

Locked Doors
John 20:19-31
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As I was preparing a sermon on the story of Doubting Thomas, and the blessedness of believing over seeing, someone came to the church office and reminded me of the night I was candidating here for the position of Pastor at URCC. The reality was if I was to become your next pastor, it was, as it were, a night of seeing the candidate and also of believing whether the candidate has what it takes to lead this congregation in the future. Well, on this particular evening, June 24, 2009, it was a moment of truth. Everything was hanging in the balance. If there were any doubting Thomas' in the congregation, the liturgy I lead, the sermon I preached and the answers I gave to the questions at the social hour were the last opportunities to bring belief to any doubters in the congregation. (How many of you were here when that happened. "Now that you have seen me, do you believe that I am called of God and Christ's church to be your new pastor? To look back on that day with contemporary eyes, it was ironic that you called me at all with the little information you had. You did not have the benefit of seeing me minister over a lengthy period of time no more than Thomas had the benefit to see the actual resurrection. However, you believed. The rest is history. Believing is seeing.

Last Friday, the world got to witness the wedding vows of Prince William and Catherine Middleton. It was a wonderful Christian wedding. As they stood before the priest, it was a moment of truth with no guarantees as it was for Thomas 2000 years ago and for you and me only 1 ½ ago. The moment of truth was that William and Catherine had to believe in the concept of marriage long before they called Westminster Abbey to set a date, find a place for a reception and stand before the congregation and say, "I do." They had to believe in marriage to see the reality and benefits of the relationship. In this sense too, Believing is seeing.

When I looked at this passage again this week, having preached on it several times before, I found something I have not seen before. What stood out for me this time was this verse, *When 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."*

What stood out in that verse was the idea of locked doors!---Those proverbial doors to the future which are locked tight with no hope of opening to the future. We all have them. People with debilitating diseases; Family members with

responsibility of taking care of aging parents. Parents with children who have gone astray. Graduates with dim job prospects. Couples with relational difficulties? Locked doors.

I cannot imagine what the people of Tuscaloosa felt when their homes and livelihood were blown away this past week by a monster tornado. What does this mean for them? What do they do now? Will they recover? Will they rebuild? What about the hundreds who died---the families who are grieved by their lost? Locked doors.

Let me give you other examples.

There are ministers who would like to speak out about some of the controversial issues of the Reformed Church in America but they are afraid to speak the words of justice and mercy. They think speaking out may anger their elders. They think speaking out may alienate themselves denominational staff. They think speaking out may hinder their chance with a particular church at which they would like to candidate. But if the truth be known, no speaking out is literally suffocating them. I sense that they feel like a caged animal, pacing up and down the length of their office. They search the scripture for wisdom, and come up empty. Their preaching feels dead. Their relationships suffer. They hunker down, lock their doors, vow that they will weather this period / that this, too, / shall pass. . . but deep down, they know the truth. They have locked themselves in, and no one can reach them. Locked doors!

Teenagers: It is your first year of high school, and you never imagined it could be so awful. Girls who used to be your friends now pretend that you don't exist. Boys who have known you since kindergarten snicker at you in the locker room. Everyone laughs at jokes that you don't understand. Everyone is bigger and more mature and more popular than you are. Why can't you figure this out? Why doesn't anyone like you? Why is your body betraying you? You learn how to set your face like stone, walk the halls without looking right or left. You learn how to put up walls so you don't feel anything. This is survival, right? You lock yourself in, so no one can reach you. Locked doors!

You are fifty-two years old, and your husband has left you. You never saw it coming: he just came home one day, announced he had met someone else, and walked out. Your children are stricken. Your friends are speechless. What are you going to do? How will you live? Will there be enough money, twenty years from now? Will there be anyone to care for you, when you are old? Will anyone ever tell

you that you are beautiful, or desirable, or cherished, or is this part of your life over? You get through the days: do what needs to be done. You console the children, consult a lawyer, draw up a new budget, and put on a brave face. Your friends marvel at your strength and independence, but you know the truth: inside, you are dying. You lock those doors tight, so no one can see. Locked doors!

Locked doors. Who doesn't have them? I cannot imagine what Thomas was thinking when Christ walked through the door. He might have felt that this resurrection stuff is downright terrifying. When dead won't even stay dead, what can you count on in this world anymore? Nothing, that's what.

Just what you think is finished may turn out to be starting. What you think is a dead end may turn out to be a fork in the road. Resurrection changes all the rules, and sometimes that is the worst possible news. If our worst suspicions are confirmed, if the dead will not even stay dead... then what could God have in store for us, in this post-Easter world? What does God intend to do with our locked-tight selves? When the death of something or someone occurs,

To a doubting congregation, looking at a candidate for only a few months, could God be saying, believe in the process?

To the people of Tuscaloosa, could this devastation produce something they never expected?

To fence-riding theologians, could there be courage waiting for them, the courage to speak the truth to what they really believe?

To a recently divorced persons, could there be friendship waiting for them, friendships they have possibly overlooked?

To those of us whose doors are locked tight due to our own situation, could there be new life waiting for us, life we had once imagined, but then shelved? Life we have known is now transformed?

The thing is, the disciples had been praying for this resurrection. They had heard of the resurrection, from Jesus himself. Yet none of these predictions, none of this wisdom, prepared them for how absolutely terrified they would be, when it actually happened.

Eminem has a song which says:

So be careful what you wish for
'Cause you just might get it and if you get it
Then you just might not know what to do wit' it
'Cause it might just come back on you ten fold.

And isn't that comforting, in a twisted sort of way?---to know that even when we hope and pray for it in this case, resurrection never feels safe? John writes that the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, but I wonder about that. I wonder if the doors were locked for fear of the resurrection. Which do you think messes with our heads more: predictable folk who question your faith or unpredictable divine intervention?

Probably divine intervention.

So what would it take, for us to unlock our doors and let go those fears?

I don't know for sure but the scripture that reminds me that I am now alone like when Jesus said:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Or this: *Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.*

It all comes down to Jesus, doesn't it? Jesus is the one who unlocks our doors. He constantly invites you to walk out into the future which God so graciously gives you. I will not kid you. It is terrifying as well as exciting to be people of the resurrection.

And if we cannot bring ourselves to unlock the doors first, it doesn't matter. The scripture tells us today that the doors were locked but Jesus came and stood among them anyway. Jesus still finds a way in that we might walk in newness of life.