Breaking Through Locked Doors

Traditionally, this Sunday has become known as “Low Sunday”. After all the self-examination, the fasting and alms giving of Lent, the prayer and mediation – after the roller coaster that is Holy Week, with the emotion of Maundy Thursday, and the horror of Good Friday, the despair of Holy Saturday we come to the joy of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. But it is a roller coaster and we feel exhausted emotionally and often physically.

As one commentator observes “we are ‘churched out’ and enervated as if we had preached and prayed and sung Jesus out of the tomb by our own efforts”.¹

Besides, the chocolate has all been eaten and the stuffed bunnies have been stored away again until we pull them out for the Easter decorations. The big roasting pan for the ham we serve at our family dinner has been returned to the basement where it will live until the next big holiday.

For the world around us, on Monday, Easter is over! But as the Body of Christ, though, we affirm that this is only the beginning. We observe Easter as a season right up to Pentecost, and we understand that we are called to “Easter” in our hearts until our own resurrection.

Yet this year it has all been strange, hasn’t it?

There were a few decorations for sure, and while folks with the littles in their houses still had an Easter Egg Hunt, and lots of families were thankful that the work of the Easter Bunny was declared an essential service, there were no big family gatherings.

Most of us only saw any grandkids, family or friends on a screen, if that. And all the while, the spectre of COVID 19, has loomed. Its devastating effects on our way of life, our economy and its growing toll of illnesses and deaths, has played itself out over and through our concerns about the shortage of toilet paper and flour and the search for masks and gloves.

For many of us, though, one of the hardest things is that in the midst of all this disorientation in our lives, we have had to grieve the locked doors of our churches.

I have to admit, right now, it is a bit of disconcerting to preach a sermon in a room where the only listener I see is my dog Bentley! He doesn’t respond very much!

And last Sunday, while it was wonderful to be able to share worship online with that beautiful service from the Cathedral, it seemed so odd not to share the Eucharist with my church family.

At a time of fear and threat, we long for the comfort of the presence of others we love, and yet we find ourselves behind locked doors, wondering if our lives will ever be the same again.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 2 p. 382
So as I pondered our gospel reading for this week, I couldn’t help but be struck by how applicable it is to this very day.

In John’s account, on the first day of the work week for the world around the disciples. That world has returned to the everydayness of their lives. But not the disciples. Earlier that day, in the darkness just before dawn, one of them came running to the others to declare “I have seen the Lord!” Jesus had broken through the locked “door” of death and rolled the stone away. He came to Mary Magdalene and in the darkness of her terrible grief, he called her name. She shared her experience with her friends, but it wasn’t enough for them. Now it was night, and the friends huddled together, locked behind the doors of their fear.

Fear does that to us, doesn’t it? It locks us away from people, it locks away from peace, and it locks us away from life itself. The fear was understandable, it was even wise actually! The authorities who had murdered the hope of God’s kingdom coming, the ones who had assassinated the Jesus the disciple had thought would be the Messiah—those people would not hesitate for a moment to slaughter Jesus’ followers as well. So they huddled together, paralyzed by fear, trembling and terrified.

Then Jesus blew through those locked doors. As he had blown through the locked door of death, through the locked door of Mary’s grief, now he blew through the locked doors of their fear.

Mary’s testimony had not been enough. They needed to see Jesus for themselves and now he was here—living, breathing, in a body they could see and touch. He breathed—not on them, but actually breathed INTO them and they received the Holy Spirit. Just as God had breathed life into the newly formed lungs of Adam, Jesus now breathed the new life of the Spirit into his amazed friends.

Wouldn’t you love to have been a fly on the wall after Jesus left—I sometimes wish John had recorded the conversation that followed! It wasn’t a short one for sure—it is a week later when we pick the story up—and they are still in that room with the doors shut.

I suspect they were integrating new understanding of all they thought they knew into way of life that was changed forever. I imagine them talking about all that Jesus had said and done, and seeing it with new eyes. I suspect they searched the Scriptures and found there messages they had never heard, though the same words had been read to them hundreds of times before.

But one of them had been missing on that incredible night—Thomas had not been with them.

Where had he been? I wonder if he had been the only one brave enough to make a run to McDonalds or the local market to get food for them all, or maybe, maybe it had just too much to be with so many people and he just needed to be alone and weep. John doesn’t tell us. But over the years, we have come to know him as “Doubting Thomas”. I am not sure, as I look at the gospel accounts, that this is a fair characterization. I think he might better be named “Honest Thomas”–or even “Courageous Thomas”. Why those names? Well check out John 11, and John 14 for a
And consider the words of one commentator who says “Thomas gets to say what we all want to say, the truth of what we do not want to admit, how difficult it is to believe in Jesus whom we have never encountered for ourselves.” I think Thomas was the one who had the courage to name the doubts almost everyone faces at one time or another, as we begin to consider the claims of Jesus on our lives.

Thomas was not prepared to piggy-back on anyone else’s faith.

He needed to see Jesus for himself — and his longing for that was, I think, only intensified during that week while he listened to the growing faith of the others — a faith he could only observe but not, yet, share.

In the gospel of John, belief is not an intellectual exercise. It is not an assent to facts or even an intuition or feeling. But rather “believe” indicates a relationship of trust. “Believing”, in the Gospel of John, is an action word — and Thomas refuses to trust himself to the stories of others. He longs to see Jesus for himself.

And so, a week later, Jesus appears again. The disciples are still in that same room, but I doubt they were the same men and women they had been the week before. Yet Jesus still needs to speak “Peace” to them. I think he is reminding us that our relationship with Jesus is never a “once and done” thing.

It’s kind of like the difference between a wedding and a marriage. Often, when I am conducting a wedding, I will remind the couple and the people gathered around them that on this day, two people are making a decision and establishing a relationship that will change the whole rest of their lives. But the living out of that relationship will not be a single decision but rather a million decisions made over and over again on the days when the excitement of this day has faded. When the “everydayness” of the lives around them will tempt them to doubt sometimes their love for one another. And that’s the time, when, I tell the community, it is time for them to come in and remind the couple of the promises they’ve made, of the love they’ve pledged and the faithfulness they have promised.

It is not that much different in our relationship with Christ. We must have an individual and personal relationship with Jesus, but that relationship is not lived out not in a “once and done” decision that never changes but rather in a life that’s lived in the reality of the world in which we are placed. And to live that life, we need a community around us and on this night, in the company of the men and women he had come to know, Thomas responds with a decision to believe, – he responds in abject worship – “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas has seen Jesus for himself – as each of us must. We cannot piggyback on the faith of our fathers and mothers or grandparents, not even on the faith of our spiritual ancestors in the church. Each of us must come to the place where we enter a relationship of trust in Jesus – where we experience his presence for ourselves. Will we have doubts? Absolutely – if there were never any doubt, there would be no need for a decision to have faith.
And in those times, we need more than ever what Mary needed, what the disciples needed, what Thomas needed. We need the community of faith to remind us of the truth – not just the precepts and principles – but to remind us that the One who is the Truth and the Life is the one we are called to trust. Jesus comes to us individually and invites us to live in community as his body in this world.

And in these last days, he has blown through the locked doors of our habits and comfort and understanding to push us into new ways of being church, of being his body in the world. We have always affirmed the fact that the church is not our buildings but the living, breathing Body of Christ. But somehow, oh somehow, it seems our believing has centered in that building. So, In these days of locked buildings and empty pulpits – we are living out our relationship with Christ in new ways.

Will Willimon observes that “Our deadly yearning to get back to business will be disrupted by the resurrection”. Someday soon, the locked doors of our homes and schools and churches will be opened. But pray God, that those of us who have had these quiet days to reflect, to grow in intimacy with Jesus and perhaps even to experience his presence for the first time – pray God we will walk through those open doors as new people, bring the gospel of peace to a world still desperately yearning for the peace that only Jesus can bring. Thanks be to God, Amen