

**2nd Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31**

**April 11, 2010
Bakersfield, CA**

"Behind Closed Doors"

Holy Week is central to the story of Jesus' passion and death. The gospels devote a great deal of attention to the week before Easter. From Palm Sunday through Jesus' burial on Friday evening, one quarter of Matthew's entire book is devoted to that week. Nearly a third of Mark's gospel and about 40% of John's gospel are dedicated to that week! Luke devotes the smallest portion to that week, only 18% but that's still a remarkable amount. But what about the following week? We know all about the week before Jesus' death; but what do we know about the week after his resurrection?

We ought to have a particular interest in that less-heralded week; after all, this is where we live. Not only is this particular Sunday the week after Easter, but every day of our lives is lived during a week after Easter.

The second week is really a continuation of the story of Jesus' resurrection and his appearance to his followers. You recall, it was Sunday evening, the first day of the new week; it was Easter night in fact, but the disciples didn't know that. All they knew was that they had found His tomb empty. They huddled together behind locked doors and closed windows, afraid. . . fearful of what lay ahead, anxious about the future. Who hasn't been afraid at some time, or anxious about the future? Many a congregation faces an uncertain future...

And that's right where the Risen Christ met them, and still meets disciples today: behind closed doors. Christ meets us in deeply personal ways, in the private arenas of our lives, behind our closed doors. There are some things we must do alone - like being born or dieing - no one can do these things for us. In the same way no one can believe for you; no one can meet Christ for you. The Risen One meets each person, behind closed doors.

Jesus entered that room of fearful disciples and said, "Peace be with you." This is no casual greeting, even if it sounds so. It is a formal word (the same as the angels spoke to the shepherds at Jesus' birth) to reassure the hearers that they have nothing to fear from the divine presence they are witnessing. The Risen Christ enters and offers them peace, a gift that is a fulfillment of his promise made before he was crucified. When the disciples were fearful at the Last Supper Jesus had assured them that his parting gift

of peace would be lasting, for it is related to his return. Then, he had told his disciples, "Peace I give to you, but not as the world gives." (Jn.14:27-28)

Now, in his return, he breathes on them the H.S., who is the enduring presence of Jesus Christ, and gives them the peace which casts out all fear. Reminds me of a plaque I once saw which read, "Fear knocked at the door. Faith in God answered. No one was there."

The story of Jesus meeting his disciples in that locked room continues by describing the five different kinds of people who believe in the resurrection and receive power to become the Body of Christ and continue his work:

- 1. Beloved disciple - gets to empty tomb first and believes w/o seeing Jesus.**
- 2. Mary Magdalene - sees Jesus but doesn't recognize him until called by name.**
- 3. Disciples in upper room - believe only after seeing him.**
- 4. Thomas - believes after demanding and getting tangible proof.**

Thomas, known as "Doubting Thomas", arrived late and missed meeting the Risen Jesus. He refused to believe the disciples' account until he could see and touch for himself. Yet Jesus did not hold him in any less esteem because of his demand. In many ways Thomas is like the average Christian: wanting to be more than an average believer but inclined to be pessimistic. By the grace of God every one of us can be more than just an average Christian -- and I think that each of us wants to be that "more." Jesus helped Thomas to grow and to become that "more" and that's what he'll do for each one of us.

Thomas gets his proof, seeing and touching the wounds in Jesus hands and sides, and knows that the Risen Jesus is the same as the Crucified Jesus. Thomas then confesses his belief in the very words the Psalmist uses, "My Lord and my God!" He gives Jesus the definitive title: YHWH God, and on this triumphant note the gospel is complete, for at the beginning of John's Gospel we are told that the Word was with God and the Word was God. Now that theme is repeated: Jesus (the Word of God) is declared to be God. He is God at the beginning, and God at the end; alpha and omega, who is and who was and who is to come. In other words, God of the past, present, and future.

We continually recall God's actions from the past, from Creation to the present. Each prayer of thanksgiving at Communion or Baptism recounts God's saving acts on our behalf. God is in our past and can even heal the past. That is important to remember.

God will be in our future, as well. Many of us are anxious about the future. We have fears about health, finances, our children, stability in the world. Do you think God, who has loved us and sustained us thus far, is suddenly going to abandon us? Of course not. The future is in God's hands. Let us not forget that. But let us also not push God off to the future only, the sweet by-and-by.

God is God of the past, the future and, but equally important, of the present. God is God of the now! What bankrupt lives we lead when we do not perceive God in the present moment. [S. Cal. paper carried the story during WW II of a man from the south who had come to work in an aircraft plant. He wanted to do his part for the war effort, and having a large family he did not qualify for military service. A number of weeks went by and his paychecks never showed in the office as having been cashed. Further investigation revealed that he had all his paychecks neatly filed away. Having never before seen a check he assumed they were papers expressing appreciation for his part in the war effort. Meanwhile, he was working at another job to support his family. Amusing, but tragic. The poor man didn't recognize what was important in the present].

This the day the Lord has made! God is at work in our world and our lives this very day. God is faithful and loving today. Regardless of the burden we are carrying, God is available to us this moment.

Earlier I stated that there were five different kinds of people who believe in the resurrection. The fifth group are those of the present moment: those who believe at a distance. [Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish (A.D. 250) once said, "The proselyte is dearer to God than all the Israelites who were at Sinai. For if those people had not witnessed thunder, flames, lightning, the quaking mountain, the trumpet blasts, they would not have accepted the rule of God. Yet the proselyte who has seen none of these things comes and gives himself to God and accepts the rule of God. Is there anyone dearer than this one?"]

Jesus said this as it shows here in John's gospel: "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe." They too shall join in the body of Christ and share in the power of the resurrected life. These are the disciples who have met the Risen One, behind closed doors, now, today, in the present.

The important question for us is not "*was* resurrection real?" but "*is* it real?" Not "*did* it happen?" or "*will* it happen?" but "*does* it happen?" The Living Christ calls us out from behind closed doors to new lives. [A terrifying prospect for many and perhaps the reason so many would rather believe it happened back then, or maybe it will happen sometime in the future; but surely it doesn't happen now, certainly not today, not in my lifetime.]

We wax sentimental around Christmas and ask how can we keep the Christmas spirit all year round. It's so much more important that the music and message of *Easter* be heard year round. He is alive! He is with us, giving us hope to live a new life and enter the future unafraid.

We need not fear going out in His name for Christ is the Alpha and Omega and everything in between. And He said, "I am with you always, even to the close of the age."