

Locked Doors

What comes to mind when you think of a locked door? Do you think of the door on your home, bringing to mind that ritual that has become automatic, the turning to lock the door when you enter or exit? Or maybe you think of that business you ran an errand to, only to pull on the door to find it locked, and the business closed? Or maybe the image of a locked door reminds you of places of confinement, like a prison or detention center, where the doors often clang shut ominously.

There are two basic reasons to lock a door, either to keep someone or something out, or to keep someone or something in. For most of us, we probably identify more with the first option. We lock our doors to keep unwanted visitors from gaining entry, from invading our space. We hide behind locked doors for the security they provide, for that small, safe place where we can unwind, without the worry of danger from the outside world, the unwelcome stranger or threat. It's often how we try to calm our fears. Likewise, when we lock someone in, we are trying to again make ourselves safer. When someone has exhibited behavior that is a danger to others, our societal inclination is to remove them from the public, to eliminate the perceived threat to us, and restrict them in an area with doors that are locked. Again, to help us allay our fears, to make us feel safer.

There's the story of a man who had been visiting a therapist because he has had a fear of monsters living under his bed. The man has been seeing this doctor for months. Every time he would come in the doctor would ask "have you made any

progress?”. Every time the man would say “no”. The man decided to go and see another doctor. When he went back to his first doctor and he asked “have you made any progress?” he said “yes, I am feeling all better now” The doctor asked “what happened”. The man said “I went to another doctor and he cured me in one session”. The doctor asked “What did he tell you?” The man said “he just told me to cut the legs off of my bed”.

While he may have found a way to get rid of his fear, are we ever really successful in that endeavor? Do we ever get around our fear? If fear is something we struggle with, then we’re in good company. As we enter our gospel lesson this morning, we find the disciples huddled together behind locked doors, afraid that the authorities will come after them. Like us, they want to keep danger, and the threatening stranger out. They lock their door so that they can feel safe and secure. But they are still on edge. They’re wondering what it all means, the reports of “Jesus sightings” when they know very well they saw him crucified, and nobody ever comes out of that alive. Yet suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst, and their reaction is to be “startled and terrified.”

Even though the women told them about the empty tomb, that Jesus had risen.

Even though the two from Emmaus told of encountering Jesus on the road.

Even with all that, they are shocked and surprised when Jesus appears, and they respond with fear. Would we have reacted any differently? After all, when confronted with the unknown and unfamiliar, the natural human response is fear.

We respond with fear when we feel we don’t have control of a situation, or we encounter a situation that is outside of our control. Yet Jesus addresses that fear

right off the bat. His first words are “Peace be with you.” As we discussed last week, that phrase implies his desire for their well-being and wholeness, their shalom. He immediately follows that up with asking why they are frightened, and what doubts do they have in their hearts? Jesus understands what it means to be human, he’s been down that road. He had doubts, he struggled with despair on the cross. He knows this is a process for them. So he encourages them to touch him, to feel that he is real, and not just a spirit or a ghost. Then he takes a bigger step and asks for something to eat, to show that he is a real body, capable of eating and digesting food.

In doing all this, he encourages them to move beyond where they are. Yet they still struggle. Even when they realize it’s him in the flesh, they express joy, yet they still wonder how this is possible, they still can’t make sense of it. It doesn’t fit into their understanding of how things should work, it’s not the natural way of things as they’ve experienced it. Again, would we be any different?

We know biology, all of us have at least a basic knowledge of human anatomy and what happens when we die. Decay begins, the brains ceases to function, and the brain cells begin to die rapidly after a few minutes. There’s no coming back from that, right? So Jesus continues to walk them along. He reviews familiar words of scripture and helps them gain a deeper understanding of the prophecy contained in those words. He opens their mind to see that death is not the final word. They are witnesses to something new, something unheard of and completely unconventional. The seeds are planted for their commissioning at Pentecost to witness to the world.

They are made ready for this mission because they have moved past the fear that has kept them prisoners, that has kept them idle behind locked doors. What about us? Behind what locked doors do we keep ourselves? Some doors may be common to most of us, but I'm sure that individually we have locked doors that are unique to each of us as well. For some it can be fears concerning our health, for others it can be our financial security, or loneliness, or loss. Others are played out on a national level such as the fear of terrorism, of our national security. This weekend we witnessed the vain way we try to make ourselves more secure, by responding to violence with more violence. But does that make any of us feel safer or make the world any more peaceful? Or are others using our fear to move us in the direction they desire?

Unfortunately, many people in our world use fear to their advantage, in our governments and politics, in advertising, in parenting, and sadly, even within the church. I have certainly heard many a sermon in my youth scaring me with the fear of "eternal damnation" to get me to keep myself in line. Yet even when we get behind "locked doors," we may feel more secure, but we are still left with our fears, with our mistrust. The very doors we think keep out that which troubles us, actually keeps us in our own prison with those very fears that we are trying to escape.

So how do we escape the prisons of fear we erect for ourselves? How do we get past those fears to be proper witnesses to the hope and joy in the promise of the resurrection?

The first step is to recognize, like the disciples, that change happens at the level of action that contains risk. In other words, if you want to remain completely safe and secure without taking any risks, then you will not effect any meaningful change in your life or the lives of others. If the disciples had stayed in the locked room or returned home to Galilee to hide out and stay safe, nothing would have changed. There would have been no mission work, the Gospel would have died out in the first century.

If they would have stayed where they were at, behind their own locked doors, they would still be captives to their fears and their mistrust of the resurrected Christ. The disciples risked all in following and witnessing to the risen Christ because he had already defeated the ultimate threat, death itself. Death was no longer to be feared because it was no longer the end of the game.

Jesus didn't bring them security, he brought them peace, and hope. Hope for a different future. Hope for a new way of life which would lead to a new world, if they were able to open that locked door and be the change they wished to see, the change that he taught them was possible. And most important of all, that he taught them that he would be with them all along the way, until the end of the age.

I'd like to wrap up today with an interesting little illustration. Some of the early Native Americans had a unique practice of training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, after learning hunting, scouting, and fishing skills, he was put to one final test. He was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then, he had never been away from the security of the family

and tribe. But on this night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of a thick woods, and he was terrified. Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. After what seemed like an eternity, dawn broke and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of a path. Then to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there all night long.

How many times do we feel alone and afraid like that, behind whatever locked door we erect to try to feel secure? Yet we still feel alone and vulnerable, like the boy in the story. But also like him, we have someone close by, to look out for us as well, to make sure we are cared for.

The question is, are we willing to take that test? To give up the false security our locked doors give us, for the peace and hope that the resurrection offers us and the new world through risky change that our discipleship calls us to.

I hope and pray that we can take that first step. Jesus is knocking, will we unlock and open the door? Amen

Hymn – How firm a foundation 567

Benediction

Let us go forth as Resurrection people

People of hope and peace

Witnesses to something new in the world

Makers of change,

7

Willing to risk unlocked doors,

Amen.