

Sermon April 24 2022 Rick Floyd

SCRIPTURE: John 20:19-31

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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe. Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON: "Behind Locked Doors" The Rev. Dr. Richard L. Floyd

The Second Sunday of Easter, traditionally called Low Sunday, can be a tough Sunday for a preacher for a number of reasons. First of all, the context of our preaching can be a bit discouraging. Churches typically have fewer than half the people as Easter Sunday, and I always preach better for some reason when there are more people present. It must have something to do with group dynamics.

Easter is always a high holy day in the church, a bright and festive day, and though the church in theory believes that Easter lasts for the Great Fifty Days, the second Sunday is, well, you know, Low Sunday. Plus, preachers are always exhausted and worn thin after Easter. Which is why, when I was an active preacher, I always handed it off to a seminarian or staff member or retired pastor. So here I am – what goes around comes around! But I have a confession to make: I like Low Sunday.

I like it for two reasons. First, the folks who come on Low Sunday – all of you, bless your hearts -- tend to be the faithful core of the congregation, and I don't have to explain so much of the Gospel. To use Eugene Peterson's helpful distinction, on Low Sunday there are more pilgrims and fewer tourists. I say that not to disparage religious tourists. God knows we have all been that at one time or another. God meets us where we are and even spiritual tourists need God's mercy and God's love. My point is just that hardly anyone feels a pressing social or cultural need to be in church on Low Sunday, so those who are here tend to be serious about what we are doing here, and I like that, since I am serious about what we are doing here.

But the second and more important reason I like Low Sunday is that it speaks deep truths about how the risen Christ comes to us. Low Sunday is sort of a down and out Sunday, and the Lord Jesus seems to appear especially to the down and out, and in down and out situations. If you read the stories of the resurrection appearances, it is startling that without exception the disciples are doing nothing especially religious when Jesus appears to them. They aren't praying or worshipping. In Luke they are walking on the road lamenting what had just happened. They're heartbroken. Or they are fishing, having given up their discipleship to return to their day job. Here in John's Gospel on Easter night the disciples are in a locked room, hiding in fear.

And it occurs to me that that is the church's natural state: a bunch of scared people locking out the world. You might argue that the disciples are not yet the church, until Jesus comes to them and gives them the Holy Spirit, which is John's version of Pentecost, and you would be right. The church without the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit is just a bunch of quite literally dispirited people hiding in fear from real and imagined enemies.

And that is one of the reasons I like Low Sunday. The disciples are so obviously failures at being disciples and so they share that in common with us. They're followers of Jesus, but they're just not very good at it. It's Easter and they don't even know it. They have nothing to offer as the church, no vision, no energy, no courage, no conviction. They are hiding. They are afraid. As far as they know Jesus is dead and done. The shepherd has been struck down and the sheep have scattered.

They should have believed the witnesses. Peter and the beloved disciple have been to the empty tomb. They have told the disciples what they have seen. Mary has told them 'I have seen the Lord.' They should have believed, but they didn't, and yet Jesus still comes to them.

So, this isn't a story about the disciples or doubting Thomas so much as it is a story about Jesus. We always want Jesus to meet us at our best, and maybe help us get a little better, improve us. But instead Jesus comes to us at our worst, and he doesn't care about improving us. He comes not to offer improvement, but resurrection. He comes not to bring the world as it is, only a little better oiled, but he comes to offer new life, a new heaven and a new earth.

And so, he comes to these dispirited disciples hiding behind locked doors, and he comes to us hiding among our manifold fears and anxieties. He comes among us and finds us worrying about our money and our health and our future and the future of our world, worrying about our image and our reputations. He finds us ready to hide behind locked doors to keep the world out.

He finds us afraid that we will be found out, that it will become known that we are not as courageous, virtuous and committed as we have led people to believe. If people really knew how self-centered and selfish we can be; if they only knew that we can be stinkers and schemers, can act dishonorably and shamefully, childishly, stubbornly. If they only knew.

But Jesus does know. Jesus knows and still he comes among us and stands there with his wounded side and those dreadful broken hands and says "Peace be with you." And if that isn't good news, I don't know what is.

And then he says something most astonishing: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” There must be some mistake. He can't mean us. We are hiding in fear behind locked doors. But there is no mistake. And this is the beauty of the church. We are the ones he sends, not the virtuous, the strong, the wise, the courageous. No, he wants us, sends us, foolish men and women, and slow of heart to believe.

I need to say a word about Thomas. Poor Thomas, he gets a bad rap. We mistakenly call him “Doubting Thomas,” but the word in Greek means unbelief, not doubt. And we shouldn't pick on him, because his unbelief is no different from that of the other disciples, in that he doesn't believe until Jesus comes to him. Just like all the others. I mean, they had the testimony of Mary. One of the messages of Easter is always believe the women.

Thomas wasn't there on Easter night when Jesus came among them. He missed it and he can't buy it, he can't believe it. The disciples said, “We have seen the Lord.” Notice it is the same phrase that Mary said when she came away from the tomb. But Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” So there! And the careful reader of this text will notice that Thomas never did touch Jesus, never needed to touch Jesus when Jesus appeared to him.

Thomas is the church, as well. Practical, not given to flights of fancy or imagination. Thomas is the church in all its stubborn, hard-headed practicality. He has been a disciple, sure, but look what happened to Jesus. It was time to get back to reality, back to basics, back to practicalities. Show me or I won't believe. And once again the good news of Low Sunday is Jesus comes to Thomas, comes to the church in all its shortsightedness, in all its stingy fearfulness, in all its ingratitude. Jesus comes and says, you want to see, see. You want to touch, touch.

That's the beauty of Low Sunday. The real Easter story is not so much last week among the lilies as it is here among the few of us who have gathered to hear how the church began with these fearful disciples.

And if we can dare to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, can we not dare to believe that he can raise us too, not just when we die or at the resurrection of the last day, but now, raise up a church, a people who on their own are dead or as good as dead, afraid and hiding, but who when he comes among them are raised to life, raised to become the church. To love as he loves, to forgive as he forgives.

One of my last years as an active pastor, we had a glorious Easter. The church was packed, the music was spectacular, we had more lilies than the lilies of the field. And on the Wednesday night after Easter, I dragged myself to come to church to two committee meetings that met at the same time. When I came in, there was one person at the first meeting, and when I went down the hall there was only one at the other. There were some important things to be done by each committee, but it was not to be done that night. On the way home I was complaining a little bit to the Lord, and I thought, well, people are busy, and they are volunteers, and it's Easter. And finally I said, “Lord, if you want something to happen here, you better do it, because we are not up to it.” And then the lightbulb went off in my head. Of course, we're not up to it. We never

have been up to it. That's the beauty of the church. What was I thinking? But still Jesus comes among us, still he sends us, still he calls us to be the church.

And later that week I had two funerals, and I look down at the faces of the people as I told them the good news of the Resurrection, the good news of the Gospel, the good news of Easter, and I thought, yes, this is the church. This is why we're here, this is what we are here to do. To be witnesses to the risen Christ. To tell people he lives, and we can live too with him.

So, I may feel a little low this Sunday, and you may feel a little low this Sunday, and this Sunday may feel a little low since it's called Low Sunday. But the Risen Christ comes to meet us when we're low, in fact, more likely than when we're not. And when he comes, he bids us peace and he sends us out in the power of the resurrection, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We're coming out of our locked doors. We don't need to hide. There is nothing to fear. Because it may be Low Sunday, but it's still Easter. And Christ is still risen. Alleluia! Amen.

*Our guest preacher this morning is The Reverend Dr. Richard L. Floyd, Pastor Emeritus of the First Church of Christ (UCC) in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Rick has been an active member of this congregation, First Congregational Church (UCC) in Stockbridge, MA, since 2013.*