

Unlocking Doors John 20:19-29

On that same evening (Resurrection Sunday) the followers gathered together behind locked doors in fear that some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were still searching for them. Out of nowhere, Jesus appeared in the centre of the room. Jesus said: may each one of you be at peace. As He was speaking He revealed the wounds in His hands and side. The disciples began to celebrate as it sank in that they were really seeing the Lord. Jesus said: I give you the gift of peace. In the same way the Father sent Me, I am now sending you. Now He drew close enough to each of them that they could feel His breath. He breathed on them.

Jesus said: welcome the Holy Spirit of the living God. You now have the mantle of God's forgiveness. As you go, you are able to share the life-giving power to forgive sins, or to withhold forgiveness.

All of the eleven were presented with the exception of Thomas. He heard the accounts of each brother's interaction with the Lord.

The Other disciples said: we have seen the Lord.

Thomas said: unless I see His hands, feel the wounds of the nails and put my hand to His side, I won't believe what you are saying.

Eight days later, they gathered again, behind locked doors and Jesus reappeared. This time Thomas was with them.

Jesus said: May each one of you be at peace. He drew close to Thomas. Jesus said: reach out and touch Me. See the punctures in My hands, reach out your hand and put it to My side, leave behind your faithlessness and believe. Thomas was filled with emotion and said: You are the one True God and Lord of my life. Jesus said: Thomas you have faith because you have seen Me. Blessed are all those who never see Me and yet they still believe.

Where is your faith and belief this morning? Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. And I wonder how many of you are still holding onto the hope that this resurrection provides both for today and for the future. Or are you someone that struggles to accept this miracle?

Let's see what the disciples were up to on that Easter evening – the first day of the week, the day after the resurrection. Mary Magdalene had rushed to tell them – I have seen the Lord. She was responding with joy and obedience by telling the disciples but they didn't believe her. Of course, in those times women were not considered as reliable witnesses – I think it was great that Jesus chose to appear first to a woman – don't you?

Now the disciples obviously had other things on their mind – will the Jewish leaders find them and kill them as well, because of their belief in Jesus? So here they were, hiding in a house, with the doors locked and they were shaking in fear. And then here comes Jesus – suddenly appearing – no locked doors or walls could keep Him out.

We have Jesus whose tomb is open and empty. We have the disciples in a house which has become their tomb. Jesus is on the loose and the disciples are bound in fear. The disciples have separated themselves and their lives from the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Their doors of faith have been closed. They have shut their eyes to the reality that life is now different. They have locked out Mary Magdalene's words of faith, hope, and love. They left the empty tomb of Jesus and entered their own tombs of fear, doubt, and blindness. The locked doors have become the great stone sealing their tomb. They have locked themselves in.

No locked doors or walls can ever keep Jesus out from those He loves. As Jesus calms the disciples He again identifies Himself with His Father. He tells them that He has been authorised by God for the work He has done. And He then passes His Ministry task onto the disciples – to spread the Good News of salvation around the world.

Then Jesus breathes the power of the Holy Spirit upon them. If we go back to Genesis we read that God created man but man did not come alive until God breathed into him the breath of life. God's first breath made man different from all other forms of creation as He imparted eternal, spiritual life. With this inbreathing came the power to do God's will on earth.

We read that Thomas, one of the disciples wasn't with the others when Jesus first appeared to them after the resurrection. We don't know where Thomas was and I think it is sad that he has been labelled as 'the doubter.' Yes, Thomas was a doubter, but his doubts had a purpose – he wanted to know the truth. Thomas didn't idolize his doubts, he gladly believed when given reasons to do so. Doubting was his way of responding, not his way of life. Thomas struggled to be faithful to what he knew, despite what he felt. Thomas was reluctant to believe the other disciples' witness to Christ's resurrection.

Now we read that Jesus wasn't hard on Thomas for his doubts. Despite his scepticism, Thomas was still loyal to the believers and to Jesus Himself. Some people need to doubt before they believe. Doubt isn't necessarily a bad thing. Doubt encourages rethinking, to sharpen our mind then to change it. But doubt was never meant to be a permanent condition.

Look down at your feet – do you have one foot lifted – poised to step forward in faith with Jesus or poised to step backward because you doubt. There is no motion until the foot comes down. Thomas didn't stay in doubt, but allowed Jesus to bring him to belief.

Don't settle into doubts, move on from them to decision and belief. His inquisitive mind let him to naturally doubt God's work in the world but also led him to pursue answers to his questions which ultimately led him to great faith. When Thomas believed he was quite courageous. In John 11:16 Thomas urged all the disciples to accompany Jesus to Judea that they might die with Jesus. Thomas went to Syria, ancient Persia and India sharing the Gospel and he was murdered in India in 72AD because he wouldn't worship an idol. Thomas became the Patron Saint of people struggling with doubt.

I think many of us have wished we could actually see Jesus, touch Him and hear His words, to sit down with Him and get His advice in person. Thomas wanted Jesus' physical presence too. Jesus says we are blessed if we can believe without seeing. But God's plan is wiser. He has not limited Himself to one physical body. He wants to be present with us at all times.

Jesus' resurrected body was unique. It was not the same kind of flesh and blood Lazarus had when he came back to life, Jesus' body was no longer subject to the same laws of nature as before His death. He could appear in a locked room; yet He was not a ghost or apparition because He could be touched and could eat. Jesus' resurrection was literal and physical – He was not an embodied spirit.

Even now He is with you and me – wherever you are at this precise moment. Our locked doors cannot keep Him out as He is always with us in the form of the Holy Spirit. We have all the proof of Jesus in the words of the Bible and the testimony of believers. A physical appearance would not make Jesus any more real to us than He is now.

We may be living today in the freedom and joy of resurrection or behind our own locked doors. Has your life changed after Easter or have you locked doors in your life, heart or mind?

Yes, our world has been rocked by crises and today we are witnessing an uncertain life. You may have been wishing you could just pull the blankets over your head and stay in bed until it is all over. Some days it seems easier and safer to lock the doors and avoid the circumstances and people of our lives. Sometimes we just want to run away, hide, and not deal with the reality of our lives.

And of course, with COVID 19 that is what we have been told to do – stay at home. And this is impacting our mental health and our anxiety levels may be on the increase. We may have to close our doors and stay at home for our own and others protection, but this does not mean shutting the doors of our life, our mind or our heart as this just imprisons us.

Our Scripture is telling us more than the house, the doors and the lock – it is describing the inner condition of the disciples. The locked places of our lives are always more about what is going on inside of us than around us.

What are the closed places of your life? What keeps you in the tomb? Maybe, like the disciples, it is fear. Maybe it is questions, disbelief, or the conditions we place on our faith. Perhaps it is sorrow and loss. Maybe the wounds are so deep it does not seem worth the risk to step outside. For others it may be anger and resentment. Some seem unable or unwilling to open up to new ideas, possibilities, and change.

Jesus is always entering the locked places of our lives. He enters unexpectedly, perhaps uninvited and sometimes even unwanted. He steps into our closed lives, hearts and minds. And what does He bring – as He breathes new life into us He brings us peace. He gives us all we need so that we might open our doors to a new life, creation and way of being. This is happening all the time.

Regardless of the circumstances we are living in today, Jesus shows up offering and embodying peace and life which are the reality of resurrection. They do not necessarily change the circumstances of our life and world but enable us to meet and live through today's circumstances.

When Jesus arose from the tomb, He gave to the world a new kind of love and a new kind of life – eternal life. Out of that life has grown a new kind of ethics and a new standard of moral power that can destroy hatred, bitterness and selfishness in every form. The resurrection of Jesus meant that satan was defeated and that evil could be dominated by God's love. Sin could be mastered. When we realise what the resurrection of Jesus has meant potentially to the human race, we must stand amazed.

Prayer of Confession.

This prayer has 2 parts. As I read part A I would like you to sit with your palms downward – on your lap. This symbolizes putting things down and letting go of them. As I read part B I would like you to sit with your palms facing up – this symbolizes receiving from God. Between each section we will have a pause.

Part A Father, we know that fear and other emotions get in the way of our relationship with You. We want to let go of all the things that get in the way.

Part B Father, we thank You that Your love casts out our fear. We want to receive Your love.

Part A Jesus we know You are holy and the things we do wrong spoil our relationship with You. We want to put down our bad habits and the things we do that get in the way.

Part B Jesus we thank You that You have paid the price for all the things we do wrong. We want to receive Your forgiveness.

Part A Holy Spirit we want to put down and let go of all our wrong attitudes and thinking.

Part B Holy Spirit, we thank You that You comfort and guide us into all truth. We want to receive Your wisdom.

Amen.