

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 3

I John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

I saw a cartoon last week in which a woman and a man were sitting at a table in a restaurant. The man, with a big smile on his face, said “Every year when I start to think that life is utterly meaningless and the world is going to hell, baseball starts.” Now, I’m not a big baseball fan, like some I know, but I did recognize the feeling. It was what I felt last Sunday when I watched the sky brighten and the sun peak through the holly trees in the memorial garden, what I felt when I heard the trumpets calling us to worship, when I saw the abundance of flowers gracing the entire chancel area, when I looked out over the sanctuary and saw the room packed, when I joined with hundreds of your voices to sing the Alleluia chorus. I guess Easter Day for me is like the start of baseball is for others.

And like baseball, Easter, too, has a season. Officially it is comprised of the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost—a whole season in which to consider whether Easter is just one glorious day or something more.

Here is one more way that this Easter season and the baseball season may be similar. After the excitement of opening day when, hopefully, your favorite team overwhelms its opponent, but then by the second or third game, things become more routine. Well, here we are on what is often referred to by church pros as “Low Sunday.” Typically the preacher takes a rest from sermonizing. The brass players have packed up their cases and gone home. The ushers will not have to bring in extra chairs for the overflow crowd. And we are unlikely to hear Widor’s Toccata! That makes this a perfect day to ask whether Easter makes any difference.

The account we just read from John is appropriate for Low Sunday, because the mood and the questions in that locked room were probably similar. Jesus’ disciples were gathered where they had last shared a meal with Jesus; they had gone underground after the Resurrection. How could they wrap their heads around such a startlingly, radically new idea? They did what any of us might do. They slipped back into the familiar, the safe, the secure. John tells us they gathered together behind locked doors because they were afraid of the officials, afraid that they too might be subject to arrest and persecution as Jesus’ followers. I wonder if there were something more frightening, however. Perhaps it was Easter itself that frightened them. Professor Tom Long suggests that there was fear, because “when the glory-filled presence of the risen Jesus appeared to them, the seemingly solid ground on which they were standing suddenly melted away.... The frightening demand,...of Easter [was] to leave the familiar but dying world behind and to enter the new, unexpected, and uncertain world revealed in the Resurrection.”ⁱ

That certainly is what terrifies me about Easter. It isn’t getting through the demands of Holy Week. It isn’t worrying about whether the lilies will give me a sneezing fit right in the middle of Sunday worship or if I will remember the names of people I haven’t seen since Christmas. No, this is what shakes me about Easter. If I really believe the news of resurrection, it means I have to accept and trust that God’s love is more powerful than anything that can threaten me. If Easter makes a difference in my life, then I have to utterly rely on Christ and let go of all the other people and things and ideas upon which I try to rely. Believing in the resurrection, living an Easter life, means such a radical change, such total newness from the way things are, both in my life and in my understanding of the world, that it is terrifying.

You and I affirm the reality of the resurrection. People who show up in church on the Sunday after Easter are not coming for trumpets and lilies. We are here to remind ourselves that Easter isn't just about a changed Jesus. His Resurrection is about a changed world and our changed lives. Death, the great enemy, has been defeated. Sin, our great failure, has been overcome. Resurrection assures us that no enemy is stronger than our God. So we keep coming back to be reminded and encouraged, to touch the wounds of the risen Christ, to hear him tell us to be at peace, to feel his breath of Holy Spirit. Just as Christ knew those first followers needed more than an empty tomb to move them out into the world, Christ knows we need his presence and his word and his Spirit. That's why we keep coming back even when it's not Easter Sunday, to remember what Christ calls us to do, which is to follow him. Jesus Christ is already out there in the world, going ahead of us, sending us to live out Easter, to live as those freed from fear and worry and anxiety and to bring Easter hope in places of brokenness and pain.

Maybe you noticed in this reading that Jesus greeted his disciples three times with words of peace. This was not just an ordinary greeting, not a wish or a hope from the risen Christ. It was a declaration that peace was already among them. He was their peace. It was also a reminder of the heart and soul of Jesus' mission. Through his words and actions, he showed the generosity and justice, the neighborliness and hospitality, the forgiveness and love needed to bring peace into the world. The officers of our church have chosen to concentrate on the idea and practice of peace this year. They have asked us to be on the lookout for places and situations in need of peace, situations to which we, as a church, might be called to respond. But we are also to attend to the places and situations in our own lives in need of peace—the relationships in need of mending, the anxiety we carry, the hesitancy to speak truth to power. Doing the work of peace, both internally and externally isn't easy. Jesus' own life and death demonstrated that. But I find it exciting that our congregation is being challenged to take seriously Jesus' call to get out into the world as peacemakers.

From its beginning, the church has had a choice—to stay in a locked room or to go out into the world, to stay with the familiar and secure or to respond to God's urging to do a new thing. From the beginning, from that first Easter evening, the followers of Christ have been challenged to be about his mission. Sometimes we have done that faithfully and well and sometimes not so much. But our Lord, who never gives up on us, is constantly saying to his body, the church, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

One theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx has put it this way. Christians are called to participate in the living story of Jesus by "writing a fifth gospel with their lives."ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have written their accounts of how Jesus changed their lives and the world. Luke went on to write the first chapter of a fifth gospel called the Acts of Apostles. In it he recorded how the apostles and others in the early church lived out the difference that Easter made. That fifth gospel continues to be written by our response to Jesus' commission to carry on his mission.

Resurrection declares that our Lord and his mission cannot be kept behind closed doors or inside a sealed tomb. In Jesus, God came to do a new thing, to demonstrate the power of God's love for all people. The difference that Easter made for those first followers was that it got them up and going, it gave them the proof of God's amazing and powerful love, it gave them just enough trust in God to take the first step out the door and into the bright light of God's new future. And that is the difference Easter makes for us, too—to get out of the locked places where we may be hiding, fearful, worried, anxious, doubting, or even comfortably secure; to live Easter lives of humility, hospitality and servanthood; to follow the risen Christ into his future.

In a few moments, we will hear Christ's invitation to the meal he gave us so that we might remember him. So we will come in remembrance, but also with our own longing to see him, to hear his voice, and maybe even to touch his wounds, as they remind us of the suffering of the world he loves. We will come to renew our faith in him and recommit to his mission. Just as those first disciples gathered around the table where they heard him issue that invitation for the first time, we will gather to be nourished and nudged out the door.

Easter is not just a day or even a season, but the beginning of a new reality disclosed in the risen Christ. In him, our God is doing a new thing and we are summoned and empowered to be partners in that new thing. Christ, freed from the bonds of death has been set free in the world. As Easter people, may we follow and find him there.

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, "The Shock of Easter," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2024, p.6-7.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in *Context*, April 2010, Part A, p. 4.