday is a hard day following the anguish of Palm Sunday and Holy Week. It’s hard to change gears so quickly even though we do it every year. Year after year, Easter follows Holy Week. But what follows Easter? For the disciples it was fear. Fear followed Easter... because fear was easier than believing that God had overturned the grave, raised Jesus from the tomb, and declared victory over hell and sin and death. What follows Easter is new life, for Jesus, and for all of us... if we can let go of fear and disbelief.

I know fear well because I lived a lot of my childhood in lockdown. Fear can be the best response in a volatile household... but fear can fill you up like helium in a balloon until there’s no room for a breath of faith, and you have to make a choice: Fear? Or faith?

Twice in this story Jesus appeared to the disciples who were in lockdown because of fear. The doors were locked because they were so afraid of what might be waiting for them or who might be looking for them. But Jesus came in. He didn’t allow the locked doors to keep Him out, and when He came into their midst, Jesus breathed into them. Does that ring a bell with you that God breathed into someone? It’s from Genesis; when God created humanity out of the dust of the earth (the name Adam means “ground”) God breathed life into the nostrils of the human.

The disciples were locked in, and breathless with fear. Fear makes you involuntarily hold your breath. Yoga and meditation and prayer are all recommended ways of learning to breathing deeply, breathing fear away, breathing peace.

Jesus appeared to His disciples, His friends, the very ones who’d abandoned and betrayed Him, and He breathed peace into them; He breathed the Holy Spirit into them. With that same breath Jesus told them (these men and women who’d deserted

and denied Him) to forgive sin, to let it go, to be at peace. Jesus told the disciples to release their fear, to release the wrong-doing of others, and to be present to the love and power of God in the Holy Spirit; to be present to faith rather than be filled with fear.

I think the way to give up fear (not all at once like a magic elixir but as a practice) is to have faith that Easter happened, and that Easter is still happening. God's salvific work - of life overcoming over death, of love overcoming hate, of forgiveness overcoming bitterness, of faith overcoming fear - is still happening in the world and more importantly it's still happening in you.

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent I like to ask the children to gather up all the "Alleluia" balloons scattered in the sanctuary and to put them away until Easter Sunday. And on Easter I love to watch the "Alleluia" balloons escape the box they're in. During Lent we don't sing "Alleluia" in worship because Lent is a quiet and somber season and "Alleluia" (which means "Praise the Lord!") is too boisterous. But when Easter happens we open the box and "Alleluia" bursts out.

Easter has happened and "Alleluia!" needs to keep bursting out of us. We need faith to believe that what we have always known about life and death, about God's love and power, has changed. Nothing since that first Easter, when God raised Jesus from the dead, is the same. Nothing is the same.

The disciples, hiding behind locked doors, were full of fear and regret, and Jesus appeared to them. Jesus refused to let His followers remain in lockdown, breathless with fear. He breathed His peace into them; He breathed the Holy Spirit into them. Those same fearful and doubting disciples became the church... and countless lives, including mine, including yours, have been changed because their faith in Christ was exercised and became stronger than their fear. They unlocked the doors and went outside, and shared their experiences of Easter, and released the "Alleluias" they'd been holding in.

On this second Sunday of Easter, when we find the disciples in lockdown, and when the hope and joy of Easter already seems a thing of the past, I find this quote from Pope John Paul II to speak to doubting disciples, and all who live in fear. He said, "Do not abandon yourselves to [fear, regret,] despair. For we are the Easter people and hallelujah is our song." So "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" [Christ is risen indeed!] Amen.

And now I invite you to find the Communion liturgy on the insert in the bulletin, and let's celebrate the Lord's Supper.