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John 20: 19-31
"Behind Locked Doors"
April 16, 2023 – 2nd Sunday of Easter
Rocky River Presbyterian Church

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As My God has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

"Behind Locked Doors"

This week I had the joy of starting the training of 43 new seasonal staff who joined the team at Youth Opportunities Unlimited. As this new team was being trained, intake appointment communication was being sent out to 3000 youth. As you can imagine, this has been a busy week.

After receiving her notification, the parent of "Isaiah" called our call center – She called to let us know how happy she was that "Isaiah" was selected to participate in the summer job program because "he" has had a tough year and needed something good. You see, his sister was a victim of a random act of violence and since then "Isaiah" has had a hard time leaving the house, and when he does, he views everyone as a threat. As soon as he gets home, he locks the front door and then every other door he can after he enters a room. His mother is hopeful that this good news will help bring back her baby.

We can see from today's reading that people's need for locks is nothing new.

Every year on the Sunday after Easter we spend time with the disciples to see how they are reacting to the news about Jesus' resurrection. Last week the tomb was empty, and the Mary's ran to tell the disciples all about it. I would have expected to find them on their way to search for Jesus, but here in the Gospel of John we see that isn't the case. Instead of running out to find Jesus, the disciples have gathered in the house and have locked the doors – their fear has caged them.

They have heard the good news from Mary Magdalene, "Christ has risen." Some have seen the empty tomb, but they are hiding out in this room, locked away from the stares and

idle gossip; locked away from crowds who just recently called for their teacher and Lord to be crucified; locked away from the opportunities to live as Christ taught.

Again and again in John's gospel Jesus was teaching these disciples about his imminent departure and about his commandments for them to love one another, to trust in him, to be branches of his vine, to be ready to follow him at all costs. But like us, in times of stress and uncertainty, the disciples fall back into their old habits. Instead of living by Christ's example, they are holed up behind doors that are barricaded against the world they were called to serve.

The disciples are living in their own self-made tomb; unsure of what to do; waiting for what was to come next. To be honest and fair, their fear is understandable. I get it. The city is still full of the same people who called for Jesus' crucifixion and their teacher, their Lord, had died because of those cries.

I imagine they are sitting in a hot, stuffy room thinking about the ridicule their friends and family will give them. These people dropped everything and everyone to follow Jesus, they believed that he was the one who would redeem Israel.

And I imagine in the confines of that room, sitting around a table, they are now contemplating the possibility of having to return home to people who would look at them and say, "Some Messiah! Where is your Lord now?"

The words of Mary Magdalene "Christ has risen," are probably still echoing in their consciousness, along with the unwelcome thought, "but if he has risen why have we not seen him?"

The more I think about it, the more unsettlingly familiar that locked door becomes. How many times have I hidden behind some sort of "locked door" out of fear of what people might think or because I was unsure what I should do?

How many times have we closed doors on certain conversations because we did not want to have to explain our beliefs or because we did not want others to think we are THOSE kind of Christians – the kind who preach, very loudly, a very different message than we do?

How many times have we locked away parts of ourselves because we did not think they were worthy? Most of us present carefully prepared facades, but Garrison Keillor reminds us that, "We always have a backstage view of ourselvesi."

We let others see only the neatly arranged welcome mat and tidy yard, but behind our locked doors we can see all of our STUFF lying around: our old failures, our hurts, our guilt and our shame. So when something happens and our façade feels rather brittle we sit in our rooms, huddled behind yet another locked door trying to control who can get close to us.

Will Willimon says that "it is no small matter that those who have closed the door and locked the locks are Jesus' own disciples. This is not a story about all the ways the world locks its doors against the claims of the Christian faith. This is a story about the way those of us who are Christians lock our doors. And in locking our doors out of fear of the world and what it might do to us we lock our doors against Jesus and what he might doii."

Thankfully we see in our text that the Living Christ will not be locked away from us. If death, the silence of the tomb, and that heavy stone could not lock him in, then we can safely assume that the locks we hide behind will not be much of a problem for the one who makes a way out of no way. But we can rest assured that Christ does not break into our presence to scold or rebuke us. For today's text, and all the stories of our faith and life, tell

us that Christ comes into these charged, emotionally vulnerable situations offering peace. "...Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you" (20:19).

While we shy away or get annoyed by stares and probing questions we see here that Christ invites the disciples to draw close and if needed to touch his hands and side. He greets our fear, disbelief, and uncertain feelings with loving acceptance and he invites our questions for he wants us to feel his risen presence in our midst.

But he does not just come and stand among them. He speaks words of peace and then reminds them that they are called to more than this tiny room can offer. "Peace be with you. As my God has sent me, so I send you." (20:21)

While the rooms we lock ourselves in offer a twisted sense of comfort and control, Jesus breaks in to remind us that we are called to so much more; we are to follow his example. Which is a path filled with the breath of life and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be engaged in the work of forgiveness in all we do and say.

This work throws open the doors of our hearts and embraces the hurts we carry there; it throws open the trunks of shame we have hidden in the back corners of our mind offering Christ's peace so that we might go out into the world to proclaim the good news of Christ's presence in our midst and to forgive and offer peace as we have been forgiven.

Thus the story of the resurrection, begun when the stone was removed from the tomb, is not complete until it is echoed and reechoed in the lives of all God's children, freeing us from the rooms in which we hide to be engaged in God's work of reconciliation. Let us throw open the doors and be engaged. Let us throw open the doors so that we might forgive and offer peace to those who seek Christ's presence.

Christ is Risen – Alleluia! Amen!

ⁱ Christian Century, April 6, 2004 "Crying shame" by M. Craig Barnes Sunday, April 18 John 20:19-31

ⁱⁱ Pulpit Resource, Vol. 35, No. 2, Year C; April 15, 2007. Page 19