

Behind Locked Doors
John 20:19-31
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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On Easter morning the disciples discovered the tomb was empty, but interestingly, their reaction wasn't joyful celebration, but fearful confusion. John reports Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the tomb, then after looking around, went back to the Upper Room, locked the door, and told the others what they didn't see. Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, lingered at the tomb to find out who took Jesus' body, when suddenly she encountered the Risen Christ. So, she then ran back to the disciples' hiding place announcing, "I have seen the Lord!" John doesn't report their immediate reaction, however, it's a safe bet they were dubious at best, since they stayed put and kept their door locked tight.

It's instructive for us to know even though our Easter mornings are celebrations, that first Easter morning wasn't. All four gospels have somewhat similar reports on this. Mary believed, but the men dismissed her news, in Luke's words, as "idle tales." The only variation is found in Mark. He has Mary and her companions fleeing from the empty tomb so filled with "terror and amazement" they said nothing to nobody. Matthew, like John, also reports Mary saw Jesus that morning, but again there's no report on the disciples' reaction to her good news.

So what should we make of the disciples' delayed gratification except to conclude they were all from Missouri, the "show me" state. This was especially true of Thomas who famously declared unless he saw and felt Jesus' wounds he could never believe. And so they spent their first Easter hiding behind their locked door.

Except for Luke's Christmas story, this passage from John's Gospel is probably the most frequently used lectionary reading in the Bible. Every Sunday after Easter, worshippers hear this story about the doubting Thomas and Jesus' response to his unbelief when he said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

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Jesus' dig at Thomas' doubt has prompted many preachers, myself included, to title their Sunday after Easter sermons, "Believing is Seeing," a play on the old saying "seeing is believing," the point being nobody denies what they can see with their own two eyes, but believing what we can't see takes a leap of faith.

Having said that, we need to define our terms. The New Testament word for “believe” means much more than intellectual assent. It really means totally trusting in something or someone. For example, if I have a headache, I take an aspirin trusting my headache will go away. Of course since aspirin is a proven medication that has a definite track record, when I take an aspirin tablet I’m betting on a sure thing. But let’s say a doctor is treating a patient who never even heard of aspirin. The doctor gives him a pill and a glass of water promising if he ingests it his headache will go away. Naturally he’s dubious, what if it doesn’t work, or what if this little white pill makes his sicker? Now the doctor, using her best bedside manner, has to encourage her patient to take a leap of faith saying, “Trust me, this little white pill won’t hurt you, it will help you.” So, he sets aside his doubts and makes the decision to believe or trust the doctor.

So, biblically speaking, to believe means deciding to trust. You bet your life that something is true and then decide to reorient your life around that truth. But that’s easier said than done, isn’t it?

When I’m volunteering at the Baltimore County jail, most of the young men who come to my Bible studies are already believers, or on the verge. Many of them attended church as children, unfortunately, when they hit their teens they stopped going, but they never stopped believing, especially now since they’re in crisis. Like most of us, they believe Jesus is the Son of God, but they find it hard to trust Jesus just enough to reorient their lives around his truth. And so to impress on them the need to trust Jesus, I tell them,

“Imagine you’re sitting in your cell with the door locked, and Jesus walks by with the key. ‘You want to come out and be free?’ he asks. ‘Sure,’ you reply. So Jesus unlocks and opens your cell door. ‘Come on out,’ Jesus says. But instead of stepping out into freedom, you don’t move. Freedom is just three steps away but you’re afraid to come out, because if you do, you have to trust God will help you overcome all your overwhelming troubles and challenges. Your life can be different if you take the necessary risks and do the hard work to become really free. So, even though Jesus unlocked and opened your cell door, even though you believe Jesus is God, unless you trust Jesus with your life, there you’ll always sit, afraid, confused and lost in your troubles.”

It sounds cold, but it’s true. Your life and impact on the world for good will remain insignificant until you really believe. In some ways my young friends at the jail are just like us and we’re just like them. Like them, we believe Jesus is God’s only begotten son, but again, like them, most of us find it hard to trust Jesus just enough to reorient our lives around his Truth.

That was the disciples’ problem on Easter morning way into the evening. They believed Jesus is God’s Son but they still couldn’t trust him with their lives. That’s why they were hiding behind locked doors, prisoners of their fears and confusion.

Today you are being asked if you believe in Jesus just enough to reorient your life around his Truth.

Let's be honest. Like the disciples on that first Easter morning we feel safer hiding from the challenges and problems of the world behind our locked doors. Like Thomas we doubt the power of God could ever work through us, so we hold ourselves back, protecting our selves from other people's pain and suffering and convincing ourselves, "God really doesn't expect me to get mixed up in other people's troubles, I have enough of my own."

At this moment some of you may be thinking, "Cahill's trying to lay a guilt trip on me. He's setting me up to do more in the church."

Trust me, that's not what I'm doing because I know from personal experience, guilt doesn't work. It only causes hard feelings and burnout so believe me, I'm not drumming up drones for church work.

But I am urging you to consider how your life can become much larger and more significant if you believe in Christ and his gospel just enough to allow your life to impact the world.

What do I mean by impact the world? Simply this, by making an indelible difference in the life of someone who can never pay you back. Here are just a few examples: a child living in a dysfunctional home who needs a healthy Christian role model, teens at risk desperate for friendship and guidance from adults who really care about their quality of lives and the health of their souls, single parents trying to make ends meet and hold their families together, not really knowing how (the all purpose manual has yet to be published). You get the picture, you impact the world by impacting a life of someone who can never pay you back, only because Christ first impacted your life (and you can never pay him back).

Of course, we Christians believe you impact the world with the gospel, especially the ancient Christian proclamation, "He is risen, he is risen indeed." Just as God raised up Christ from the dead, God raises up disciples who look for opportunities to love and serve in the name above all other names, Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

Here's today's homework assignment: Be on the lookout for the Risen Christ to step through the locked doors of your house, your office, even your church. Let Christ breath on you, and hear him say, "Receive the Holy Spirit." For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven..." In other words we are called by Christ to be an agent of reconciliation, bringing the people you are called to love and serve back to God. How? St Francis of Assisi tells us how, "Always be prepared to preach the gospel, if necessary use words."

Of course the time comes when it will be necessary to use words, but as we say in our weekly benediction don't worry about what you'll say because the Spirit of the Father will always give them to you.

This morning the Risen Christ is stepping through the locked door of your hiding place to empower you to spread the gospel by making yourself available to make an impact for Christ on the world.

Like Thomas leave your doubts behind and when Christ makes himself known, be ready to make your profession of faith "My Lord and my God!" by living and serving in his name.