

**“Behind Locked Doors”****John 20:19-31****Rev. Andrew Connors****2nd Sunday in Easter****April 16, 2023**

“The doors were locked for fear of the Jews.” If you’ve spent any time in this church, I hope by now you know the reasons John’s Gospel comes across as so anti-Jewish. The community that produced John’s Gospel had been put out of the synagogue as Judaism, emerging from the destruction of the temple, decided that believing in Jesus was beyond the bounds of Jewish belief and practice. They were angry and upset and the language reflects the us and them outcome of their beef.

Nearly two thousand years later, we could just update the language to “the Judeans” to more accurately pin down the specificity of the particular historical groups experiencing this rife. Another alternative is to change “the Jews” to “the religious authorities” since John’s beef is really with the leadership making these decisions about identity and practice. Or we could just leave the language intact and tag this entire Gospel with a warning label - handle with care.

But as we deepen our Easter experience with this first of several post-resurrection appearance stories, I want us to first focus on the fear. “The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear.” Whether they were locked for fear of the religious authorities, or locked for fear of the Roman authorities, they were locked. And you can’t blame the disciples for their lock down. Who knows what might happen if they are found out as followers of Jesus? –Followers of the one who was branded enemy of the state, tried in the courts, sentenced and put to death? Who knows what might happen to this remnant of Jesus’ followers, huddled together in fear?

Behind locked doors, Jesus appears. He appears to his faithful to dispel their fear; to show them that death has not conquered him; his enemies have not won. Will Willimon, the former dean of Duke Chapel, once made the point that if he were Jesus, back from the dead, he would not have gone first to these inept disciples. He would have gone first to Pontius Pilate – “Pilate, you made a big mistake. Now it’s payback time!” or to Caiphus – “Check your Bible one more time, you idiot!” He would have gone to someone to get even.

No wonder Thomas doubts Jesus is alive. Because Jesus doesn’t show up for payback. He doesn’t go to get even with his persecutors. He goes to his weak, frightened disciples, not talking about judgment or payback, but still talking about forgiveness. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Thomas doubts because nothing has changed. Pilate is still washing his hands of his own participation in violence, Caiphus is still pleased that the

death of one person has restored the power of the religious establishment, and the disciples are still huddled in fear behind locked doors.

And I know this is supposed to be good news for the church today. Jesus believes wholeheartedly in those of us who have so much trouble believing in him. The inept followers of Jesus who never measure up are exactly the ones Jesus chooses to carry on his mission of forgiveness on the earth. Even those of us whose first instinct is to doubt God's power and presence in the world are met wherever we stand and given what we need to follow. Doubt is honored by God even as faith is encouraged. This is good news for us and for the disciples.

But I can imagine that this good news is full of more fear for the disciples. The one who got himself into trouble for forgiving sins now gives the same power and responsibility to his disciples. They are sent out, from behind locked doors, to do the work of Jesus in the world. They are sent out into a world that is hostile toward the message of forgiveness and reconciliation.

That hostility seems to be on the rise, whether it's the growing *partisan* hostility measured by the Pew Research Center or the *violent version* that's playing out on our streets where 1 in 3 people shot this year are 18 years old or younger. Or whether it's the road rage that I've heard a number of people talk about - not just angry honks, but vile-filled, threatening tirades. That fight or flight wiring inside of all of us seems to be in fight mode these days as more and more of us feel the world is stacked against us. The choice seems to be hurt or be hurt, kill or be killed. And Jesus expects us to enter that world with forgiveness and reconciliation.

It's no wonder that Thomas doubted. He's not in a nation that even gives lip service to free expression. He's in Roman territory. The disciples want him to go out with them from behind locked doors and share Christ's message of forgiveness. -To do the hard work of forgiving sins. But Thomas is not about to go out from behind locked doors without some guarantees. He knows that the business of forgiveness got Jesus into trouble with the religious hierarchy and with the Roman empire. He knows that the life of forgiveness is the work that got him killed. He's not about to go out behind those locked doors back to share a naïve message of forgiveness that died on a cross at Calvary. He's not about to leave the security of that house without seeing for himself some proof that the message of forgiveness is not as naïve as the world wants him to believe.

It's hard not to doubt the message of forgiveness, especially in these days when we're all legitimately concerned about someone taking something away from us - womens' right to make decisions about their own bodies, a kid's need to be safe to, from, and at school, Black voters worried about the same old Reconstructionist dreams robbing them of the right to self-govern, trans kids worried about their ability to be where a basic trip to the bathroom has been turned into a threatening political event. The enemy language that we used to direct in our wars overseas is now firmly entrenched at

home. We lock not only the doors to our house, but the doors to our hearts as retributive justice becomes the normal way that we relate to each other, not just nation to nation, but person to person. And yet Jesus wants us to know that there is a cost to that kind of active war footing - a personal and a public one.

If you haven't seen the Netflix series "Beef," I highly recommend it. It was written by Lee Sung Jin who was inspired after a road rage confrontation in Los Angeles. The road rage incident that occurs between the two protagonists in the series builds a life of its own as they become obsessed with getting even. But the show is not a simple moralistic warning tale. It actually shows how satisfying this kind of anger can be, bringing relief - even pleasure - to people who seem to be working hard all the time to contain lives of discontent. The nearly all Asian cast "is both a casual fact of the setting," as one critic writes, "and integral to its themes" since in America, Asian Americans are given less social permission for anger because of the "model minority" stereotypes they have to contend with. The word "beef" equates to the word "feud." But as the critic notes: "this series shows you how anger can also, for some people, be meat. It fills an emptiness, it sustains, it momentarily satisfies - even if, in excess, it's terrible for your heart."<sup>1</sup>

It's hard not to doubt the message of forgiveness because loving your enemies invariably winds up leaving you hurt. There's simply no way around it. Love for friend and foe alike, for the righteous and the unrighteous, means hostility for those who live that life, just as it did for Jesus. The wounds are still fresh in Jesus' hands and feet. New life does not erase wounds from the past. Thomas knows that. But he also knows that Jesus came to fill the emptiness, not just treat its symptoms.

In a world full of unending cycles of violent retribution, we who are the church gather to deal with the difficult news of the gospel. To deal with the reality that the risen Christ did not come back for his own retributive blood bath. He did not come back to his disciples to arm them for conflict with the enemy. He came instead to say in his resurrected body the same message that he had always shared with them-- that the way of forgiveness leads ultimately to life.

We gather each week behind our own doors to deal with that reality. We pass the peace, not just to be friendly, but to remind each other that a forgiving stance that meet the hostility of the world with a desire to connect, to heal, to know and be known is still alive and well in the world. We pass the peace hoping that our weekly habit will spill over into the rest of the week when we are confronted with the wisdom of the world that preaches that strength comes only from getting even; when we are confronted with the reality that if we choose to live a life of forgiveness, we are opening ourselves up to being hurt yet again.

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<sup>1</sup> James Poniewozik, "Beef Review: Mad in America," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/05/arts/television/beef-review.html>

And we need the repetition of that reminder because we can see even from the us vs. them language that is planted in this particular Gospel story that seeds of hostility can grow quickly into a kind of beef that takes on a life of its own; a beef that's hard to stop. A rage that temporarily satisfies but is terrible for the heart.

We come to hear the story one more time to give us a measure of courage to go back outside from behind all the locked doors in our hearts and in our world to risk a life of generosity again. To say to each other and to the world, that living a life marked more by forgiveness and less by getting even, is worth the cost. It is worth the wounds. It is worth the risk.