

+ John 20:19-31 + Discover Peace Behind Locked Doors! + Second Sunday of Easter + 11 April 2010 +

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Our world is far from a peaceful place. Conflict rages between nations, political parties, religious groups, and people of different social status, gender, and culture. Wars and revolutions threaten to engulf nations. Peace plans and accords only end up burying the conflict for a time until it rises up again. Turmoil on every level causes stomachs to churn, sleep to be lost, and fear to reign. Even our homes can be far from peaceful places.

Our hearts are naturally not peaceful places either. The wounds of old guilt still open up fresh and painful, even as temptation makes new sin seem so seductive. Fear over what's going to happen in the days and years ahead churns the stomach even more. Lingering doubt over God's ability to do what he has promised hardens into skepticism. The constant conflict between the Spirit-created New Self that wants to serve God and the sinful nature that hates him leaves us worn out for the struggle.

Oh, for a little peace in this chaotic world and in our messy hearts! Such peace won't be found in the plans of princes and governments and task forces. It won't be found on ESPN or FOXNews or the Hallmark Channel. It won't be found on the highest mountains or in the depths of the sea. Amidst sinful hearts in a sinful world, we will not find true peace, but there is an unexpected place where the Source of true peace can be found. The Apostle John takes us back to that Source this morning and urges us to **DISCOVER PEACE BEHIND LOCKED DOORS**.

The disciples had every reason to be afraid. Their windows were locked and the door barred. They waited for the inevitable. Every knock, every crunch of gravel outside raised the tension in their already quaking hearts. Their teacher, Jesus, had been condemned by the Jewish Council for claiming to be God. He had been crucified because the will of the mob was stronger than the will of the Roman governor. In fact, they figured they would end up following Jesus down the path to execution. They were afraid.

So often we New Testament Christians look back on those fearful disciples and shake our heads at their foolishness. "They should've known better. After all, Jesus did tell them time and again that he would suffer at the hands of his enemies, be crucified, die, and rise again on the third day. How could they forget Jesus' promises?" At times, we might even dare to think we would never, ever be like those fearful disciples.

...But then you get a phone call from the doctor's office about a recent blood test. Your boss asks you to come into his office. You get a phone call from the police or a hospital. The deployment schedule comes out earlier than expected. Bad news pours in from your television, computer, or radio. A simple misunderstanding blows up into a big argument or a church controversy. Suddenly there you are behind locked doors with the disciples—fearful, tense, worried, stressed out, and uncertain of the future.

There was peace to be found, however, behind those locked doors. All that first Easter the disciples received report after report after report of strange goings-on. The women had come back reporting Jesus' tomb was empty, speaking of angels and **"He has risen"** and clutching Jesus' feet. Of course, no one believed them. Peter and John went out to investigate and reported an empty tomb. Later Mary Magdalene breathlessly came back reporting she had seen the Lord outside the tomb. No one believed her. That afternoon Peter himself reported seeing the Lord. As evening began to fall, two others found themselves back in Jerusalem after they had spent the day traveling to little Emmaus with a companion who was really Jesus. In spite of all those reports, they still hid behind locked doors while their hearts remained imprisoned by fear and uncertainty and worry.

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'" Luke tells us, **"They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost."** That's no surprise considering they were seeing someone who had clearly died three days before. They were frightened, but notice how Jesus appeared amongst them. He didn't simply walk in the door. He didn't blow them away with an awesome display of glory. No, he appeared among them as if he had been there all the time. The first words from his mouth were words of peace, words meant to take their fears away. Jesus asked them, **"Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."** Jesus showed them his hands and feet and side. They reached out and touched him. Soon their overwhelming fear was overwhelmed with joy, so much that Jesus had to tell them again, **"Peace be with you!"** Their joy and amazement were so great they still weren't sure, so Jesus ate a piece of broiled fish. Jesus was alive! Their fears melted away in the presence of their loving, living Savior.

In the meantime, Jesus reminded his disciples how he had fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament. He began to prepare them to proclaim the peace they discovered behind locked doors. **"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."** Jesus breathed on them and said, **"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."** Jesus was giving a gift to his disciples and the

entire Church. He gave them the key to unlock those doors of guilt and fear and uncertainty and worry with his forgiveness. They were going to proclaim their joy and open the kingdom of heaven for countless souls.

Do we not find that same peace in Christ behind those locked doors? The Christ who appeared to those fearful disciples is the same Christ who comes to you through his Gospel, through your Pastor, and through your fellow believers to open the way to heaven. When you're imprisoned by fear or guilt or worry or stress or conflict, there in the living, loving Savior you find peace the world cannot give, peace for your heart, even when you receive troubling news from your doctor, your boss, your teacher, or anyone else in this world. This is not peace that simply covers up the problem for a little longer, but peace that frees your heart and changes your life, peace paid with blood on a cross and guaranteed in an empty tomb, peace with God and one another.

You find that peace in the still visible wounds of your living Savior. You find it in his peace-filled face and peace-giving words, so then listen as he sends you out with the message of his freedom from guilt and fear. Proclaim your joy in Christ and use the keys Christ has given you to open the doors of heaven to lost sinners you know and love, but realize some will have doubts.

Not all of the disciples were present when Jesus made his first appearance behind locked doors. Judas was dead, but Thomas was not around. When he returned, the disciples proclaimed their joy, **"We have seen the Lord!"** Thomas slammed the door in their faces. **"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."** With his skeptical demand for physical proof, Thomas locked down their hearts again with doubt. In fact, their doubt grew to such an extent that they again found themselves behind locked windows and barred doors. Thomas wasn't just doubting here. He was on the verge of unbelief as he verbally rejected the Word of the Lord. His doubts had grown into skepticism. If Jesus himself didn't do something about it soon, Thomas would be lost and could very well take the rest of the disciples with him.

How easily you and I fall into the same trap as poor Thomas, whose heart was imprisoned with doubt and skepticism! How often don't we let doubts linger about God's promises to bless and be with us and then allow them to grow into deep-seated fears and even skepticism because we just can't see God doing that? Perhaps you hear God's promise of free forgiveness for every sin, but think, "There's no way God could forgive that sin." Perhaps you look at the world around you, perhaps even drink a little too often at the fount of bad news, perhaps look back on your life and see all the troubles you've been through or that could be ahead of you, and suddenly God's promise of peace in Christ doesn't seem so reliable. "I have to see it to believe it". In those moments, Satan wants you to doubt God's promises as powerless, to be without peace, and to plunge into the depths of despair.

Amazingly, in his grace, our Lord responded to Thomas' skepticism and his disciples' doubt. The next Sunday, again behind locked doors, **"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'" Thomas' skepticism was put to shame. Jesus really was alive! "My Lord and my God!"** The Holy Spirit burst open the locked doors of his doubting heart, but Jesus wanted his disciples to depend on his Word, not his appearance. **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** Along the same lines, John even adds a little postscript at the end of the account. **"These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."**

When our Lord appeared to Thomas and the disciples that Sunday evening, Jesus was thinking about you and how your heart can be so easily locked behind doubt while you live as a Christian in this skeptical, peaceless world. He was thinking of you when he rescued Thomas and the disciples and blessed you when they doubted, because he knew he would appear to you through his Word and Sacraments. Through those means of grace, you see and receive the benefits of his death and resurrection. You receive life, because by them the Holy Spirit bursts open the locked doors of doubt and skepticism with the peace that comes from Jesus Christ alone.

If that conflict and that need for peace take place in our hearts, surely we must expect it in the hearts of people like us in our families and workplaces, communities and schools. Their hearts are as locked behind fear and doubt and uncertainty and skepticism as ours have been, yet we have the key to eternal life. We have the sure Word of our God to open the gates to heaven.

Our world and our hearts are usually far from peaceful, but behind locked doors, we have discovered peace the world cannot give, peace found only in the loving hands of our living Savior. Through him we have peace with God and with one another. Now it's time to go with that peace and proclaim it with all the unbridled joy that comes with Christ's resurrection victory. We have seen the Lord. With his help, let's help others to see him too! Amen.