

“Prison without Bars”

John 20:19-23

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Did you grow up in a time and place where doors were locked at night? I did not. One reason is because we had no air conditioning and the only way to cool the house in the summer was to leave the windows and doors open so air could circulate through the screens. Locking a screen door was rather futile when you think about it. Most of them had a hook and clasp, but I never understood why.

On the other hand, we never felt the need to lock our doors because we felt safe in our little town. Burglaries were very rare. As a matter of fact, I don't recall a friend's home being broken into by an intruder.

I suspect that level of trust and safety existed in Jesus' time, too, which makes one detail in today's text quite noticeable. Wherever the disciples were on that first Easter evening, and it was probably the Upper Room where they had assembled just days before with Jesus, the door was locked. John does not want us to miss this.

I'm intrigued by the locked door and cannot gloss over it. It raises a lot of questions that I would like for us to consider because I think answering them can unlock some powerful lessons.

Why was that door locked? John tells us they were afraid of the religious leaders that masterminded Jesus' crucifixion. “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’ ” John 20:19.

They feared that the authorities were not content with crucifying Jesus, but wanted to kill everyone associated with him. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? This is why it made sense to keep a low profile and go into hiding.

Do you think fear was the only emotion in the room that evening? I don't. I think the room was filled with grief, guilt and even anger. These strong and lethal emotions would send anyone into seclusion, wouldn't they? No one wants to be around others when they are struggling with these wild emotions.

Why did John include this story in his Easter narrative? I think his readers were struggling with the same issues the disciples faced on Easter evening. They were being harassed and threatened by the authorities and needed to find the courage to confront their enemies with the power of redeeming love. They needed to continue the work that Jesus began even under adverse circumstances. Too much was at stake if they did not and John knew it. I believe this story was written to inspire and motivate them, to move them from fear to faith.

How many of us are in retreat? Of what are you afraid and how has it confined you? How many here today are facing intimidating challenges and have gone into hiding out of fear of failure? I suspect that number may be rather large and I would not be surprised if it is. We live in a culture that breeds fear.

Since 9/11, our society seems to be obsessed with fear. We are afraid of being attacked by terrorists, running out of resources or losing our job because the economy is going to crash.

What are our fears doing to us? It seems to me that they are making us cynical, suspicious and separating us from others as they drive us into a prison without walls.

Jim Evans, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Auburn, Alabama, sheds light on what our fears do to us. “As fears increase, reason decreases, which is both dangerous and sad. It is dangerous because we are likely to strike out and do harm to ourselves and others. It is sad because without reason we never achieve the vision God has for us as human beings.”

How do you break free? How did the disciples? Our text teaches us that they had to have help. This challenge was too big for them to overcome on their own. They needed the help of a dear friend and they needed God's help.

Jesus was the friend that helped them. He entered that locked room and spoke words of comfort and peace. He reminded them of their mission and his need for them to leave that room and continue the work they had begun. He blessed them with the gift of the Spirit that would accompany them on their journey providing the wisdom, courage and strength they needed to take risks and be bold.

There is something else the Spirit would do. God's Spirit would enable them to forgive those that crucified Jesus and terrified them. You see, I believe this was their biggest challenge. As long as they were angry with or afraid of the authorities that killed Jesus, they would remain in a prison without bars. Forgiveness would liberate and empower them. However, this challenge was too big for them. Only by God's grace could they forgive and Jesus knew it.

When told by a Nazi concentration camp guard that the only way she could survive was to hate, Corrie Ten Boom replied, "Sir, hatred will put me in a prison far worse than this." She was right and so was Jesus when he assessed what the disciples needed to do to come out of hiding.

What did the disciples do? Through Jesus' encouragement and with God's help, they left that room and continued the work the Lord began with them. They were not timid or shy about it, either. To the contrary, they were confident, bold and quite effective.

Did they pay a high price in order to continue Jesus' work? Some did, which showed how committed and strong they were. Becoming the presence of Christ in a broken world became their passion for which some gave their lives.

Do you need to break free from whatever is holding you back and keeping you from becoming the presence of Christ in a broken world? Will you refuse to be controlled by fear, grief, guilt or anger and respond to God's call upon your life? Do you need to find your voice or reclaim your passion?

Is someone reaching out to you to help you make that journey? Will you let them be your friend? Will you let God help you by receiving His Spirit and letting Him accompany you on your journey?

Do you need to help someone unlock a door and come out of seclusion? Friends don't let friends retreat into meaninglessness. Friends don't let friends waste potential. Friends don't let friends ignore opportunities to make the world better.

Will you be that kind of friend, encouraging those that are struggling as Jesus did the disciples? I hope you will and I know who will help you along that journey of goodwill and compassion.