

Unlocking the Doors to New Life

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John 20:19-31, Psalm 133

Locked down faith

In thinking about the disciples huddled in their room behind the shut door, it brings to mind those of us who are now pondering how to begin venturing out in public as the risk of COVID-19 is abating here in Arizona and Cochise County in particular. Many of us will be working through anxieties and fear over the next weeks, I think. Are you ready to eat in a restaurant? Gather with family at home? Just this week, I did two things I hadn't done before: eat at a home indoors, and travel in a car with a vaccinated friend without masks.

In my experience, anxiety and fear often freeze us up, doesn't it? We get locked into the "what ifs?" and "should have, and could have." Scenarios in our heads multiply beyond their true worth. Frozen into our tracks, staying stuck appears to have more gratification than getting on with moving along. At least our fears are familiar.

And the thing is, the fear has been a genuine response to the current events. In none of these situations are people making up the reason for fear. But the problem is, fear that freezes us up doesn't do any good. Fear that keeps us from finding solutions doesn't do any good. Fear that locks us up from reaching out to others who are also in fear doesn't do any good.

In speaking with friends and family about this re-entry, one person told me, "I feel like I'm going to be back in high school and feel awkward in social situations again."

The doubts necessary for faith

Curiously, I don't think it is the doubts of Thomas that are a problem for either the rest of the disciples or even Jesus. Thomas doesn't get a reprimand from the other disciples, who, after all, had seen Jesus for themselves. If we think about it, the fact that they are huddled behind a locked door isn't exactly the kind of witness to the resurrection that we might hope for. Where is that new experience of transformed lives for him to observe? If they are so paralyzed by the realities of their situation, why should Thomas have faith? What would such a puny faith be defined by, anyway?

What Jesus says

Rather than judge Thomas, I'd like you to think about how Thomas is a model for our discipleship today. Upon hearing about the appearance of Jesus beyond the locked

door, Thomas uttered his doubts honestly. There was no prevarication about him trying to pretend with Jesus about where he was. His doubts were out there to be looked at and tested. Contemporary writer Kathleen Norris writes that in her time of unbelief she was startled by an old Benedictine monk who told her that “doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.”¹

It reminds me of a story that a pastor in Nova Scotia wrote about his experience of preaching at a downtown church where they run a drop-in center for street people. As the preacher read the part in the gospel about Jesus walking on water, one of them stood up and said, very loudly, “Are we supposed to believe that?” The pastor was upset, but on his way out, one of the elders caught his attention, and said, “Listen to him. He’s the only one honest enough to ask the questions.” If we can’t have doubts in church, where are we going to have them?

What doubts do you carry about Jesus? Do you, like Kathleen Norris, secretly harbor doubts that you are sure will prevent faith from coming? Are you afraid to name them? Are you afraid to tell them? Let Thomas be a model for you.

Real Presence of Jesus

So, Jesus appears once to the disciples and gives them a commission of peaceful relations, receiving the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness of sins. But it hasn’t taken. They are still in the middle of a room on the “eighth day.” The reference here might be to the eighth day of creation, which would mean the time of action beyond the seven days that God took to create the world. Thomas has made his remark about not being able to believe until he sees and touches Jesus’ wounds.

And so now Jesus comes to him and lets him see and touch. I find this such an intimate act, touching the places where he has been wounded – his hands, his side. A real change comes over Thomas in this experience. He experiences the cost of discipleship.

If you have ever made a pilgrimage to a place where people have lost their lives for something they believed in, you might have an inkling of this kind of experience. A few years ago I visited the house of Anne Frank in Amsterdam. As it happened, the hotel that the group I went with was staying nearby, and early one morning I went and took the tour of the house, and the locked rooms where they stayed hidden for years. The house was nearly empty, and along the tour I was often the only one in a particular room, the place where they stayed in hiding until they were betrayed and taken to a concentration camp where Anne died shortly before the end of World War II. It was a deeply moving experience – to see movie star photos cut from the newspaper on the

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books: New York, NY, 1998), 63.

walls, and simple everyday items that they used. Equally moving was the memorial just around the corner, where a series of pink triangles noted the loss of life for those who were oppressed for their sexual orientation, also during World War II. It was right around the corner from the Frank house. Two different experiences, linked by a common hatred.

As we come out of this pandemic time, we have experienced a big thing, but often differently. I wonder how we will find ways to name the costs of this pandemic. Some of us have names and even family members who either died or are experiencing the effects of the disease. Our community members have the scars of isolation, income loss, physical affects and perhaps like me, a few additional pounds I didn't have at the start of this. We have missed times of celebration (anniversaries, birthdays and holidays) and times of grieving (memorial services).

I guess it is a comfort to me to realize that the Jesus in our story comes after the resurrection bears the marks of his death still; that we too, bearing scars of life's challenges and tribulations, also make rise to new life in Jesus.

Thomas experiences the cost of the discipleship, and the miraculous victory over death. Overcome by all of this, he makes a confession of faith beyond that of any of the disciples to this point, he blurts out "My Lord and My God!" What started off as unbelief, has, through the touching of the wounds, become a bedrock belief for Thomas. Through the working through of his doubts, he becomes the leader of the gathered disciples.

We are beginning plans to have worship here in the Sanctuary, hopefully by the first Sunday in May. The timing for each of us as to when we will feel comfortable returning will vary, and that is ok. Some of us will need longer, and as our story shows, discipleship is different for each of us.

Living in Resurrection Times

But the call of Jesus is the same, even when the timing varies: it is to abundant life. And Jesus calls us to a world waiting for the healing power of Jesus on the other side of this pandemic. We aren't always sure what our role is going to be, but we are called to listen for what God might want us to do.

Let us be willing to see Jesus, and listen! Amen.