



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Through the Door

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*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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord (John 20:19-20).*

The disciples' doors are locked. They're locked out of fear, which is why doors are always locked, of course.

We know all about that, don't we? Most of us lock our doors because, though the chances are fairly small, we know there are people out there who will break in and steal. Many years ago, my rather modest little car was stolen. I had some golf clubs in the trunk, cheap ones I'd bought not long before because I wanted to learn to play. I tell you that detail because a few days later the police called and I got my car back, but the clubs were missing. I took it as a sign that I was supposed to drive but not play golf. As a matter of fact, I only got another set of clubs a few months ago, thinking maybe it's time to try again after all these years.

So now the disciples are huddled together in a house, and the doors are locked because they're afraid. They're not afraid of anyone stealing their stuff. They don't really have much stuff. No, they're afraid for their lives. Just a couple days ago they watched—most of them from a fairly safe distance—as their leader was crucified. They know they could be picked out in a lineup as followers of Jesus, possibly to meet the same long, agonizing end as their master. So they've kept the doors locked and the shades pulled down low ever since.

There have been rumors all day that Jesus isn't really dead, and some women even claim to have seen him alive again. But the women were traumatized because they stayed near to Jesus and witnessed the crucifixion up close, while most of the men slipped away, and who knows what tricks their imagination might be playing on them? Peter and John went and saw that the tomb was empty, but nobody really knows what to make of all this. The whole little band of brothers and sisters are afraid, so it's safety first, as it always is when people are afraid. They keep the doors locked.

But then a strange thing happens. Jesus comes and stands among them, as if the locks on the doors don't matter at all. It's not as if he picks the locks, or climbs in through a window. He just appears, out of nowhere.

Now if you're thinking that can't happen—people don't just appear, and they surely can't pass through locked doors—you're thinking pretty much what the disciples are thinking. And yet, there he is, standing right in front of them. We all have our notions of what can't possibly happen, until it does. Then we have to decide whether to deny the evidence or adjust our understanding to fit the facts. It's one or the other. This is a classic case of cognitive dissonance, though people haven't learned to call it that.

Jesus breaks the stunned silence. He says, "Peace be with you." That's not the same kind of greeting as "Hi, how's it going?" This is no time for small talk. Peace is precisely what the disciples need right now, since their world's been turned upside down and they're all in a turmoil. So Jesus gets straight to the point. This man who used to talk in parables, by way of slipping through the locked doors

of people's perceptions, suddenly is all specificity. "Peace," he says.

Then Jesus does another thing that might seem strange at first. He shows them his hands and side. He shows his disciples the marks of his crucifixion, the very signs of his suffering that made them so afraid. Here are the holes, but the pain is all gone now. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore. The powers that be have done their worst, and even death has had its way, but none of that matters now. Jesus is alive. "Peace be with you."

Why do you suppose the holes are still there in Jesus' hands and feet, and in his side? You might think that resurrection would have cleared all that up, made the marks go away, removing all trace of the terrible thing that had happened. But here they are, the signs of what used to be suffering preserved in the risen Lord. Why should that be?

One reason, of course, is that Thomas isn't here. We're not sure why, but Thomas is absent when the rest of the disciples see Jesus on Easter evening. And Thomas is going to need a very powerful sign.

That's not because he's spiritually slower to catch on than all the others. The whole "Doubting Thomas" label that's come down upon him is a bum rap. Just a week or so ago, when they were all safely on the other side of the river Jordan, Jesus said that his dear friend Lazarus was sick in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, and he needed to go and be with him. The rest of the disciples said, "That's a bad idea, Lord. You know some powerful people there are out to get you. We need to stay away from the city for a while, at least until the heat dies down." But it was Thomas who spoke up and said, "If the Master wants to go to Jerusalem,

let's go too, and die with him there." Thomas was the brave one, the loyal one, when all the others were counting the cost of discipleship and deciding it was far too expensive to follow Jesus.

So Thomas missed Easter. Why do you suppose he wasn't there? A whole week goes by before he's with the other disciples in the same meeting place, and it's the longest week of Thomas's life. He's the one who said, "Let's all go and die with him there," but now only Jesus is dead. The rest of them are still alive, and it isn't hard for Thomas to think that the death of his Master was mostly his fault. If only he hadn't said, "Let's go back...." Survivor's guilt is a terrible thing, especially if you think you're responsible for the death of someone you love.

Now Thomas is back, after a week of rumors that Jesus is alive. He can't dare to believe it—not because he was reluctant to follow Jesus, but precisely because he had been so ready and willing. Then look what happened. He saw it with his own eyes. He watched Jesus die, the man on whom he'd pinned all his hopes. "Fool me once ...," as people say, but he won't be fooled again. It just hurts too much to love with all your soul and then lose the one you've loved. Now the doors to the house are locked again, but the door to Thomas's heart is locked tighter still.

Then Jesus appears again. He comes back not least for Thomas. No disciple gets left behind. "Here, Tom." Jesus says. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Don't doubt, but believe." There's not a trace of judgment in Jesus' words or in his voice, only the infinite tenderness of one who knows what love is, and knows how love hurts when it suffers loss. "Here, Tom. It's all right. You can believe again."

And Thomas cries. He cries out, “My Lord and my God!” and it’s not the trivializing profanity “OMG” that people bandy about so thoughtlessly today. It’s an outburst of faith restored and hope reborn. Now Jesus smiles, and I think I hear him laugh the way people do when tears of pain give way to tears of joy. “You believe because you’ve seen me?” Jesus says. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe!”

Which is to say, blessed are the likes of us. Some of us believe in Jesus, though we haven’t seen him, because he’s passed through the doors of our hearts, the doors we’ve kept locked on account of our fears. Some of us were afraid to trust the Son of God, relying instead on tangible things we can’t take with us, rather than the intangible truth which alone can take us to a world we cannot yet see. Jesus comes to tell us we don’t need to be afraid. You don’t have to lock Jesus out, for fear that he might let you down, or condemn you for your faithlessness. That’s not why he comes back. He comes to find you and let you know that it’s all right to believe in him and trust in him.

But he also comes to send us back out into the world. We’re not really disciples, or true followers of Jesus, if we’re not willing to go where he leads, as Thomas was willing to follow him, even into Jerusalem. There’s work to be done. “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few,” Jesus says. He doesn’t come just so we can live a comfortable life without caring for the rest of the people Jesus loves. That’s why he breathes on his followers and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” We need the Spirit of God to make our own fearful spirits come alive. And then we start to live, not just for ourselves, but also for others. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus says, “so I send you.”



There are doors we lock to keep people out, and there are doors we lock to keep Jesus out too—doors that would keep him away from the parts of our lives we're not willing to share for the sake of his kingdom. Sometimes that's just another way of holding onto our stuff. Sometimes we want to hang onto old habits. And sometimes there are things we don't want Jesus to see in us—as if he could not see them already.

There's another door in this story too, of course, which is death itself. Jesus has passed through that door and come back, so there's no other door that can keep him out now, except the door of a heart that's unwilling to let him in. The soul is the inner sanctum of who we are, and Jesus will not break in and steal our identity; but he can make us a new creation if we ask him—a deeper, fuller version of the person we were meant to be.

I mentioned a book last week by James Smith, called *You Are What You Love*. Smith says that we all live in some kind of story, some way we imagine the world to be, and what matters in it. So the question for each of us is, what story do we think we're in?

The disciples learn in the wake of Easter that they're living in a different story from the one they thought they were in. The disciples of Jesus live in a story where death is not the last word, and the worst the world can do turns out to be nothing compared to the redeeming power of the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom of heaven, even the scars we accumulate in this life, like the holes in the hands of the risen Lord, are only reminders of the way love wins in the end.

Every once in a while I still hear some Christians, when they're getting on in years and celebrating yet another

birthday, say something like, “Well, it’s better than the alternative.” But then I want to ask, If you really think that’s true, what story are you living in?

Are you living in the story that Jesus tells? Are you living in a story where death is just a door that can lead to even more abundant life, so that you don’t need be afraid of dying, and the people you love who have gone through that door are not lost forever, but will turn out to meet you in God’s good time, if all of you trust in the grace of God?

Are you living in a story that says, because all of this is true, you don’t need to keep the doors of your heart locked here and now? You don’t have to keep Jesus out, for fear of what he might want from you, since whatever he wants will turn out to be what you were meant to do, and the person you were meant to become. You don’t need to lock other people out either, because you can’t take anything with you, except the soul that grew larger or smaller according to what you did for other people with all that God entrusted to your care.

So a week after Easter, when Thomas unlocks his heart again and lets Jesus in, what are the doors of your heart keeping out, and why? And when you’re reminded yet another time of this great story of Easter, what story are you living in?



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