

John 20:19-21

March 30, 2008

“Unlocking Doors of Fear”

You recall, it was Sunday evening; Easter in fact, but the disciples didn't know that. All they knew was that they had found His tomb empty; evidence of something. They huddled together behind locked doors and closed windows, afraid.... And that's where the Risen Christ met them ... and still meets disciples today: behind closed doors, in the midst of fear. Christ meets us in deeply personal ways, in the private arenas of our lives, behind our closed doors, or in places where fear grips our lives. There are some things we must do alone - like being born or dying - no one can do these things for us. Just like no one can believe for you; no one can meet Christ for you.

The battle is lost or won in the secret places of your heart, the center of your will. It is never settled in the external world: trying to do things for God, or in God's name. The Spirit of God, in the risen Jesus, meets you alone where he asks you to surrender to Him. It may take a minute, a year, a life-time. That is the great turning point in life. From that point we either go toward a more listless and useless type of Christianity, which is worn only on the surface, or we become more and more ablaze with God's glory and thereby useful to Him.

[Recall Jesus' words in Matt. "... when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen." It's the honest to God prayer, the prayer from the heart, that gets answered. Still true today: Christians who experience abundant life have an active, regular prayer life where they can grow in their closeness to God.] Yet Jesus does not stay there, locked up in our hearts. Let us not be tempted to be hypocrites, pretending we pray regularly in secret when we don't; or an excuse for not ever praying in public, thereby cutting off opportunities to witness to faith or encourage others in the faith. Life in Christ is always individual, but never solitary.

Jesus entered that room of fearful disciples and said, "Peace be with you." But Thomas was not there and later, when he was told the news that Jesus had risen he refused to believe it. That was like him anyway, Thomas the skeptic. You recall how earlier, when Jesus had said let's go to Bethany

where Lazarus was ill, Thomas' reply had been "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). He expected the worst.

Was Thomas a pessimist? [One person has described a pessimist as someone who burns his bridges behind him and then crosses them before he gets to them. Or, a pessimist is one who, of two evils, chooses them both! Okay, or the old glass of water: the pessimist says it is half empty, the optimist says it is half full. The engineer says the glass has twice the volume that is presently required.] Was Thomas a pessimist or, was Thomas so broken-hearted and disappointed after the crucifixion of Jesus that he could not fathom any news being good? Have you ever been in that situation?

Thomas stands out to us not because he doubted the resurrection, but because he made the mistake of withdrawing from Christian fellowship when his heart was broken. It looks like he left the company of his friends to be alone with his grief. And because he was not there with his fellow Christians, he missed the first appearance of Jesus.

You miss a lot when you try to go it alone. When sorrow and grief come, we often tend to shut ourselves up and withdraw from others. A person loses a child or a spouse and so leaves the church – I understand the need to be alone for a time, but permanent separation cannot help. Another realizes the pastor has feet of clay and so leaves. Another does not find everything to be just right and convenient for their children, so they leave. And on it goes. But that is the time, in spite of our sorrow, in spite of disappointment, when we most need the fellowship of Christ's people. That is when we most need to ask others to pray for us. It is there we are most likely to meet him face-to-face and to have our wounded spirits healed. Those who love the Lord need to be here with the rest of the believers, over and over again. It puts earthly things into proper perspective. It's a vital sign to the rest of the church family.

Our loyalty needs to go way beyond the pastor, the music director, the buildings. If Jesus died on the cross and is now just a dead martyr, then we can remember him with flowers on the altar and let it go at that. We can dissipate our energies in arguing over things like what hymns we sing, what activities someone else should organize, or complain about things in the bulletin, the kitchen, or whatever. But if Christ came out of the tomb on Easter and is alive here, these considerations become trivial compared to

who needs Jesus and how best we can love him in our congregation. Thomas left the other believers just when he needed them most. So, he found himself mourning over a dead Jesus instead of being with a live Christ.

Fortunately, Thomas did come back, and fortunately we have a powerful and forgiving savior, who was there to meet him. Thomas, brought his doubts with him. We read in John 20:25 that after Thomas was told the news of the resurrection, he said, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side." In verse 27, Jesus replied, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!" Jesus allowed Thomas the dignity of carrying his doubts to the very one who carried the Cross. He did not ask Thomas to bury his questions, but offered him the most convincing answer available: himself.

Thomas had, despite his doubt, two great virtues. First, he had an uncompromising honesty. He wouldn't rattle off a Creed without understanding what it was about. Thomas had to be sure. There is more ultimate faith in the person who insists on being sure than in the person who glibly repeats things which he/she has never thought out and which he/she does not really believe. There is a notion in society today that believes having a firm opinion on things is somehow bad. This notion has influenced a generation of church goers to shy away from the biblical mandate to go and make disciples. They don't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable. We are now living with the consequences. Behind closed doors so many American Christians huddle with their self-imposed fears. Safely inside their private religion they don't reach out to broken lives with the gospel news of forgiveness and renewal in Christ. What this church needs is what every church needs: people who know the risen Jesus and aren't afraid to talk about it.

Jesus knew Thomas' heart, just as he knows your heart. He invited Thomas to make the test his doubt demanded. When he did Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Thomas' second great virtue was that when he found assurance in Jesus, he went all out. Thomas wasn't airing his doubts in order to get out of pledging or serving, or giving. He doubted in order to be sure. Half-hearted surrender to Jesus prevents our ever knowing him alive with us. So often we try to live our Christian lives

straddling the fence, mouthing the creeds, singing the hymns, but still living by the world's standards and priorities. It's a miserable existence. We know real stewardship is to tithe our income to a Risen Christ. Yet we tip him like a token memorial to a dead hero. We know our lives are enriched when we share Christ with other people. But we are like rivers flowing to the Arctic Ocean - all frozen at the mouth! We know we should love our enemies, but we barely manage that with our friends. We have heard so many times that we have complete forgiveness of our guilt in Him, but we rarely take that seriously. So we don't enjoy being the free and the whole person God intends for us.

Thomas had his grief and doubts, but it was argument that moved him. It was the presence of his Lord. He made the discovery that each and every Christian must make: by himself there is doubt and fear; with Jesus, who is perfect love, fear is cast out. In his presence you too will be able to cry, "My Lord and my God!" and walk forward in confidence. It reminds me of a plaque I once saw which read, "Fear knocked at the door. Faith in God answered. No one was there."

In summary, here's what we learn from Thomas:

- 1) stay in the company of the rest of the believers;**
- 2) admit your doubts and work through them;**
- 3) give yourself completely to the Lord.**

[Finally, Thomas believed after receiving tangible evidence of Christ's resurrection, and he went on to be a great apostle. How much more will we do? 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, lightening, 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 had already said this, as it shows here in John's gospel: "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe." These are the disciples who have met the Risen One, behind closed doors, in their personal lives, now, today, in the present. They just as surely share in the power of the resurrected life.]

In the book of Revelation it says that Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. That's true, and he's also everything in between. Christ is alive now, today, waiting to meet you, and cast out all your fears.