

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER (B-RCL) April 11, 2021

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

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Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania

Think for a few moments: What *doors* did you use this morning? In your getting up and getting ready routines, what doors did you open or close, lock or unlock?

A *door* is a *movable* structure for opening or closing the entrance to a building or room or vehicle – or to a cabinet or closet or cupboard. As movable structures, doors have the *potential* of being opened. They also have the potential of being shut – and some doors, when closed, can be locked.

Have you ever been locked out of somewhere? Locked out of your car, your house, your office? Or maybe you've had the key break in the lock. How did you feel? Panicky? Frustrated? Overwhelmed? What did you do? Call a locksmith, perhaps? (This might be the stuff of coffee half-hour conversation!)

Have you been locked out of your job – due to reductions in force, layoffs, or off-shoring? Have you ever felt locked out of your church – perhaps because of your sexual orientation or gender identity, because of the color of your skin, because of your economic status, or because of some other reason? What did you feel then? Anger? Betrayal? Sadness? Resignation?

Have you ever been locked out of someone's life? – someone with whom you wanted to make contact, someone in whom you sensed a need for relationship and connectedness – but who would not let you in?

Have you ever locked *yourself* in? – thus effectively locking someone else *out*? One occasionally hears about people who become angry and go to their rooms – possibly slamming the door behind them. *Fear* can be a strong motivator for persons to lock themselves in. I grew up on a farm seven miles from the nearest town. We never locked the doors to our house, and the car was in an unlocked garage with the keys left in the ashtray. But such a place is not the world where many people live today. Instead, residents may feel a need to have not just one, not even just two, but as many as three or more locks installed on their doors. The disciples in today's Gospel reading are no strangers to doors and locks.

At the recent Easter Vigil, the Gospel reading ended with Mary Magdalene's announcement to the disciples that first Easter day, "I have seen the Lord." [John 20:18] Today's Gospel picks up where that one left off. It is now evening of that same day. The disciples are not out celebrating resurrection news, however. (It is possible, I suppose, that they didn't believe Mary Magdalene, or they didn't know what to do with her story.) Instead, the disciples have met and locked all the doors of the place where they are gathered, essentially locking themselves in. Why? "For fear." For fear of what or of whom? Of 61 English translations of Verse 19, 41 (including the NRSV) say "for fear of the Jews". We note that, although the disciples themselves were Jews, the Gospel of John was written at a time when the early Christian community was painfully distancing itself from its Jewish roots. Scholars have suggested that "when John speaks of 'the Jews,' it refers not to the Jewish people as a whole, but to the synagogue authorities of a particular time and place; or sometimes to Jewish

believers whose faith, or their courage in expressing it, fell short in the writer's view." [David K. Rensberger, "The Gospel of John: Introduction", The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, general editor, Wayne A. Meeks (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), p. 2012] To counteract today's rising antisemitism, some translations now offer alternate phrases for "the Jews" – including "Jewish authorities", "Jewish leaders", "the elders", "Judean leaders", or as in the emended *Readings for the Assembly* that we use, "the Judeans."

[<https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/John%2020:19>] But it was Pilate, the *Roman* prefect – that is, the *Roman* governor – of Judea, who gave the order for Jesus' crucifixion. Thus, the disciples may also fear Roman authorities. Having been followers of Jesus, they are "guilty by association".

Which could lead us to a question about *ourselves*: What do *we* fear? What doors do *we* close out of our fear? And how does this fear contribute to our treatment of others? For when we fear something in or about ourselves, we may project that trait or characteristic onto someone else – or even onto an entire group of people. Criminologist Scott Bonn, who has interviewed numerous violent criminals, notes that: "[V]iolence as adults is largely a response to fear and resentments that were not resolved in childhood." [<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/wicked-deeds/201803/the-solution-fear-based-violence-is-faith>] So the question may become: *Whom* do we fear? Where is such fear directed? As we acknowledge that this past Thursday was Holocaust Remembrance Day – Yom HaShoah, we note that the Anti-Defamation League's "most recent *Audit of Antisemitic Incidents* in the United States recorded more than 2,100 acts of assault, vandalism and harassment, an increase of 12 percent over the

previous year. This is the highest level of antisemitic incidents since ADL's tracking began in 1979." [<https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/antisemitism-in-the-us>] In addition, during the pandemic, because of scapegoating and incendiary language around the coronavirus, the Asian American Pacific Islander communities have been terrorized by over 3,800 anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents, with women comprising 68% of the reports. [<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/there-were-3-800-anti-asian-racist-incidents-mostly-against-n1261257> and <https://securerusercontent.com/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report.pdf>] Just one example: Nancy Toh, an 83-year-old woman who was attacked while walking on a sidewalk in Westchester, NY, said, "I didn't think it was so close to home. And now I'm afraid to go out and my kid is afraid to go out." [@CAPAC, #StopAsianHate, Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus] So in these cases, fear is operational in both the perpetrators of violence and in the recipients of it. Like the disciples, Nancy Toh is locked in due to fear for her very life.

And we don't have to look far for examples of people locked in against their will by governmental agencies: As of March 21st, "US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents were holding more than 15,500 unaccompanied children in custody".

[<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56405009>] Amnesty International maintains a list of prisoners of conscience worldwide. And, because this past Friday, April 9th, was the date the *ELW* gives for the commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I mention this one example of a war prisoner from World War II. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and a member of the Confessing Church in Germany – the church that protested the antisemitism of the Nazi regime. After the failure of a plot to

assassinate Hitler, documents were found linking Bonhoeffer to the conspiracy. He was imprisoned. On April 9, 1945 – 76 years ago this past Friday – he was hanged by the Nazis just 2 weeks before U.S. soldiers liberated the camp. A little over a year before his death, he wrote a letter to a friend, which showed that, though his body was in prison, his spirit was not. He wrote:

I am constantly reminded that it is mainly to you that I owe my enjoyment of / the Easter hymns. *It is a year now since I have heard a hymn sung.* But it is strange how the music that we hear inwardly can almost surpass . . . what we hear physically. It has a greater purity . . . and in a way the music acquires a “new body.” There are only a few pieces that I know well enough to be able to hear them inwardly, but *I get on particularly well with the Easter hymns.* [Bonhoeffer to Bethge – 27 March '44; *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953, 1967), pp 131-2, emphasis added] //

On that first Easter evening, although the disciples have locked themselves in from fear, we note that they are at least gathered together. And it is into this room that Jesus comes and stands among them. You may have noticed that we aren't told just *how* Jesus enters the room. So I wonder: Is Jesus here embodying the I AM metaphor used earlier in this Gospel? That is, in chapter 10, Jesus says, “I AM the door for the sheep. . . . I AM the door.”

Then, once in the room, Jesus speaks to them, saying, “Peace be with you.” After showing the wounds from the crucifixion, Jesus says again, “Peace be with you”, and then tells them, “As [God] has sent me, so I am sending you.” Thus, Jesus says, in

effect, “*Unlock the doors!* Receive the gift of the Spirit – a life without fear.” The crucified and risen One gives the disciples freedom – and with it a mission to make that freedom mean something. *The stone of the tomb is rolled away, the doors are open!!* [Charles Rice and J. Louis Martyn, *Proclamation: Easter (Series B)*, 1975, p 19]

And yet, one week later, when the disciples are together once more, the doors are again shut. Our English text doesn’t say “locked” this time – although the Greek uses the same word – κλεισμενων – as before. (Without also considering the Greek, we might think that the disciples have grown a bit less frightened after Jesus’ first visit.) This time the text clearly states, “Although the doors are shut [or: locked], Jesus came and stood among them. (Is Jesus here a *locksmith*, then?) Persistently, Jesus repeats, “Peace be with you.” [John 20:26b,c,d]

I think it’s significant that the Greek word for “doors” - θυρων – used in today’s Gospel [John 20:19] is the same Greek word used in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark for the door-like opening of the entrance of the tomb where Jesus was buried. [Mark 16:3, Matthew 27:60, Mark 15:46] From feelings of fear and grief we move “a week later” to images of life, of birth, of resurrection – for the door of the tomb is open, and other doors have been unlocked, as well. The tomb of death becomes the womb of new life. From the “three days’ sleep in death,” Christ has burst forth. [ELW363:2] In the words of today’s Sending Hymn: “Neither could the gates of death, / Nor the tomb’s dark portal, / nor the watchers, nor the seal, / hold you as a mortal; / but today among your own, / you appear, bestowing / your deep peace, which evermore / passes human knowing.” [“Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #363:4]

And what about for us? Where are *we* “a week later”? True, it has been over a year now since we’ve sung Easter hymns – or any other hymns – together in person at Sunday morning worship. And it is 13 months since UniLu’s doors closed to worshipers. Yet on this Sunday after Easter, though apart, we *are* gathered together. Through cyberspace and into our individual Zoom boxes Jesus still comes, greets us with, “Peace be with you!”, breathes on us – and then sends us out. Jesus the Locksmith has unlocked the door; we are sent in the energy of the Holy Spirit. The Risen One in-spires us all to *open* the door and go out – if not literally, at least virtually – to make phone calls to members or to write letters to politicians; to work on GBIO efforts; to advocate for unaccompanied minors, and to work for prison reform – and, in so doing, effectively open doors for others. The Resurrected Christ sends us to dismantle racism, to address antisemitism and violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, as well as the degradation of the Earth.

— This list isn’t *exhaustive*, unfortunately, but it may seem *exhausting*. The pandemic has created opportunities for some (often those already holding a certain level of privilege) and showed that we can be together in many and varied ways even when we are apart. But, for some of us, the pandemic has been like a prison, isolating us more than connecting us together. Some of us may just not have the energy anymore. Like the disciples, we have witnessed acts of violence. Like the disciples, we have experienced trauma. Like the disciples, we have become numb with grief. And perhaps, also like the disciples, we may be immobilized and locked inside for fear.

We note that the disciples didn't rush right out that first Easter evening. No, even for them, Jesus had to return the following week. Likewise, Jesus today comes to us again and again – sometimes in the guise of a friend who sends a card, a text, or an e-mail at just the right time; sometimes in the form of the worshiping community where we find encouragement.

Jesus' entry into the house both times, then, brought a blessing to that space and its occupants – a blessing of peace, of hope, of joy (for the text says that “the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” [John 20:20b]) – All of which brings me to *Epiphany!* True, in English, Easter and Epiphany share the same initial letter “E”, but I also find another less obviously apparent connection between this Easter text in John and an Epiphany tradition: And that connection is: *doors*.

Some of you may remember the practice on Epiphany Sunday of *chalking the door* – which we do on the church door leading from the sanctuary to the narthex, and which we are also encouraged to do at home. On Epiphany, we remember the story of the Magi and of their journey bearing gifts as they searched for the young child Jesus. Tradition has set their number at three and given them the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Writing in chalk on the door for this calendar year could look like what is on the front of the bulletin cover: 20+C+M+B+21. The numbers of the year – 2021 in this case – are split in half and bookend the other symbols and letters. The crosses in between each symbol or letter stand for Christ; the letters have a two-fold significance: C, M, and B are, of course, the initials for the traditional names of the Magi; but – which I think is really neat –

“they are also an abbreviation of the Latin blessing *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, May Christ bless this house.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalking_the_door]

How might we, then, mark our doors this Easter season as a way to mark the passing of a full calendar year of the pandemic and remind us of Christ's blessings in our lives and our homes? Many real and metaphorical doors have been opened and closed, locked and unlocked, during this time. But Christ's blessings remain steadfast. Thus, I invite you this week to identify a doorframe in your own living space. Then, find a piece of chalk or a piece of paper that you can fasten to the doorframe. What symbols remind you of Easter? What symbols show hope rising out of despair? Of joy rising out of grief? Of life rising out of death? A butterfly? A door? A heart? (Either a picture or a letter could be used.) Then, each time you exit the room or dwelling over which you have written your own “code”, you can be reminded of its meaning – that Christ is risen and sends you forth in the power of the Spirit. If you are not leaving your dwelling for a while yet, it can, perhaps, still be a visible reminder of the Risen Christ, who comes again and again, who addresses our fears and breathes peace.

Let us heed, then, Christ's invitation to burst forth from the locked doors that imprison us!

Let us rejoice in new birth.

Let us *live!* – in peace, with empowerment, in joy.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!** Alleluia!
Amen.

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