

“Behind Locked Doors”

April 28, 2019

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: John 20: 19-23

This morning's Scripture passage is a continuation of last week's. It is still the very first Easter day – the day of Jesus' resurrection – only now it is evening, and the disciples are huddle together behind locked doors. Earlier in the day Mary came and told them that the tomb where Jesus had been buried was empty. Peter and John ran to see for themselves, then returned again. Mary came to them a second time and proclaimed that she had seen the Lord. She said Jesus was alive, and she had talked with Him.

Which begs the question, “Why aren't they looking for Him?” If Jesus is alive and walking the earth, why aren't they out looking for Him? Did they simply not believe Mary? You know, in typical male fashion, chalk up her story to the ranting of a hysterical woman? That doesn't really make sense. They responded to her first unbelievable story of an empty tomb and it checked out. There is no reason to not at least check this story out. Why haven't they split up in twos and began searching Jerusalem for Jesus? It says they had the doors locked for fear of the Jews, but I don't know that I buy that. After all, Peter and John had already ventured out to see the empty tomb. If they were really afraid the Jews were going to do the same thing to them as they did to Jesus, why would they run to Jesus' tomb? If soldiers were looking for them, the route to and from the tomb as well as the tomb itself would have been the first place the soldiers would have staked out.

The Gospel of John tells us the disciples had gathered together behind lock doors for fear of the Jews. I am not convinced it was for fear of the Jews. I think it was for fear of one particular Jew. A Jew named Jesus. Think about it, the disciples didn't exactly establish a new high score on the “best friend and follower matrix”. Sure they talked a good game. Peter lead the confident words when he said in Mark 14, “‘If I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And they all said the same.” Yet all those who said the same ran away and abandoned their Lord in the garden at His arrest. Peter lasted longer, but before the rooster crowed morning, he also had denied Jesus 3 times. What if what Mary said was true? What if Jesus was alive and He is bearing a grudge? What if the resurrected Lord's first order of business is to settle some old scores? Even if Jesus wasn't looking for revenge, how could they face Him after they had failed Him – after they left Him all alone when He needed them most? Maybe they chose to lock themselves inside as opposed to going out and looking for Jesus because they were afraid – afraid if they looked, they might find Him. For if they found Him, even if they did not have to face His anger, they would have to face their own shame. So they hid behind locked doors.

But then all of the sudden, Jesus just appears right there with them. Thankfully He comes in peace. The very first words out of His mouth are “peace be with you” and He repeats it a second time. He shows them the scars on His hands and side to assure them He is the same Jesus who they saw crucified. Then He says something strange. Verse 23, “If you forgive the sins of any,

they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” What a strange thing to say to this particular crew. These are the people who just denied Jesus in His hour of greatest vulnerability and loneliness. These are the people who were just cowering in fear, not wanting to see Jesus for they would have to face their shame. These are the people who desperately need forgiveness in order to move forward. To them, Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Putting the people who are in desperate need of forgiveness in charge of forgiveness. That is either crazy or genius. Whether crazy or genius, what it does is take forgiveness out of the exclusive realm of heaven and make it an active force on earth. It takes the power of the cross and makes it active now. It takes the good news of resurrection and makes it alive on earth now.

Personally, I think it is genius. When I was in psychology we studied something called cognitive dissonance. The example was this. You are taking an exam in college and the teacher suddenly leaves the room. This is an exceptionally hard test and you have your book and your notes right there on the floor next to you. You have friends sitting on either side of you. The teacher is out of the room. Soon other students start flipping open their notes and book. Others start conversations saying, “How did you answer number 3?” Everyone else is cheating, and because of it they are going to get a better grade than you, and this teacher grades on the curve. It is not fair. If you choose not to cheat and everyone who did cheat got a better grade than you, and the test scores stand, you are pretty sure cheating on a test is what God meant when He said “You shall not bear false witness” because cheating is a top ten offense when it comes to sins. Cheaters should be punished to the full extent of the law without exception. But if you do choose to take a look at your notes, or look at your friend’s paper, or look something up on your phone, then you are in a quandary. On the one hand, you consider yourself a good person. On the other hand, you just cheated on a test. Both of these cannot be true. You either need to conclude you are not a good person, or that cheating is not really that big of a deal. 10 out of 10 of us will conclude that cheating is not a big deal in order to protect our identity of being a good, decent person. Now if you were caught cheating on a test, who do you want determining your punishment: a fellow cheater or one who received a failing grade because they did not cheat?

Jesus came to the disciples, the very people who had denied Him and failed Him in His most desperate time of vulnerability and need. He said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” He gave them – He gave us – the gift of forgiveness and invited us to use it as people who need forgiveness ourselves. The genius is it takes the power of the cross – that is the power of forgiveness – and makes it active now. It takes the good news of resurrection and makes it alive on earth now. And it is the only way out of the tomb we create when we hide behind the locked doors of a broken relationship.

Because Jesus forgives us our sins, we can forgive those who sin against us. We are the only ones who can.

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