

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, 4/19/2020

John 20: 19-31

Out From Behind Closed Doors Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

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With this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter coming up we are also entering into a fourth week of not being able to gather physically to worship due to the need to isolate and protect one another in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. I find myself, as I'm sure many of you do as well, getting restless – anxious to know when will this be over. When will we be able to be “normal” again? Even in my restlessness and all my trying to anticipate and look forward to opening the doors on our lives again, I do wonder how will we be changed by all of this? Will we be changed? And perhaps most importantly, most essentially, I wonder, how do we open ourselves to a change, a transformation, that needs to happen?

One of the unexpected things that's happened to me is the experience of coerced solitude. Normally I cherish times of solitude in my life. They are the times when my soul is refreshed, my energies replenished, when I can experience the beauty of life around me. But the thing I realize is that kind of solitude is something I embrace with choice and intention. This coerced solitude and isolation in the midst of a world-wide pandemic is something completely different. And because it is coerced, forced on us, it engenders fear.

All of this resonates as I ponder our Gospel reading from John 20:19-31. It's the passage where we hear how, on hearing from the women that Jesus' tomb is empty and being told that Jesus has risen from death, the disciples are

shut up behind closed doors in an upper room for fear. And Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Then again he says, "Peace be with you", and breathes on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained."

You'd think that after that – after that joyous, unbelievable, empowering fulfillment, Jesus showing himself to his disciples risen from the dead – you'd think that they would know no fear; that they would unlock and fling open the doors and shout the good news from the rooftops and in the streets. But no ... that's not exactly what happened. They seem to have kind of whispered the good news. They told Thomas one of Jesus' disciples who happened not to be in that upper room with the doors locked. But Thomas didn't believe them; couldn't take their word for it. And the next week there they all were again in the room with the doors locked out of fear. And Jesus again stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." And he showed Thomas his wounds as well.

"Peace be with you," says Jesus. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven ..."

We know that shortly after, Jesus' disciples began to give witness that God had raised Jesus to life. In the New Testament Acts of the Apostles we are given a

picture of this after - resurrection, life-filled and life-giving community. This “new normal”:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed their possessions were their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them. (Acts 4:32-34)

What was it that compelled those first disciples to move out from behind those closed doors? What is it about knowing that “Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed!” that pulls us out from behind what we are comfortable with, what we know and understand to be normal, all the habits of behavior and belief that we hold on to that shape our responses to others and the world around us? How do we move out from behind what is normal into a world where we experience a grace that cannot ever adequately be described?

We cherish the holy moments in our lives – moments of spiritual uplift, worship, prayer, inspiration – the moments of communion with God and with those whom we love. We cherish those moments and return to them again and again for comfort, hope, even healing. In the face of resurrection – the joy of Easter – it is tempting as Christ’s church to stay behind the closed doors of our holy moments – or at least set certain terms or norms that filter when the doors are open to the world. But what happens when the world invades our holy moments? What happens when the virus hits, when the prospect of death and grief raise up?

Something, someone will intrude. Yet we human beings can make it so hard for others to get in – get through the locked doors of our lives and hearts. There is always some part of us that we hide from others, from ourselves. We can be so afraid of showing others where it hurts; afraid of revealing our need and weakness and uncertainty; afraid that if we do we will be judged and found wanting. So we lock the doors of our lives, of our hearts and minds, protecting the wounded places deep within our souls. We don't want others to look too closely at our wounds and scars. Yet now in our coerced isolation when we do come face to face with the nitty gritty of human need, come face to face with the injustice and inequalities of our systems, come face to face with our own grief and misunderstanding and fear, come to that place where our own wounds are tender ... well then is there any graceful way to ask for what we need, any graceful way to beg? No, when confronted with our own wounds and the wounds of others there is nothing gracious about any of it! Look at Thomas ... he was anything but gracious when the others told him, "We have seen the Lord!" No! Thomas said, "I don't believe you. I saw him crucified, dead and buried. Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the wounds, I will not believe!"

Thomas' outrage, his fierce refusal to close his eyes to the fear and pain and grief around and within him, echoes our outrage. He won't embrace resurrection, a "new normal", if it means denying the wounds and the death.

Jesus, when he is risen from death, doesn't appear in triumph to multitudes of people, saying, "I told you so. See now no one can deny who I am. No one can have any doubt." He doesn't humiliate or judge those who put him to death. No, he comes without fanfare, simply appearing in that upper room where the doors are locked. He does not come with power and judgment, but with words of peace, forgiveness and sending out.

With his words, the risen Christ unlocks our hearts and minds, opens our souls gently, over time, over and over, invites each one of us to see and touch his wounds, see and touch the wounds in ourselves, the wounds in others, and know healing, forgiveness, salvation, and new, resurrected life. All that divides and separates, all the hatred and hurt, bad feelings and hurt feelings, all the certainties and uncertainties, all the fears and anxieties, convictions and conflicts that divide and separate people from one another, leaving us frightened, hurting, condemning and violent people; all of it is redeemed, transformed into a community of love and compassion.

"Peace be with you," says Jesus. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." And in great grace God gives great power.

The Risen Christ walks through our closed doors, into our holy moments and into our moments of fear and hurt, and breathes life into us. And then sends us out to contend with sin, with all that afflicts and wounds others in this world. And so the church moves, we move, out from behind our closed doors. The disciples become apostles, followers become those who are sent out to witness to the resurrection and God's healing, forgiving, reconciling grace.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed their possessions were their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them. (Acts 4:32-34)

One of my favorite resources is *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, the New Testament with commentary from two Jewish rabbis. In their commentary on the phrase "... those who believed were of one heart and soul", they point out that in the Jewish tradition of understanding scripture, "heart and soul" are often paired to represent the completeness – the wholeness – of one's obedience to God. This totally exploded the normal Christian understanding of the passage, which understand it as referring to the unity of the Christians in belief, the absence of disagreement and anything that would divide them. ... What a difference it makes to think of being of "one heart and soul" as being

wholly committed to the mission Christ sends us on, rather than in complete agreement!

We are even now Christ's community of presence in this world. Great grace is upon us as Christ's church. We are a community of disciples become apostles – those sent by God to offer what we have, what God has given us, for the needs of others. WE are a community where forgiveness can be given and received, where wounds are touched and healed, where all are welcome to enter into our holy moments and know the risen Christ, wounds and all. Amen.