

Covenant Word

Behind Locked Doors

Psalm 16; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
March 30, 2008*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

To be truthful, I was surprised by the request for help. An unusually self-sufficient church member called. He had a friend, a close friend, and the friend's wife was dying of cancer. While the specialists were convinced that death was imminent, the woman wanted no outside help, no heroic attempts to even make her last days comfortable, no visitors (even her children had been banished) and certainly no attempts to save her soul. All she wanted was to be surrounded by her books, her husband, and this friend who was restricted to a certain amount of time per visit.

When he last visited with her, she asked him if he

would be willing to say her eulogy. He agreed but asked if she might re-consider talking with a minister before her death. He

told her about me, and she said I could come. I suspect this was more about satisfying her friend than it had anything to do with me.

The house was between David's school (at the time) and work. So on the designated morning, I dropped David into the masses of healthy, beautiful and vibrant youth and made my way to this house that stood in stark contrast, for it was filled with isolation, illness, sadness and death.

When the husband opened the door, before I could even identify myself, he smiled and said, "She won't see you, you know. I am the only person she is seeing, and besides she has gone to sleep. I was wondering, though, would you sit with me for awhile? It has been a long time since I had someone to visit with just me." As I stepped into the house, I was aware of the deafening quiet. Nothing seemed to move or breathe.

The house was beautifully appointed. We sat in the den which seemed to have been constructed to catch the morning light. As we talked, I began to observe

the face before me. He was about my age. His sadness and exhaustion was making its presence known in the lines and shadows around his eyes. We talked of normal things as he was weary of the events surrounding his wife's circumstances. He was gentle and kind, quick witted and mostly, it seemed, ready for this death watch to be finished. Our visit came to a natural end. I moved to make my exit, and he politely promised to come hear me preach sometime as if this would repay me for the time I spent with him. As I stepped out into the morning, the door closed behind me. I could hear the lock click into place as it echoed off all the hard surfaces in the house.

When have you shut a door and locked it tight?

Now, I am not talking about the normal lock of a door to insure some privacy in an office or at home to protect our possessions and loved ones. I am talking about that impulsive reflex when a loved one deserts us in death, or a friend fails us, or a family member breaks a promise, or a confidant succumbs to the temptation of rumor and suddenly, what we considered to be a private conversation becomes public information. Dreams are destroyed. Betrayals overtake what we thought was unconditional love. Rejection is easier than working things out, and it would seem that death is more victorious than life. We find ourselves profoundly disappointed and the words roll off our tongue from the depths of our despairing spirit:

"You just can't count on anybody anymore." And so we shut the door, turn the lock and listen as the click of its tumblers echo off the hard places

of our heart and soul.

When the disciples gathered in that room after the events of the crucifixion, I suspect that when they locked the door, the click of the lock echoed off the hard surfaces of their fear, shame and grief.

It was the evening after the resurrection, and all but one of the disciples had gathered in the room that I imagine was filled with long shadows of ambiguity. This detail that the gospel writer includes, i.e. that the door is bolted shut, immediately clues me in to their fear and to my own incessant need to check each door of my own home, not to mention my spirit, so that I know I am safe...I know I am protected from what lurks in the dark beyond the confines of what I deem to be known and safe space. It gives me a sense of power and control, as I would imagine these faithful few are in need of sensing after the devastating events surrounding the crucifixion. For just as we experience betrayal, one of their own had betrayed Jesus in an ultimate way. Just as denial seeps into our pledges of loyalty to the end, so they had all fled from the fray; gone into



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hiding; leaving Jesus to face his tormentors all alone. And so they gathered together behind a locked door, seeking safety from what might be outside and seeking solace within.

J. K. Rowling describes a similar room in her book The Order of the Phoenix, one of the Harry Potter books.

The children have their defense against the dark arts thwarted by a difficult headmistress of their school.

Unable to find any place to practice their skills to fight the evil Voldemort, they find within their magical

school that there is a sympathy to their plight. Walking down the hallway, wishing for a place to gather and practice, a wall suddenly changes. Doors mysteriously appear and then open to reveal the Room of Requirement. We are told that the room only appears when there is a need for it and that it will be equipped with all the items one might need for his or her unique and particular plight. The students then meet in this room to encourage and learn from one another. Each time they enter the Room of Requirement, the entry doors vanish so that they cannot be followed or disturbed.

It seems to me that the disciples in our gospel reading for today have found a sort of Room of Requirement in which to gather. Instead of doors that disappear in order to protect them from their enemies, we find that the disciples have shut and locked the door. They gather to encourage one another in their grief, guilt, and anguish. And they gather to share the news of the day. But what is most required, Jesus gives them. He comes to be present with them one more time, and He gives them His peace. Their denials and betrayals are immediately dismissed when He entrusts them to continue His mission. Then He gives them the Spirit by filling them with His life-giving breath, much as God breathed *pneuma*, "Spirit," into Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

They are all there to see Jesus except for Thomas. We do not know why he was not with the others, but we do know that when he joined them, they all told him in unison, "We have seen the Lord!"

Now the previous stories about the disciples teach us that Thomas was a pragmatist. When Jesus announced that the disciples would go with him to Lazarus' home in Bethany, right through the middle of enemy territory, it was Thomas that said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." When Jesus sat at the Last Supper table and told his friends not to be afraid, because they knew where he was going, Thomas quipped, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we possibly know the way?"

He was not automatic in his following. He was not willing to take another's word for it. He was literal-minded; a realist who appreciated the logic of what was true and provable. And so when his friends tell him, "We have seen the Lord," he does not put them down for their excited discovery, he simply says, "Well, for me to believe, I will have to touch the wounds on his hand, feet and side."

Thomas reminds me of John Updike's character Fogel in the

story "Short Easter." Keenly aware of the retirement that was drawing close, Fogel found many things in his day to day routine that caused him fresh reason for irritation: the line at the Post Office and the grocery store, other drivers' habits on the commute to work, an eyelash that troubles his eye, and now,

Easter was to be cut an hour short by day light savings time. It wasn't that he was pious or even to be counted among the faithful. Most Easter festivities he had experienced fell flat due to quarrelsome and embarrassed family members who

felt quite uncomfortable in their pristine Easter clothes. His were melancholy thoughts of headachy brunches where the champagne punch tasted sour, conversations lagged, and children hunted for eggs in the muddy cold. Most of all Fogel thought of how nature was never quite in cooperation with Easter day. This year it appeared would be no exception. It seemed that Easter would be a day of drizzle and chill, only there would be one hour less of it.

Fogel and his wife spend Easter morning working in their yard, and then they join friends for a meal, which Fogel describes as "pointless." When they finally return home, this husband and wife go to separate rooms to pursue their individual interests and memories. Fogel sneaks into his son's room and stretches out on his bed. It is not long before a deep sleep takes over, and he dreams of when his parents cared for him. In the dream, he was an innocent clutching his pet teddy bear. Heavy in every cell of his body, Fogel begins to awaken from the denseness of his dreams. Aware that it is still Easter, he also realizes that he is afraid...that the "atrocious weight of coming again to life was the unnatural ache of resurrection." Everything in the room is still in place, but Fogel personally recognizes that "something was immensely missing."

Thomas, maybe for the first time, grasped the truth about Jesus. And it is the key that unlocks the door so that faith was given room to grow. His proclamation, "My Lord and My God" is the pinnacle of John's gospel.

Don't you know that Thomas, this man of accuracy, reality and detail, was weighed down by what was "immensely missing?" I ache for his need to know absolutely for himself; his cynical refusal to accept Mary's experience in the garden; the obvious audacity he assigns to the other disciples' nerve to tell such a fantastic story about Jesus' appearance to them. No doubt, like Fogel, Thomas felt an unnatural ache for resurrection, but to come again to life was an atrocious weight he could not bear.

But then, there is Jesus. This same Lord, who refused to perform miracles in order that others might believe, appears to the disciples a second time for the sake of Thomas' faith! In an act of enormous kindness, Jesus shows him his hands and feet. He

encourages Thomas to use his finger to see the wounds. But, Thomas, in the end, does not have to touch. Yet, he no longer has to take anyone's word for it either. Thomas, maybe for the first time, grasped the truth about Jesus. And it is the key that unlocks the door so that faith was given room to grow. His proclamation, "My Lord and My God" is the pinnacle of John's gospel.

Surely it is of utmost importance that the sign demanded by Thomas was to touch the marks of Jesus' *wounds*. It was not the sign of His glory that gave proof, but the sign of his sufferings. Again and again this brings us back to the place where faith must stand—not in the place of clarity and certainty, but in the place of ambiguity and pain...the place behind locked doors. (Fleming Rutledge, "Doubting and Believing," [Help My Unbelief](#))

A couple of years ago, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church invited me to be one of their Wednesday night Lenten speakers. I was to talk about my personal faith journey and the ministries of Baptist Church of the Covenant. I stood to speak and recognized several of my neighbors and a few baseball field acquaintances. There was one man in particular that I kept trying to place. He was sitting with a woman. His arm was around her shoulder and there was an obvious easiness between them. They listened attentively, laughed at all the right times, and by the time I concluded, I remembered who he was. He introduced me to his new friend. He said they had met in a grief support group after his wife died. I asked if he was a member of St. Stephens and he said, "Our grief group meets here and when I saw that you were coming, I remembered my promise to you that I would come hear you preach sometime. So we came. Thank you for listening that day when you came to the house. It has been a hard road, but I don't feel all locked up inside any more."

"I don't feel all locked up inside any more."

Oh my friends, what would it take for us to let go of our fears and unlock the doors of our hearts?

If the presence of the risen Christ with you in your torment is not enough, what about this:

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Or this: *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

Or this: *Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.*

Or this: *Blessed are those who believe but who have not seen.*

It all comes down to Jesus, doesn't it? Jesus is the one who unlocks our doors. And if we cannot bring ourselves to unlock them first, it doesn't matter, for just like with those frightened disciples, just like with Thomas, and just like with us, Jesus will find a way to be present with us in our despair and longing. So thanks be to God for resurrection power that unlocks our

fears!

Thanks be to God for the presence of Divine comfort!

Thanks be to God for new beginnings and fresh starts!

Thanks be to God for the gift of merciful grace!

Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God! Amen

It all comes down to Jesus, doesn't it? Jesus is the one who unlocks our doors. And if we cannot bring ourselves to unlock them first, it doesn't matter, for just like with those frightened disciples, just like with Thomas, and just like with us, Jesus will find a way to be present with us in our despair and longing. So thanks be to God for resurrection power that unlocks our fears!