

April 8, 2017
Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. Chip Whitacre
John 20:19-33

Picture, if you will, a room. It's a small room on the second floor of an ordinary looking building on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Outside the building the world is abuzz with the happenings of last few days. Jews from all over the known world have come to celebrate the Passover feast. It is a multicultural mix that can be boisterous, even unruly. Resentment of the Roman occupiers is especially high during this time. The potential for violence in this mix is ever present. Roman troops are on high alert. The execution of a teacher who was causing serious unrest in the Jewish community has quelled that potential somewhat. But another, truly violent character, has been released in his stead.

Inside the room ten men are huddled in tomb-like darkness. The doors are closed and locked and the blinds on the windows are drawn. The only light is that which comes in around the edges of the blinds. There are dirty dishes and remnants of several meals on a table in the center of the room. These ten are hidden away from the world outside because they are afraid. The teacher was their leader. One in whom they had placed all their hope. And now he is dead. They don't know what to do. At first, they scattered in their separate directions. But now they have come back together. They have decided to wait until things quiet down before they try to leave town. After all that's happened, they don't feel safe in the crowds outside. Especially with so many Roman soldiers around. So, they are waiting.

Suddenly, their teacher is there. In the room with them. He didn't open the door and walk in. He couldn't have because the door was locked. He was just there. At first, they didn't recognize him. He greeted them in peace. But he must have thought they still didn't recognize him because he showed them the wounds from his execution. And it was a good thing he did. Because they hadn't recognized him. Somehow, he seemed different. Familiar but not the same. But when they saw his wounds they recognized him right away. He greeted them in peace again and said they were sent just like he had been sent. Then he did this really odd thing. He breathed on them. It was kind of like when God breathed life into Adam in the beginning. And he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit". And now they seemed different. Even to each other. And they knew that they could no longer hide behind those doors. And you know the rest of this story.

When people are afraid they tend to withdraw to places of safety. Sometimes those places are literally behind closed doors. In this story from the Gospel of John when Jesus enters that room, the narrative shifts. But there are some subtexts that are important to capture as we think about this story. First, the word for door can also mean the opening to a cave or tomb. So, Jesus might be thought of as coming to where his disciples have entombed themselves in their fear and grief. Second, yet another meaning of the word for door implies being open to possibility. In essence Jesus is telling his disciples that nothing is possible while they are behind closed doors. Fear may have led them to hide behind closed doors, but the Gospel compels them to go out into the world.

In her collection of essays titled The Givenness of Things the novelist Marilynne Robinson says, "fear is not a Christian habit of mind". And yet fear seems to be a significant presence in our public life these days. Fear of terrorists and immigrants and mass murderers and nuclear war. Worry about the loss of jobs and the impact of trade wars. And we react to fear by bolting the doors. With new laws or tighter

enforcement of old laws. Or more personal action. Every time there is a mass shooting somewhere in this country gun sales spike. At the same time protests against the NRA increase. And counter-warnings of the negative consequences of restrictions on the right to own guns increase in response. All of which has gotten us exactly nowhere. Except further and further into our respective positions on the issue. It is tragic enough that our public places - schools, churches, nightclubs - have become the targets of such action. But it is even more tragic that we have reached a point in our public conversation where we are no longer able to acknowledge our common pain over these incidents.

Over the last several weeks some of you have pointed out that we did not say a single prayer in church after the most recent school shooting in Florida. And that concerns me most of all. If as a church we do not pray for the victims of these and other such incidents, we fail to acknowledge our common sense of loss. If we do not acknowledge that loss because we are afraid even of opening up the subject in this forum, then the Gospel is just words on a page. And we are living behind closed doors just like Jesus's disciples, giving way to fear. This of all places should be a place where we can speak our shared pain and anguish, even if we don't agree on the solutions.

This past week we remembered the day fifty years ago when Martin Luther King was assassinated. There have been interviews with his children and former associates. Replays of portions of his speeches and sermons. And reflections on the importance of his work. We were reminded that he was reluctant to be the spokesperson for the civil rights movement. And how it was his belief that it was his responsibility to stand up for dignity and justice for all people. It was a belief that resulted in many uncomfortable and even dangerous confrontations with people who resisted change. And several nights in jail as well. He admitted to being afraid on many occasions. And toward the end of his life he even suspected that he would be killed for his work one day. Yet he insisted on continuing non-violent protest as a means of confrontation to bring about change. In the end, his willingness to stand on the line with garbage workers cost him his life. Those who worked with him must have lost their bearings when that happened. They must have wondered what they would do now. And they must have considered stepping away; seeking safety behind locked doors. But they went back to work. And many of them are still with us today; reminding us of his legacy and the need to keep working for justice.

And what of Thomas? The truth is we don't know much about Thomas after this point. There is a Gospel of Thomas. While it has much wisdom to offer any real connection to Thomas seems doubtful. The little bit of historical evidence we have about Thomas tells us that he founded a Christian community in southern India, a journey of almost three thousand miles by air from Jerusalem. And that he was martyred there around the year 72. There must have been times on that journey when he was afraid. When he even doubted if he was doing the right thing. But his experience of Jesus clearly moved him out from behind those closed doors into the world in a big way.

Jesus resurrection is real to his disciples and they are themselves transformed by it from followers into apostles. From that room they moved out into the world and continued a tradition that eventually arrived at the door of Martin Luther King. And he too was transformed by it into a leader. As were his followers after him. And now it's at our door. We don't have to wonder if we should unbolt the door because Jesus has already let himself in. The only question for us now is will we open the door and let ourselves out?

Amen.