

“Getting through Locked Doors”
 Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
 April 8, 2018
 Easter 2 2018
 John 20: 19-31

Today is officially the second Sunday of Easter—the second out of seven. But *unofficially* this Sunday “Low Sunday”. It’s usually one of the lower attendance Sundays—and coming off the high of Easter—both in numbers and energy—there can be a low feeling to this day.

But I think there’s another—maybe deeper—thing going on in this week after Easter. I’m hoping that last Sunday many of us had that sense that Resurrection is real—and that we experienced it in some way together.

But I’m also imagining that for a lot of us this week has brought us down from that Easter high. We’ve gone back to the same troubles we had before Easter and maybe even some new ones. On Easter, those troubles may have stepped off center stage—and hope and resurrection and new life came into sharper focus. We even had a sense of being resurrection people.

Was it only a week ago that we felt that way?

This story of Jesus coming to the disciples behind locked doors is a good one for us this week.

It actually takes place on Easter evening. In John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene runs to the disciples and tells them she’s seen Jesus—not only seen him but talked to him. Maybe they had their Easter moment of thinking it might be true but it must have been fleeting.

Here they are—together and scared—behind locked doors. The text says that they are scared of the Jews—and there are reasons the story is told this way—but it is good to remember that the disciples themselves are Jews, and most of Jesus’ followers are Jews, so if they are indeed scared of the Jews, it’s a small leadership group they’re afraid of.

Much more likely is that they are afraid of the Romans—and there was good reason to be—especially after the body of Jesus is not in the tomb. Grave-robbing was a capital offense under the Romans. And—if the claim was that Jesus would rise from the dead—the most likely suspects would have been Jesus’s followers. So, these disciples had good reason to be behind locked doors.

But the good news of this story is that Jesus can get through locked doors. He could move through the doors that were literally locked by the disciples and he can move through the metaphorical locked doors of fear that we live behind today. The great news of Easter is that we don’t have to be full of faith or free of doubt—We don’t have to be brave or bold—for *Jesus to come to us*.

And the even better news is that Jesus keeps on coming.

We tend to focus on Thomas in this story and the way he needs graphic proof that Jesus has risen. But, in his defense, he’s only asking for what all the other disciples have already gotten. Thomas looks to be the bravest of the bunch—he’s the one that’s out and about, probably getting food for everyone else.

On that first Easter eve, Jesus comes to the rest of the disciples—and they know it’s him. And the story says they *rejoice*. When Thomas comes back they tell him all about it.

But—guess what? A week later *the doors are locked again*. Doubting disciples, not just Doubting Thomas. Which says to me that doubting is always going to be in the mix for those of us who are trying to follow Jesus.

And so is Jesus coming to us again and again in the places of our doubt and fear.

When Jesus first comes to the disciples, he greets them with the gift of peace. “Peace be with you,” he says. But they still don’t know it’s Jesus. They still don’t recognize him. The moment when they recognize him is when he shows them his wounds—the places in his arms where the nails went through on the cross and the gash in his side where the spear of the Roman soldier made sure he was dead.

And it’s the same for Thomas. When he sees those wounds, he knows this is really Jesus.

And it’s the same for us. It’s in those places of great pain and loss—in the gaping wounds of our lives and the world—that we will find Jesus. Or better said, where Jesus will find us.

There is a caravan of refugees from Central America—most of them are from Honduras. These caravans have been organized for years to draw attention to the plight of refugees in Central America. But this year, they rose to a whole different level of visibility with a series of tweets from President Trump.

How you see what is happening here has a lot to do with how close you get to it. President Trump—and President Obama before him—if you judge by their policies—see these people as foreign invaders of our country. Invaders have to be stopped by force. Since 2015, we have responded with a military solution—giving military aid so that Mexico can beef up their control of the Guatemala-Mexico border.

But if you get closer—if you talk to the people who are fleeing—if you hear the stories of the people on this caravan—you will see how cruel this response is. I have been talking to refugees from Central America for 35 years, and there are places now where life is more dangerous than it was during the wars. One of the main factors is the extraordinary level of gang violence and the way that gangs control neighborhoods and even whole towns.

The caravan of refugees that is in Mexico now is called, Via de Crucis, Way of the Cross. And if you get up closer than the twittersphere, you see the wounds. One Honduran woman shared that she had fled with her 17-year-old daughter who was raped by a gang member and who now feared for her life.

If you get closer to the wounds, you see that these are not invaders of our country. These are not people who are looking for a life of luxury cars and swimming pools. They are people who want the basics—a relatively safe life for their kids.

But you can’t see that unless you go toward what is unknown and maybe even makes you afraid. You can’t see Jesus, until you see the wound.

On Holy Saturday, we had a very small prayer service. Just a few women waiting around the tomb. And, for whatever reason—probably because it was simple—I was able to worship in a way that I usually can’t when I’m leading. We had a time of reflection on what this waiting time between Good Friday and Easter was like. And Vicar Tamika said something that took me to a new place.

She said that what was on her heart were the people who were close to Stephon Clark, the man who was shot dead by police in his grandmother’s back yard. She said she couldn’t stop thinking about the people who loved him—his kids, his grandmother, his brothers—and the trauma they were experiencing—not only because of his death but because of how he died.

After she said that, I couldn’t stop thinking about them either. Issues of gun violence—of police killings—of racial injustice—become overwhelming—and at a certain point numbing. I have to admit, while I knew the information of Stephon Clark’s tragic death, I had not really taken it in. It felt like just one more awful triumph of death in the world that I couldn’t take. I was afraid to go any closer. The doors of my heart were locked.

But Tamika's words and her prayer took me toward that wound. And in that place, I became more of the human I want to be—and I'm pretty sure it's because I saw Jesus there.

Recently, I caught up with a friend who I haven't seen in a long time. A lot has happened to us both. In the course of our conversation, she shared that she and her siblings have a phone call every morning where they read the scripture from the Word in Season devotional and they pray together. She told me how they started doing that.

Two years ago, her sister—at age 50—was about to get married for the first time. A week before the wedding, her husband dropped dead. They all felt helpless in the face of such pain. That's when they came up with the daily prayer together on the phone.

Staying there. Staring that wound in the face. Becoming a community of prayer and loving presence.

They not only saw Jesus, they *became* Jesus for each other.

Because that's the other thing that is going on when Jesus comes to the first disciples behind their locked doors. He breathes new life into them. He breathes some of his life into them. He gives them the Spirit he promised to give them.

Jesus gives them his Spirit, so that they can go out and re-present him. Not just speak and act on his behalf but *be* his presence in new ways and new forms.

Jesus comes into the locked doors of our lives and gives us his Spirit. His Spirit that can't be stopped by locked doors or walls of any kind. His Spirit that pushes us out of our own locked doors—real or spiritual—and into places of need—places where people are hurting and fearful and in need of hope and new life.

As we head into our Congregational meeting, I'm thinking about two things: our call to be faith-rooted community with no walls and that we bear Christ's name. We have a name—Christ Lutheran—that reminds us over and over again of who we are. We re-present Christ—we make Christ present in new ways and new forms—and in new places.

Week by week, Christ comes to us—here and in many other places—and he meets us wherever we are—full of faith or overcome by doubt or anywhere along that spectrum. And the good news is that *he doesn't let us stay there*. He breathes that New Life Spirit into us—and pushes us out the door—toward people and places that are broken and wounded and needing the restoring love of Christ.

And that's where we'll both see him and *be* him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.