

“Opening the Door to Faith”

June 4, 2017

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John 20:19-23

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.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

THE DAY OF RESURRECTION

Our lesson for today tells us, “It was the evening of that day ...”

What day was “that day”?

Well, it was the day of resurrection.

In John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene came early on the first day of the week to Jesus’ tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away. She immediately ran and told the disciples.

Peter and the “other disciple that Jesus loved” ran to see for themselves. Sure enough the stone was rolled away, and the tomb was empty.

All they found were the grave clothes, neatly folded no less.

How strange.

So, what did the disciples do next?

They went home.

They came. They saw. They went home.

They didn't believe in resurrection.

And neither did Mary.

She believed in grave robbers.

After the disciples left she remained outside the tomb sobbing.

But for some reason she looked into the tomb and saw that it was no longer empty.

Two angels were sitting where Jesus had been.

They asked her, "Why are you weeping?"

The Bible tells us they were angels, but Mary didn't see angels.

Mary saw grave robbers.

So she asked, "Where have you taken Jesus' body?

Show me show I can lay him to rest."

At that point Mary turned around and saw another man.

She assumed he was the caretaker at the graveyard.

"Why are you crying?" this man asked.

And Mary once again asks to find the body of the dead Jesus.

"If you've taken the body somewhere, please tell me."

At this point Jesus calls her name, "Mary."

And she recognizes him, "Rabbi," she replies.

Mary tries to hold on to Jesus, but she can't do that.

Jesus has a job for her to do.

He said, "Tell them I'm going to ascend to my Father and your Father, to your God and my God."

So, Mary went back to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord."

That was how the morning of that first day of week went.

LOCKED DOORS

Now it is evening.

And how have the disciples responded to this news?

Well, actually they don't seem to believe it.

They thought it was (as Luke's gospel puts it) an "idle tale".

And so, on the day of resurrection, they're huddled together behind locked doors for

"fear of the Jews".

Who can break through those locked doors?

Only Christ and his word of forgiveness.

Today is Pentecost Sunday.

Today we make the transition from the Sundays after Easter to the season of Pentecost.

Like Mary, instead of hanging on to our sorrows and our fears, we move out into the world.

We have been given a job.

We get to tell the story.

We get to tell the good news about Jesus.

We are no longer a community that stays behind locked doors.

We are a community that goes boldly into the world.

And yet how can we do that when many in the world think that our story is an "idle tale"?

How can we do that when many of us in the church are often filled more with fear than faith?

The disciples kept the doors locked on the day of resurrection for fear of the Jews.

But, that was not their only fear.

I think they were afraid of Jesus as well.

If Jesus had risen from the dead, how would Jesus greet these sad and unfaithful disciples?

Judas betrayed him and hang himself.
Peter denied knowing him.

The disciples did not even support Jesus with their prayers when he needed them.
And when the time of testing came, they all ran away and stayed away.

Yes, they lock the doors for fear of the Jewish authorities.
They came for Jesus.
They might come for us next.

But, they also locked the door just in case the story was true.
How could Jesus ever forgive his disciples when they had failed him so miserably?

The disciples, at this point, had lost all faith.
They had no peace.

That locked door represents not only the fear of disciples long ago.
That locked door represents our fear as well.
It is fear that separates us for each other, and it is fear that separates us from the Lord.

PEACE BE WITH YOU

What would it take to break down that door?

According to the story, the locked door is no match for the power of the risen Christ.
Jesus comes and stands among them.

And what are the first words out of Jesus' mouth?
"Peace be with you."

He didn't condemn them.
He didn't ask,
"Where were you guys when I really needed you?"

He spoke a word of peace.
He spoke a word of forgiveness.

And then Jesus showed them his wounds.
He showed them his hands and his side.

But, notice this.
When the Lord's first word is a word of peace and forgiveness,
the wounds no longer become something to provoke fear and closed doors.

The wounds are a cause for rejoicing.
The Bible tells us that the "disciples rejoiced when they saw him."

And I would say that they now understood resurrection for the first time.
They now understood what the prophet meant when he said,

"By his wounds you are healed."

They were healed by Jesus.
They could let go of the past and embrace God's future.

Jesus had opened the door to faith, not only for them but also for the world.

And as He had done with Mary earlier, Jesus gave the disciples a job to do.

He said,
"As the Father has sent me so I send you."

BREATH ON ME

It's Jesus' next action gives us the Pentecost connection.

It seems a bit unusual actually.
Jesus breaths on the disciples.

I read this week about a professor who liked to dramatically re-enact the stories of the Bible.
When he came to today's lesson he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little can of breath freshener. After giving his mouth a couple squirts, he went around the room exhaling into everyone's face.

What is this breathing on the disciples all about?
What does it mean?

It might be helpful to know that the word for “Spirit” and the word for “breath” is the same word.

The Spirit is the breath of God and the disciples receive that Spirit from Jesus.

Notice that after Jesus breathed on his disciples he said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

If disciples are to receive God’s peace and forgiveness and take up the challenge to spread God’s Gracious Word, one more thing is necessary.

They need to receive the Spirit of the risen Christ.

Today we will sing,
“Breath on me breath of God.
Fill me with life anew.
That I may love what thou dost love.
And do what thou wouldst do.”

In other words, as the risen Christ breathed the Holy Spirit into disciples long ago, so the risen Christ breaths the Spirit into us today.

On our own, we cannot get over the guilt and fear in our lives.

But, when we are filled with the Spirit, we are enabled to love what God loves.

We are empowered to do what God would have us do.

When we talk about the resurrection, we talk about the power of new creation.

When Jesus breathed on his disciples, he breathed new life into people that were essentially dead in their tracks.

It reminds us of that first creation in Genesis 2:7 when “the Lord formed man from the dust of the ground.” Without the breath of God human beings are nothing more than a lump of clay.

But, when the Lord breathed into Adam's nostrils, he breathed the breath of life.
And the man became a living being."

From the very beginning God, through the Word and Spirit, created new life.

FALL FRESH ON ME

But, today we learn that this process did not end.
The Spirit of God, the breath of God continues to create and renew.

It began with the disciples long ago, but that process carries on with us today.
"Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me."

The words of that hymn capture the promise of this passage.
The Spirit of the living God can fall fresh on us.

What keeps the door to your life closed?
Fear, guilt, anger, grief?

All these emotions were present when Jesus came to those disciples long ago.
Behind those locked doors, they carried heavy burdens.

But, Jesus relieved the disciples of those burdens.

He did it first by a sign of his forgiveness.
He showed them his wounds.
He showed them that even the greatest wounds can be overcome by God's grace.

And second, he relieved the disciples of those burdens by breathing new life into them.
He remade them into the people that they were called to be.

They became new creations by the power of the Spirit.

The Spirit of the living God did fall fresh on them, and that gave them a fresh start.

One of the most striking things in the New Testament is the difference between how the disciples acted before the coming the Spirit and how they acted after the coming of the Spirit.

Before the Spirit fell on them, the disciples were afraid of their own shadow. They often misunderstood and even rejected what Jesus taught them.

But, after the coming of the Spirit, they were like different people.

They boldly brought God's message of grace to a hostile world. They no longer stayed behind locked doors. They were not afraid of the Jews or anyone for that matter.

More than one biblical scholar has said that the best evidence for the resurrection is the lives of those first disciples.

How could these formerly fearful disciples face persecution and even death so willingly?
Just a few short days before they seemed overwhelmed by despair and death.

The answer is this: they met the resurrected Christ. The resurrected Christ breathed new life into them. They received the Holy Spirit.

PENTECOSTAL POWER

And it did not stop with just those few disciples long ago.

Today's lesson from John is a "sneak preview" of the Pentecostal power described in the book of Acts.

On that day we read about the rushing wind, the tongues as of fire, the proclamation of the Word by the disciples, the forgiveness and conversion of thousands from all over the world in one day.

What's going on?
That's what the people wanted to know.

It was the Spirit of the living God falling fresh on the people of God.

And that story continues.
Since that first Pentecost, many people have received the Spirit of God.

Many people have been "fired up" by the Word of God as revealed in the words of Jesus.

Many people have come out from behind locked doors to find a new life.
Many people have preached good news to a world that desperately needs to hear it.

Pentecost is not just about what happened way back when. It's about here and now.

FORGIVEN

You may have noticed that today's passage ends with a rather curious statement.

After the disciples are forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells them,

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;

if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

What did Jesus mean by this?

One commentator imagined the disciples of Jesus wandering the streets of Jerusalem saying to people at random, "Forgiven, Unforgiven, Forgiven, sorry pal, not you, Unforgiven ... and so forth."

That last line sort of sounds like this is true when you first read it. But, I think this last verse needs to be read in the context of this passage and the whole of Scripture.

Remember, the our lesson begins with Jesus coming through locked doors to disciples who had failed him so miserably.

What does the risen Christ do?

He gives a word of peace to people who knew no peace.

Jesus didn't come to judge his disciples.

He came to save them.

I would suggest that the gracious words of Jesus suggest how this last verse is to be interpreted.

Grace calls forth gracious living.

We do not "retain" the sins of others and judge them.

We forgive and allow for the possibility of God's grace.

In fact, Jesus said as much.

In the Lord's Prayer he said that we should pray this way,

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Retaining the sins of others is bad for our health ...bad for our physical and bad for our spiritual health.

The Spirit filled Christian lets the sins of the past go so that God's future may be embraced.

Our lesson for today reminds me of a motto that from the United Methodist Church.

It goes: "Open hearts, open minds, open doors"

They use that motto in commercials advertising their denomination to the world.

I like that.

I think its a great description of the people that we are called to be.

We are not a people who want to accuse and blame others.

We are not a people who want to retain the sins of others.

If we retain the sins of others, the door of faith cannot be opened. We will remain huddled together behind locked doors.

We will not love what God loves, and we will not be able to do what God would have us do.

But, if we open ourselves up to the power of the Spirit, new possibilities emerge.

The Spirit allows us to open the door of faith.
The Spirit opens up our minds to the possibility of grace.

The Spirit opens up our hearts so that we can begin to understand the joy and sorrow that can be found in every person's heart.

Today we take the Lord's Supper.
The words you know so well.
Body broken for you.
Blood shed for you.

Sometimes I think we know those words too well.
We use them so much that they lose their meaning.

And so today I want you to use your imagination to breath new life into this familiar sacrament.

As you take the Lord's Supper, think about those disciples who huddled behind locked doors long ago. Imagine what it was like when Jesus came among them, and showed them his scars.

How did they feel when they realized that by his wounds they were healed?

How did they feel when they realized that these awful scars had become signs of peace and forgiveness?

And then I want you to think about your own scars.
Where are the broken places in your life?
What fear keeps you behind locked doors?

Imagine that Jesus breaks into that fearful place, the place that no one else knows about.

He shows you his scars.

He hands you the bread and the cup.

And then he says,

“This is my body broken for you.
This is my blood shed for you.”

“Peace be with you.
Your sins are forgiven.”

Can you imagine that?
That’s the first step to opening the door to faith.

Amen.