

April 19, 2020 – Online/Remote Worship Service
Sermon – Behind Closed Doors

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday,
 we read about how two women discovered
 an unexpectedly empty space:
 the tomb, where Jesus had been buried.
 Guards unconscious, angelic message to share,
 these two courageous, joyous women
 took off to share this good news
 of Christ risen and alive
 with all of Jesus' disciples.

Last week, we turned back and reflected on the empty tomb;
 but this week, let's follow those two women
 as they run to share what they saw and heard.

The disciples, you may remember, had been hiding;
 self-isolating, if you will;
 in grief, in uncertainty, and most of all,
 in fear, that they, too,
 might be imprisoned, punished or killed,
 for Jesus' sake.

Mary Magdalene raced to them with her news:
 I have seen the Lord!
 And she shared everything he
 and the angel had said to her.

The Gospel of John picks up the story of this exciting moment,
 of this world- and life-changing revelation,
 on Easter Sunday evening.
 And having heard Mary describe what had happened,
 we find the disciples...
 ...exactly as they were Easter Sunday morning:
 locked away behind closed doors,
 hidden away together
 in fear
 of the Jewish authorities.
 The good news
 – Christ is risen! –
 has been proclaimed to them by an eye-witness...
 ...and they are still fearful and uncertain.
 How can this be?

Perhaps it is entirely understandable that the disciples,
that all Jesus' friends and followers,
would be afraid of the religious leaders
who pursued Jesus
and put him to death.
It would be quite natural
to fear that the same could happen to them.
Perhaps they thought safety in numbers was best,
and that the protection of a locked door
was vastly preferable to going out.
Despite Mary Magdalene's proclamation to them
that Jesus had appeared to her,
it just wasn't enough
to persuade them
to venture out.

A closed door and staying safely behind it
doesn't necessarily need to be seen as negative.
We know very well these days
that at times closing the door on the world
is good and even necessary.

There are other times, non-pandemic times,
when a closed door is needed, too:
when we are feeling unwell,
recovering from illness or surgery,
or just needing to reflect and take stock,
and we take refuge behind a closed door
that shuts out the world for a time.
Perhaps the disciples were taking stock of things
and recharging their batteries,
bracing themselves to confront
their fearful, dangerous world.

But a door is not a wall;
doors are for closing and opening,
for going through, going out and coming in.

No closed and locked door
can keep Jesus away from those he loves,
and so he seeks them out, right where they are.
And he speaks directly to their fear:
peace be with you.

And then, poor Thomas; he missed it!

We'll never know exactly where Thomas was that Easter Sunday evening;
perhaps he was being his usual brave and bold self,
and had gone out.

Thomas, after all,
when Jesus declared his intention
to return to hostile territory, said:
"Let's go too, so we can all die with Jesus."
Maybe Thomas was the
designated grocery shopper
for the household.

But now it is a week later
– the disciples are still locked away behind closed doors –
and Thomas does not believe them.
When he first came back among them,
the disciples proclaimed the risen Christ to him:
"We have seen the Lord!"

But Thomas is uncertain;
he has doubts and questions,
and he wants to see Jesus for himself:
"Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands
and put my finger on those scars
and my hand in his side, I will not believe."
And now, a week later,
Jesus comes,
speaking directly to Thomas' uncertainty,
his doubts and his questions:
peace be with you.

The most surprising and unexpected part
of this glimpse into the post-resurrection,
Easter world
is that closed
and locked door.

As individuals or families,
we may have experienced

the kind of fear and caution
that would lead to
closed doors or careful movement
in the world before.

But collectively, as a community,
we now understand fear and caution in a new way;
we all of us understand
the value,
the necessity and the frustration,
of a closed door between us and the world.

So that first closed door, only days after Jesus' execution...
...we are able to be more sympathetic
toward the disciples and their desire, their decision,
to stay where it's safe
than we may have been in years past.

It's that week in between;
those seven days between Jesus' first visit with the disciples
and his second visit, when Thomas is there.
The followers of Jesus are still meeting behind closed doors;
still locked away from the world.

This is unexpected.
Christ is risen,
he came to see them,
face to face.
He gifted them with the Holy Spirit,
he commissioned them,
and sent them out,
as the Father sent Jesus himself.

But they are still locked away,
behind their closed door.
Because, it seems,
that even though Jesus is risen,
even though sorrow has been transformed into joy,
their loss into this tremendous gift...
...there are still things to fear.
Christ is risen,
but the world did not become
suddenly, magically perfect;
this is not a fairy tale.

Christ is risen,
 but fear still exists,
 and so do doubt and uncertainty,
 and so do unanswered questions.

When Jesus returns to his friends and followers a second time,
 he does not get angry with them,
 or say he's disappointed in them.
 He doesn't tell them to get over it and get out there,
 and he doesn't dismiss their fears
 and doubts and questions.
 Jesus does not reject them
 or condemn them
 or blame them
 for feeling and acting
 as they do.

Instead, Jesus enters into that locked room full of fear and doubt,
 he seeks them out,
 comes to find them,
 where they are.

Jesus speaks directly to their fears and doubts and uncertainties.
 And he speaks
 – not of blame or disappointment or rejection –
 but of peace.

The peace that Christ is speaking of,
 the peace that the triune God
 – Father, Son and Spirit –
 offers to us,
 is more than peace and quiet
 or the absence of conflict.
 When we talk about Jesus and peace,
 we might leap to one of his names,
 the prince of peace,
 and then immediately make the association with Christmas.
 And from there, we go to quiet, holy, starlit nights...
 ...and we may find that our definition of peace,
 of the peace of Christ,
 is too small.

The peace that Christ offers his followers,
that peace that Christ died to give us,
is not a quiet night
or a life without trouble.
The peace of Christ
is the presence of something better.

In Scripture, peace means wholeness or completeness.
Nothing is missing, and everything is right.
All is well.

One of the basic aspects of life
that Christians recognise as not alright
is the broken relationship
between humanity and God,
between creation and our Creator.
We call it sin, traditionally,
but however we name it,
what it means is
that we are out of
right relationship
with God.

When Christ died on the Cross,
when God the Son bore our sin,
took all that brokenness onto himself,
he who had an unbroken relationship with God the Father,
he acted to restore,
to mend and heal and make whole
our relationship with God.
In his death and resurrection,
Jesus restored peace between us and God.
The peace of Christ is
that wholeness, that rightness,
with God,
and even with one another, too.

Jesus enters into that locked room full of fear and doubt,
and he responds to those fears and that doubt with peace.
And now we know that by offering peace,
Jesus is not just saying calm down or stop worrying.
Jesus is offering something more:

He is offering wholeness,
the deep well-being
that comes from restored,
right relationship with God.

Our world right now requires us
to stay behind closed doors,
as much as we can.
And that is a life-giving,
loving choice for us to make.
But...fear and doubt,
uncertainty and questions
do creep in and join us
behind our closed doors
whether we want them there or not.

The good news for us today is that
no fear or doubt,
no uncertainties, no questions,
no closed and locked door
can keep the risen Christ away
from the people he loves.
Jesus simply wades right in,
and invites us into his peace.
Peace is not found in the absence of trouble,
or in a lack of fear,
or in complete certainty;
peace is found
in the presence of the risen Christ.
And he is risen indeed.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.