

SERMON – “BEHIND CLOSED DOORS” – MARCH 30, 2008
JOHN 20: 19—31

How often have you unwittingly started watching a movie or a show on television, have gotten totally caught up in the story, and when the hour was almost over, the words, “To be continued” flashed on the screen. Today, our scripture brings us part 2 of the continuing saga of the risen Christ!

Remember, in John’s version, so far it’s just Mary who believes that Christ rose. We’ve been told the “beloved disciple” saw and believed but what was that referring to – the empty tomb or the living Christ? John’s commentary says, “as yet, they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Bewildered, confused, and upset they returned to their homes.

This morning’s reading picks up on Easter Evening — ten of the disciples have gathered behind closed, locked doors. Can you imagine what they were feeling?

First of all, they felt that they had failed — that they had deserted their friend and leader — Peter’s last words to Jesus were that he would never deny him and he did just that. All the disciples couldn’t even stay awake with Jesus to pray in Gethsemane — was that too much to ask of them. And now, he was dead and they knew that he certainly didn’t deserve it. Why would one who was so good, die — that ageless question?

Beyond their guilt, there was doubt. Jesus had failed them. His confident promises seemed to have been blown away in the wind.

Guilt and doubt lead to despair and fear. They were locked behind closed doors to keep the authorities out lest they be arrested and killed like Jesus.

Franco Zeffirelli’s film, *Jesus of Nazareth*, effectively captured the sense of sorrow and alarm among the disciples. Fearful, dismayed, hunted and upset, they hide out. I’m not going to dwell on this, because I believe we can all imagine to some degree what that evening must have been like for them.

These are the like the moments in our lives when we are crouched behind closed doors because of our sense of inadequacy or failure, or because of anger or hate, or because of bewilderment or despair or maybe even fear for our lives and safety ~Those incidents in our lives that radically change life as we know it — sudden death of a spouse, or an act of betrayal, the loss of a job, a violent attack, a natural disaster — those invasions in our lives that leave us reeling in pain. Those scenes of sorrow are all too easy to conjure up in our imaginations.

Harder to imagine, but so vitally important to our lives is that moment when the Christ broke in on their spiral of despair and negated every one of their conclusions. He came to them to let them know that they could stop despairing over their own actions, and their doubts of his actions. He still TRUSTED THEM — imagine that! Christ startled the disciples out of their downheartedness and their belittling of themselves. What were his first words to them? PEACE BE WITH YOU. Then he showed them his hands and side. Then a few moments later, he repeated it and added more. PEACE BE WITH YOU; AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, SO I SEND YOU. Not only did he bring comfort, HE BROUGHT THEM PURPOSE. They had failed him and yet he came back and still trusted them to GO OUT as his representatives, with authority.

THAT IS A POWERFUL MESSAGE FOR US - CHRIST STILL IS ANXIOUS TO MOVE US OUT OF OUR SELF-DOUBT, OUT OF OUR LOCKED WORLDS, AND TO BE HIS REPRESENTATIVES FULL OF FAITH AND FORGIVENESS. HE IS STILL WILLING TO DO WHATEVER IS NECESSARY TO BREATHE NEW LIFE/ NEW ENERGY! NEW DETERMINATION! NEW CONFIDENCE! NEW SELF-LOVE! NEW UNDERSTANDING THAT WILL PROPELL US BACK INTO THE VITALITY OF MINISTRY.

We are those whom Jesus called Blessed. For we are those who have been given the ability to believe, without seeing and touching the physical Jesus. Yet, so many things beat us down that we lose touch with the CRUCUFIED—NOW GLORIFIED Christ — lose touch with that peace he offers — that purpose he designed for us — and the power of the Holy SPIRIT that enables us to forgive.

I think that it is important to hear the stories of journeys from fear to courage, from failure to new determination; from hopelessness to purpose; from shattering to wholeness. A couple of weeks ago, when I heard Lonnie Morris talk about the incredible power of “Herstory” in prisons, I was reminded that when we hear one another’s stories they often bring out our own story in a new way. This incredibly powerful yet gentle woman started from her own story of moving out of addiction and discovering who she could be. That led to her purpose and dream to lead other women and she has been able to do this. She talked about several transformations and now, women, who are in new prisons starting their own groups. That’s the power of what happened in that upper room that Easter night.

One of the reasons that I treasure being a Methodist, is because of the witness of John Wesley, our historic founder of the faith. He tells the story of his own time of failure. In 1725, Wesley was a leader, a scholar, a new thinker, challenging a dedicated band of students to a disciplined life of study and service. Thirteen years later he felt like an utter failure. He had decided to practice what he preached in a new setting and had failed. He had gone to Georgia in October, 1735. He left Georgia at the end of 1737 with both a failed ministry and a failed love affair. He knew that something was lacking in his faith and until he found it, he could not minister to others with effectiveness. The transformation seemed to appear as a one night experience at Altarsgate; but in reality, it was years of continuing to yearn for a new faith, a new strength — of exploring, listening, questioning — like Thomas. There was doubt that honestly had to be confronted before there was faith. Once he experienced it, there was no stopping him! He knew he was compelled to minister through words and service — that his faith would increase as his world widened.

Over the years, I’ve found myself drawn to the stories of persons who have been in hostage situations and how they survived. That’s my starkest contemporary image of what it means to be behind closed doors huddled in fear. Two of those persons, Benjamin Weir and Terry Anderson, both hostages in Lebanon in the 80’s, wrote books about their experiences. Both were Christians. For both of them it was the bedrock of their faith that kept them going.

The first is Benjamin Weir— He was a hostage in Lebanon for sixteen months. When he was released he and his wife wrote an account of their experience: One on the inside and the other desperately working for his release. The way they both drew upon their faith was inspiring. Let me share just a little of Ben’s account of his experience. First of all, he and his wife Carol, had made a conscious decision to stay in Lebanon, even after Americans had been attacked, killed, and taken hostage. They believed they needed to be on the scene to prepare the Protestant leadership for the future. They had lived in Beirut for 31 years as Presbyterian missionaries.

THEIR PURPOSE GAVE THEM COURAGE. He spoke of reading and re-reading the words of Luke 9:24 that he could not avoid “Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but those who will let themselves be lost for my sake, they will be safe.”

He said, “I had no desire to be a martyr. Yet I knew physical security could not be the most important criterion for our decision. In the face of uncertainty and threat (the situation to which Jesus spoke) the paramount consideration was faithfulness to Jesus and his cause. He offered on physical protection to his disciples then or now. But by facing the risks of serving others, they were to experience and live out the father’s self—giving love in the same way that Jesus was doing. To do so was profoundly worthwhile and resulted in a deeper kind of security than mere physical safety. I knew then that God’s will was for Carol and me to proceed toward Lebanon.

(Hostage Bound, Hostage Free, p.36)

After he was taken hostage, he wrote:

“I now sat as a prisoner of unknown forces. The golden opportunity to seek a life of spiritual growth was before me, yet I felt like a novice. It was true that I had made my commitment to Christ and accepted the new life he offered years ago. From that time on I had found meaning , joy, and direction in periods of daily Bible reading and prayer — sometimes longer, sometimes shorter and sometimes not at all. For me the day was best when I began it with a sense of spiritual direction, commitment and praise. Launching the day in this way gave me a vantage point at the beginning and a series of way stations throughout the day.

However, now the situation was different. There were no time constraints. Neither did I have the usual resources: Bible, devotional booklet, pad of paper and pencil, hymnbook, or other printed resources. This time I was really on my own.

I began with what I had: memory and imagination. Asked the question: What was there here that could bring me close to the sustaining presence of God? (p. 37)

On his third day of captivity he wrote these words: Aside from shirts, pants, and socks, I had nothing of my own. I was stripped down to the essentials, completely dependent on God. At the same time, God was not only the source of meaning but the giver of life itself. Without him I was nothing, a goner... If I were to be delivered, it would be because God noticed me and set in motion persons and events outside of this room. If I were not delivered, my death or continuing captivity would also be in his hands. In a very existential way I recognized that I belonged to him. I could only try to praise him, as I did now from the heart. (p.47)

Eventually, he was given an Arabic New Testament that he had for many months and he devoured it. But those early days must have been what it felt like for the disciples – they were stripped of every security.

Benjamin Weir's experience is another story — another sermon. But for today, it is enough to know that that it was his sustained belief in the presence of God through Christ that was able to keep him alive while locked away.

Terry Anderson, chief Middle East Correspondent of Associated Press, was also taken hostage in Beirut — he remained a hostage for seven years. His memoir, *Den of Lions*, has profound nugget upon nugget of sustaining faith intermingled with profound questions and doubt: He opened his memoir with this poem:

“Stigmata I” (*Den of Lions*, p.1)

Then later, he wrote these words about faith:

“Faith” (*Den of Lions*, pp.98-99)

His captivity and Ben Weir's briefly overlapped and for a while there was a community of five men together — Weir, two priests, Anderson and a professor — able to talk and pray. At one point after Weir had been released, Terry Anderson said the “equilibrium of the room” had been lost and now I argue with “David” all the time. He confessed:

This place is like living in a hall of mirrors. There is no hiding from the others and there is no ignoring the reflections they give me of myself. This is the most direct test possible of those things Christ teaches. If I can't control my pride and arrogance, if I can't put into practice the humility and compassion he calls for in a small room with three other men, how can I do it outside when that time comes, please God?

I've shared a bit of these two stories because for me they make the connection between those first experiences of the disciples with the physical presence of Jesus and our experiences when we have been jolted out of the ease of faith into a whole new level.

The experiences of the disciples that Easter night and what I hear in these accounts of captivity confirm the universality of the experiences. In these few short paragraphs of scripture, we

find the experiences of our own lives:

The dark side:

BEING THROWN INTO THE UNKNOWN — SHAKEN UP
MAKING ATTEMPTS TO FOLLOW and TO UNDERSTAND
THE FEELINGS OF FAILURE AND DOUBT AND ANGER
THE CONTINUING CRY FOR PROOF LIKE THOMAS.
THE TENSIONS AND FRUSTRATION WITH FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS. THOSE
UNDENIABLE REFLECTIONS OF OURSELVES.

But also, the powerful and the positive

CHRIST OFFERING PEACE
THE SENSE OF BEING TOUCHED BY THE SPIRIT
GIVEN THE ABILITY TO LIVE AND SERVE IN A NEW WAY.

Christ calls us out from huddling behind those doors of our lives that keep us from discipleship — from boldly living as Easter people —

those who have known the Christ who lived, died, and was risen that we might believe and have NEW LIFE.

He called the disciples and they did go out — some with baby steps, some with faltering, some with giant leaps. He calls to us with the same empowering love: with peace, with purpose, and with power, we can follow His way.