

## Behind Closed Doors

John 20:19-31

March 30, 2008

Call this second Sunday of the Easter season what you want: White Sunday, Bright Sunday, Laughing Sunday, Hilarity Sunday, Holy Humor Sunday, Associate Pastor Sunday, etc. and the purpose of the day remains the same – to take some time to laugh and have some fun at the expense of evil. When God resurrected Jesus, God turned things upside down. Today is a day when we celebrate the practical joke God played on evil and death and suffering and despair. It's a day when we try to grasp in an even deeper way the work of the resurrection in our lives – the belief, the faith – that evil, death, pain, suffering, despair, loneliness, defeat, guilt do not have the last word – that God does.

Before we look at what the disciples being behind closed doors might mean for our faith journey, I have a couple more jokes to share with you. The first one is a non-religious one: “You know you're from Ohio when: You've never met any celebrities – down south means Kentucky – stores don't have bags, they have sacks – school was canceled because of cold one day and because of heat the next (bring on the heat) – all the festivals across the state are named after a fruit, vegetable, or grain – you know what's knee-high by the Fourth of July – you consider being called a “pork queen” an honor – you think of the four major food groups as beef, pork, beer, and Jell-o salad with marshmallows – you drink “pop” – you know what “cow-tipping” is.

And, then there's the one about the lawyer and the IRS agent being invited to the bedside of their dying pastor. I apologize in advance to all of our lawyer friends in the congregation.

When they arrived at their pastor's bedside, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. Then he took their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled and stared at the ceiling. Nothing was said for awhile. The IRS agent and the lawyer were touched and flattered that the old preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moment. They were a bit puzzled as to why though. They both remembered how they squirmed during his many, long uncomfortable sermons about greed, and coveting.

Finally, the lawyer had to know and so he asked the preacher, “Preacher, why did you ask the two of us to come?”

And the old preacher took a deep breath to muster up some strength, and then weakly said, “Jesus died between two thieves, and that's how I want to go too.”

Well, let's turn to today's story. The disciples were gathered together behind closed doors on that first Sunday despite Jesus having tried to inform them of what was going to happen and despite Mary Magdalene's report of her encounter with the risen Jesus. The shades were drawn – the doors were locked – the followers were afraid. They knew that those who had orchestrated Jesus' death were still around and that there was the real possibility they might be next.

My guess is that if there was any conversation at all behind the closed doors, it was whispered. My guess is that every time they heard a noise, the anxiety in the room escalated. Would this be it? Had they been found? Were they about to be arrested? Would they soon be thrown in prison, or worse?

And then, suddenly, out of nowhere, without warning – demonstrating that his resurrected body was not the old human physical body – Jesus appeared among them. And he said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Imagine it – the first gift the risen Christ offered his followers was comfort – peace. It perhaps captures best the essence of Christ’s resurrection. It says: “It doesn’t matter what has happened to you – it doesn’t matter what’s going on inside you – I am with you and it is peace I bring you.”

Now, the peace Jesus offered was something more than simply the absence of noise or trouble. It was more than a greeting. The peace Jesus offered was the kind that comes in the midst of the pain – in the midst of the senseless happenings of life - and assures that whatever is going on can be endured because God is with us. It was indeed the word the disciples needed to hear that night; and, my sense of things is, it’s the word we need to hear this morning as well. We gather to hear Jesus speak to us in the midst of all that’s happening around us or in our own lives this day: “Peace be with you!”

And after he showed them his credentials – his hands and his side – their joy couldn’t be contained. The party was on! He was alive!

One of the things I think this passage suggests, and many others like it in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, is that we need to be together with others when we are in pain – when we experience disappointments – when we are confused – when we are struggling with such things as doubts and fears and guilt – when we are trying to make sense out of the troubles of life. And when we are with one another we minister to one another – we minister as Christ ministered when we reveal where we’ve been scarred. Because when we reveal where we’ve been scarred, others know they can trust us with their scars. When we’re in pain, we need to be with others who’ve been where we are – who’ve been wounded as we’ve been wounded and who’ve made it in spite of the pain.

Jesus is the Lord of Life not in spite of his wounds but precisely because of his wounds. They are his visa into our lives and experience. And our wounds are our credentials for aiding others in the midst of the painful times in their lives – the disappointments, the deaths, the defeats of life.

The support of a group of people is what the church is all about, friends. Dr. C. H. Dodd is one of the great New Testament scholars. He once said that as life unfolded for him he found a much greater need in the church to be comforted through the sorrows and sobs of life.

He told of a time when he met one of his church members on the street. She had been active but recently had drifted away. She told him that she had suffered several problems and God just seemed to have become distant to her. She said that she felt as if she had lost contact with God.

His answer to her was: “Not only now but even in the future, there will always be times when God seems distant; when it looks as if God has forgotten and does not care; when prayers go unanswered and life is difficult. And at such times you must learn to hold on to your fellow Christians. Your difficulty is that you tried to hold on to God alone, and (we were) never intended to hold on to God alone.”<sup>1</sup>

In the coming months we’re going to be starting some small groups, one of the purposes of which will be to help us better provide this important ministry of sharing our lives – our joys and pains – to better be the body of Christ to one another. Watch the Maple Leaf, website, and church bulletins for more information about this vital new emphasis in our life together.

In his book, Christ On the Mount, E. Stanley Jones, one of the great missionaries in the last century, told about an incident in the life of Adoniram Judson. Judson left Salem, Massachusetts, on a clipper ship in 1812, a newly commissioned missionary to southeast Asia. He had a deeper conversion while on the ship and proceeded to spend his life in Burma. At one point in his career he was thrown into a Burmese prison for several months and was severely tortured. His body, particularly his hands, were scarred from the experience. When released from prison, he asked the King of Burma for permission to preach in a certain village. The king replied, "I am willing to allow a dozen preachers to go, but not you. My people are not fools enough to listen to your words, but they will not be able to resist those scarred hands."

The questions we need to ask ourselves as we travel on our journeys of faith and as we pray about our call to serve include: "What are our credentials?" "What scars and wounds in our lives can Christ use as visual evidence that he lives with and through the pain of life?"

Then Jesus said again to those gathered behind closed doors, "Peace be with you." But this time he added, "As the Father sent me, even so I send you." The first gift Jesus gave was peace. The second gift was a work order – an announcement to those who follow him that we are to continue his work in the world.

We're running a little short on time so I need to offer a rather quick summary of what this might mean for us. You've heard me say it before and are going to hear it again I'm sure – Jesus Christ needs us – needs the church, the community of believers. If his message, the good news, is going to spread, it's going to be because of our speaking it, our doing it. It is our mouths that must speak in order for Jesus to speak – it is our feet that must run his errands – our hands that must do his work. It also means that we need Jesus. We are dependent on Jesus.

Now, there's a particular ministry that John's story notes Jesus entrusts to us. It is the ministry of forgiveness – both that of offering it and that of retaining it. And he imparted the Holy Spirit on us as the source that enables us to carry out this vital ministry. The proof that the Holy Spirit has entered one's life, in fact, is whether sins are being forgiven.

The purpose of the resurrection wasn't just to relieve the early disciples or us of fear or to provide assurance about eternal life, but rather it was to empower followers, both then and now, to continue Christ's ministry. It was, and is, to send into the world followers so that the doors of faith might be unlocked in others. It was, and is, to forgive – to free people from the guilt of past mistakes so that they are no longer bound by guilt and thus free to be the whole persons God intends for them to be.

Now, I emphasize the responsibility of forgiving sins and don't reference much that of retaining sins and I have a reason for doing that. And that is, that the retaining of sins has received plenty of attention. I would offer, too much attention. It takes the form of offering judgment – creating new legal hoops, moralistic positions. It is my sense that the church has become the last place people go to when they are in need of forgiveness because in many churches more oppression, more guilt, more obstacles to God's grace are offered instead. And I think it's time for the pendulum to swing the other way a bit and that perhaps it's the most important mission of the church in our day.

Come and know God's grace – God's unconditional love – God's forgiveness. In order for people to experience God's grace, God's unconditional love, God's forgiveness, they have to experience it from us. And the power to offer it comes from the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

Forgiveness: it's ours to experience and ours to help others experience. Resurrection thinking involves us being about the task of seeking opportunities to offer people forgiveness. I like to think of Jesus as a coach who's saying to us, "Now team, it's time for us to break the huddle and end our time behind closed doors and get out there and forgive sins!"

And friends, people coming to know that things don't have to remain the same – that suffering and grief can be shared – that one does not have to be controlled by guilt – that new life is possible after things have not gone one's way – well, people coming to know those things will be able to laugh in the face of evil and resurrection will be understood in a new way. We are the resurrected community and there's a world in need of knowing that resurrection first hand.

Let us pray.

Prayer: Lord, we realize this is your world and we know that you speak to us everywhere, and we understand that you've sent your son to be a bridge over the troubled waters of life. And so, Lord, we bow before you now to dedicate our total lives to you. Seize us, O God, and mold us into the loving and forgiving disciples you intend us to be. We are in your hands. In the Risen Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1. King Duncan, "Hey! I Want to Believe!" Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.