

## **“Locked Out, But Not for Long”**

**John 20:19-31**

**April 24, 2022**

**Second Sunday of Easter**

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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 Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”*

**John 20:19**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, come to us behind the walls and doors of our lives and reveal to us who you are as Savior and God, the peace of all life. Amen.

### **Message**

I read a story recently about a man who had visited a college which had for its students’ protection, security call boxes every few hundred feet. If you were wandering around the campus at night and felt uneasy about somebody following you, you could hit the button on that call box and have a security officer come investigate immediately.

On one of these phones hung a sign that said, “Out of Order.”

However, underneath the “Out of Order” sign someone had written the following: “Keep Running!”<sup>1</sup> So much for security!

It was noted after 9/11 how the “security business” industry went “through the roof” in this country, as people installed locks and alarms. And yet, as most experts stated, locks and alarms were not going to deter terrorists; nevertheless, people continued in their attempts to attain security.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, as some of you know, we purchased a new home, and one of the points of initiation, as with any new house or car, is locking yourself out. I could get into the garage, but that was about it! We had not yet found a place to put that

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<sup>1</sup> MONDAY FODDER, <http://family-safe-mail.com>.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, *Will Willimon’s Lectionary Sermon Resource* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 273.

extra key. Typically, we have always had a window to climb through; I know we will figure it out.

In getting ready for this sermon, I was also reading about a young boy who years ago locked himself out of his house, and then he tried to get back in by going down the chimney like Santa Claus. Needless to say, it did not work! He got stuck!<sup>3</sup> It was a bit traumatic.

There are all kinds of reasons why we lock ourselves out, or why we try to lock others out. It is quite natural, I think, when you have suffered trauma of some kind, or when you have been violated by some injustice, to find ways of securing your person or property. It is part of the way we respond, by putting distance between others and ourselves. We have this inherent capacity, I feel, to protect ourselves.

And not just physically. I know I see it as a pastor on other levels. There is a tendency when people breakup or go through conflict, or when there is pain in families or between people, or when there is loss, to close the doors. Who wants to deal with more pain? Love already hurts, so why hurt again?

Hence, there is sometimes a sense of isolation or fear of getting into another relationship. After all, if we just put locks on our relationships, and not relate, we will be safe, right? Rarely does it work that way. We think we might be able to outrun our problems, only to find out they appear in a different form in another context.

Since the pandemic, I think that isolation and fear have only grown. It was not good before the pandemic, but it is certainly not good even now. It is also complicated.

In addition, I cannot help but feel that not meeting face to face on a consistent basis has not been good, as we all too easily can go our own separate ways. We can so easily grow apart, lose touch, and not feel connected.

If I understand my wife's Peggy's role as a teacher, and not only Peggy but many others, teaching has become a kind of disparate journey to share and connect with children that they belong to a wider whole, that they are not separate; and not only children but the elderly and the poor. We can think of others.

## **Jesus is Coming!**

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<sup>3</sup> 11/24/03 - COLUMBUS, OH, ABC 13 National/World News Tonight.

Now the reason I have all this on my mind is because the passage of scripture we read a moment ago tells us about a group of people who are hiding behind locked doors. It is not just any group of people but the disciples of Jesus. It is night. It is a dangerous time in Jerusalem. The disciples had a weekend of violence and death. There are many reasons to be fearful, to be isolated.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the passage specifically says that the disciples were fearful and that they were fearful “of the Jews,” but a better way to understand it would be to hear how they were fearful of those who were in power, as all the disciples, of course, were Jews and as many Jews followed Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

I also don’t think that it is hard to see how these disciples who had risked it all, and who had believed in Jesus’ mission – were upset at what had happened, and were even terrified of all those who said, “Where is your Lord now? Some Messiah he was.” No one likes to be mocked, or ridiculed.

Therefore, it does not need to surprise us that those who closed the doors and locked the locks are Jesus’ own disciples! Remember that point. Remember that this is not a story about all the ways the world locks out the claims of the Christian faith. No. This is a story about the ways those of us who are Christians can lock our doors to Christ and live in a state of fear and isolation, locking out the One we say we follow.

Remember that Jesus does not come back to Caesar or to Herod, or to Pilate. He comes back to his followers! He is trying to get to them: to bless them, to give them peace, to send them on their mission, to breathe on them the Holy Spirit!

Just a tomb could not contain him, so our various locks and walls cannot keep him from coming to us!

That’s Easter! Jesus is always finding ways of getting through to us, just as he is always finding ways of breaking through our locked hearts and minds. In fact, the stronger the lock, the bigger the intrusion!

Let me try to put it the way John puts in our passage: *Jesus won’t be locked out from his own people – the church.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to William H. Willimon for these insights into the passage. See *Will Willimon’s Sermon Lectionary Resource* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 274.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1976, 55-58.

<sup>6</sup> *Will Willimon’s Sermon Lectionary Resource*, 275.

And yet, I don't think we as the church try to lock Jesus out intentionally. No, I suspect that in our attempts to secure ourselves from the world, we don't consider how we are leaving out Jesus too. We don't think about how we might not be welcoming him as a stranger or as a guest. Indeed, we don't think about how we might be locking him out when we avoid devotion time, or serving him, or giving, or praying; and we also don't think about how we might be locking him out when we keep our faith to ourselves and not share it with others. But we do.

Again, this passage is not about how the world keeps out Jesus; it's about how the church doesn't always receive Jesus as its Lord and God (John 20:28). It is about how the church can erect (and has often erected) walls that keep others from experiencing the full peace of the risen Christ and receiving God's grace (Eph. 2:11-20). We can so easily forget that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been abolished in Christ (2:15-16), or that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:28). We can forget that we who were far off as Gentiles now have access to the mercy of the God of Abraham because of the peace of Christ (Eph. 2:18). We are guests in the house of Israel because of the grace of God.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, try as we might to hide behind barriers or erect walls, Jesus has ways of entering anyway, all because he demolished them on the cross; he has put an end to the wall of hostility between us (Eph. 2:14). And not just by breaking it down, but by then coming out on the other side to seek, to find, to reconcile.

To receive Christ as Lord and God means that there are no more walls.

I don't know if you have ever read the famous poem by Francis Thompson called "The Hound of Heaven," but I would encourage you to do so. It is a poem about the way God pursues us: that try as we might to build walls, or erect fences and security systems; and try as we might to run the other way Jesus has ways of seeking us and finding us, often in surprising ways. This passage is one of three stories of the risen Christ in John's Gospel. Read them carefully. In each story, Jesus comes upon the disciples when they least expect it, to surprise.

### **Closing Easter Promise**

So, in an attempt to be faithful to this passage, let me end this morning not with an exhortation for you to go and unlock your doors; or even an invitation to

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<sup>7</sup> See Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

throw open the portals of your heart to let Jesus into your life. Rather, let me share with you a promise: that just as the risen Christ was not stopped by locked doors in 33 CE, know that the risen Christ will not be deterred by any locks that you have put on your doors, whatever they may be.

Our God is wonderfully resourceful, imaginative, and determined to have us.

Even in our fear, in our isolation, even in our betrayal, the first thing Jesus does is come and find us – his followers.

In fact, I believe that even now, even in this sermon (as small as it is), even here in this service, as you go forth, Christ is coming to find you.<sup>8</sup>

And the reason is because Christ is risen. He is risen, and he is coming for you and to you. That is the promise of Easter!

So receive his Spirit and go forth in his peace! He is sending out you now on a mission. Thanks be to God!

Amen!

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 275.