

## Sermon – Second Sunday of Easter

### John 20: 19-31

As a gay man I spent more years than I care to remember in the closet. Along with countless LGBTQ+ people the so-called closet was a protective space, a barrier we erected to protect us from discrimination, abuse and ridicule. The term ‘in the closet’ is a euphemism for the harsh reality that coming out was fraught with danger.

The world has become less threatened by gay and lesbian people and marriage equality was a huge step forward in allowing us to form stable relationships, and in many cases have those relationships blessed by the church.

However, of late the conservative forces of this country have turned their hate-filled attention to transgender people. The process of discrimination they adopt follows a familiar pattern.

All of a sudden trans people are considered a threat to others and aspects of society. And because conservatives seem to find pleasure in fighting culture wars they find all sorts of ways to enact legislation that forces, in this case trans people, back inside the closet. Inside these closets life is filled with shame, confusion, fear and self-loathing. All of this causes Psychological damage to vulnerable people, and many take their lives because of it.

The barriers erected either by us or by society are often so large and impenetrable that they force people live in fear, fear that if they dismantle the blocks of the wall then they will be rejected further.

It is so easy for any of us to put people behind locked doors and refuse to give them the key.

Racism is another example of the privileged classes erecting barriers to keep others from experiencing the fullness and freedoms God intended for all people.

The assault on voting rights across the country is a classic example of institutional racism. A barrier erected to limit people’s rights and hold them in fear, all designed to benefit another group.

Today’s gospel reading from John carries a message about the dangers of fear and living in locked rooms.

This reading is the same gospel passage we hear every year on the second Sunday of Easter. When a passage of scripture is repeated in our lectionary year after year it means that it conveys an essential truth that we need to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest,” as Thomas Cranmer, the primary author of the Book of Common Prayer, wrote in one of his prayers.

The account of the risen Lord appearing to the disciples is important for us to understand. The passage is dramatic in its description of Jesus appearing before the disciples who have locked themselves into a house, fearing that the authorities would come after them, maybe accusing them of stealing the body of Jesus.

The scene described is full of drama and wonder as Jesus appears without coming through the door. It is no wonder that this scene has been painted many times.

The focus of most paintings is Thomas, and his need to physically touch the wounds of Jesus so as to overcome his doubt that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. You might recall the Caravaggio painting I showed you last year called 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas', with its vivid depiction of Thomas placing his finger into the open wound on Jesus' torso.

What the artists miss, and maybe it's hard to capture in art, is the fear that has enveloped the followers of Jesus as they lock themselves away to protect themselves from threats and harm.

The earlier appearance of Jesus in the locked house offers just a dynamic image as the later one with Thomas. These words might conjure up for you images in your mind about how the disciples reacted to before and then after this encounter with Jesus.

The disciples are initially fearful. Then Jesus appears without warning with an appearance that they don't immediately recognize.

It is only when Jesus speaks and then shows them his wounds do they recognize him.

The wounds inflicted on Jesus on the hard wood of the cross remained on his new risen body to provide the evidence that he indeed was the same Jesus that they had known and followed, and then had died at Calvary.

Other accounts of Jesus' resurrection tell us that the risen Jesus was never instantly recognizable to the disciples, nor to Mary, but became known once they engaged with him and began speaking to each other.

When we reflect on this encounter we might understand the apprehension of the disciples as they were confronted with the risen Lord. Had Jesus come back for retribution for what the disciples did, or did not do in the lead up to Jesus' arrest and execution. Had he appeared to berate and belittle them and exacerbate their guilt.

No! For that is what humans do. When Jesus appeared to them, instead of anger and loathing, he offered them peace. "Peace be with you," he said. We might imagine how relieved they were to hear this.

For those of us that have lived in the closet out of fear of family and society's rejection, or those who have experienced discrimination because of the color of your skin, we might lament how our lives could have been very different if those that wanted us gone, offered us peace instead of rejection.

The peace that Jesus offered his friends set in motion the cycle of forgiveness and reconciliation that is a core teaching of Jesus, first for the disciples and then for the world. The disciples' future mission was to carry this act of love and forgiveness to the world and to teach it to others. This commission required a lot of courage to unlock the door and tentatively step outside.

Our lives today benefit from the offering of these four words by Jesus in that locked house that night. Peace and forgiveness comes to all of us if we allow ourselves to accept the love of Jesus Christ. When we do we are asked to pay it forward.

Faith in the risen Lord is carried forward on forgiveness and love, and from forgiveness and love comes our faith. Jesus starts this cycle of forgiveness not by commissioning the blameless or the most worthy people, but he commissions those who truly know that they have been forgiven.

After Jesus offers the disciples his peace he does two things that are important for us to learn and digest. The first is that he commissions them to go out from the locked room, into the hostile world, just as Jesus had been born into a hostile world that wanted to kill him, even as a baby. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you,"

Clearly this "peace," pushes the Christian community then and now from behind its closed and locked door, out into the world. And it pushes the disciples through that door into the world where good and evil contend—the one promising the fulfillment that God has intended for the earth, the other threatening the world's destruction.

John's recounting of Jesus' power over sin brings this into focus. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:23). Apostles are sent into mission that involves carrying into the world the Holy Spirit breathed into them, exerting a sanctifying influence on the world caught in the contest between good and evil.

The commission to contend with sin as it afflicts and affects the world is the wedge that holds the door open to the public domain for the church in the present. Otherwise the church might rest content with its prior history of mission whereby it shared the peace of Christ behind the closed door of the personal and private, even as it reached around the world.

But sin that threatens the power of good with the countervailing force of evil operates without deference to the private/public distinction.

The missionary people engendered by this peace and this inbreathed Holy Spirit are sent wherever they are needed —whether in the midst of family illness and distress or in the turmoil of racial and economic injustice.

The missionary people empowered by this peace and this inbreathed Holy Spirit bear the forgiving, transforming love of God into every sphere of human experience.

The church through most of her life has lived behind a closed and locked door, just as this scene in the house portrays. For the earliest Christians, followers of the Way, fear of persecution and suspicion of those who wanted to join them, caused them to confine themselves largely to very private gatherings. It wasn't until the fourth century when Emperor Constantine decreed that Christianity was to be the official religion of the empire that Christians finally felt safe to emerge from their locked houses to go out into the world. With the world being a hostile place it is somewhat understandable that the church has retreated behind closed doors for much of her life.

Walk around this neighborhood during the week and take a look at all the churches here. The vast majority present to the world as closed on most days other than Sunday. It is as if the church remains like a locked closet or a locked house, unable to break free of the fears of our pasts.

I'd like our church to break this bond and to have her doors open every day if we can.

We have all been baptized so we know that the Holy Spirit has been sealed into each one of us. Therefore the Lord expects that we will move from mere followers of Jesus, his disciples, to being those who are sent, his apostles.

As the pandemic eases and we all become vaccinated our fears of infection will subside and we will start to unlock the doors to our houses and come out. We have a calling to be visible in this community as missionaries from this church as well as to be apostles to your families and work colleagues. We need to be known to our community.

Our parish is in transition and we have important choices to make. All parishes move through life cycles, as does any organization. Some parishes thrive whilst others wither on the vine. I don't want this church to wither.

To survive and thrive we have to educate ourselves about how to move the parish into a new phase of growth so that those new to the community around us are allowed to nurture their spirits as yours were nurtured over the past years.

As communities change the parish must be aware of the change that is here and is to come, and must prayerfully determine how it is to respond. Will we determine to stay behind the safety of the closed and locked door and risk withering on the vine, or will we be courageous and faithful and open the doors so that we go out with joy in our hearts. Will we nurture a culture of welcome where the community feels free to enter to give thanks to God, worship with each other and will we grow a community of faith that nurtures the spiritual lives of all of us.

When the doors of this building are open, when our hearts are open to receiving God's people, caring for the lost, welcoming the poor, the rich and everyone in between, then we will be actively taking the Holy Spirit to others, helping them to find peace and joy in knowing the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. We will move from being disciples of Jesus Christ to true apostles.

God calls us to step out of our closets and our locked houses. This is our mission and this is our hope.

As you prayerfully reflect on today's gospel passage and my words, try to understand how you might be still living behind a closed and locked door, whether the door is physical, spiritual or psychological. Jesus rose from the grave to provide the key to all of us to be released from our closets and houses. May we all find the courage to step out from behind the door and help others do the same.

Amen