

The Great Door

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

April 7-8, 2018

Easter 2

John 20:19-31

Have you seen the Progressive Insurance commercial with a mock group therapy session, “We are not our dad”? It’s clever. The message is, “We can’t save you from becoming your parents, but we can save you money on your insurance.” Some of the dialogue includes: This hat was free, why wouldn’t I wear it? Why is the door open; are we trying to air condition the neighborhood? That one reminded me of my dad. He was definitely not a disciplinarian, but he did get after us about leaving the door to the house open. He would also ask us, “Were you born in a barn?”

In some ways I am becoming my dad. When people leave doors open here at church, especially when the front doors are propped open, I get a little cranky. What are the doors opened for? To cool the place off? Are we heating Edgelawn? Would you do that at home? We have trouble every year with bats and bugs; we don’t need to invite them in!

I hardly ever open the doors around here. Martha, our church housekeeper, arrives very, very early, while it is still dark, and disarms the building. Later, the front doors are opened determined by the daily schedule: Bread Wrappers, circle meetings, Adult Study, piano lessons. Our office Manager, Deb, keeps track. In the afternoon, our Facility Manager, Al, asks us, “Want me to lock the front doors?” Usually we say, “Yes.” We are secured locks and keys, codes and a buzzer, but we are open a lot! According to my calculations, St. Mark’s building will be closed only six days this year.

In our lesson from John’s Gospel, it is Easter evening. Jesus, the Risen One, comes to the disciples who are gathered in fear behind locked doors. Jesus comes to them with the greeting and gift of peace, *shalom*, the divine desire for well-being. And he breathed on them the Holy Spirit. We will recall the creation story of the Creator breathing life into the earth, *adamah* (aka Adam!) . . .

So, newly alive, Jesus comes in peace to bring new life.

Earlier in John’s Gospel, in chapter 10:9 Jesus said, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved.”

It is interesting to me that John uses the same Greek word in chapter 10 for “gate” as he does for “door”: *thura*. This word can have three meanings.

1. Simply, a door.
2. The opening to a cave or a tomb.
3. An opportunity, a favorable time for accessing a possibility.

The third sense is like a job seeker looking for someone to open the door for them. In Corinthians Paul wrote about “a great door” opened to him to minister longer in Ephesus.¹

In our two-part lesson for this weekend, it seems to me that we could have all three doors! A real door, an opening to a tomb, *and* an opportunity for a possibility. The Risen Jesus came to frightened followers through an old door—locked, not with a Schalge dead bolt but with a latch; he came through the grave; and he came with a new opportunity—to minister longer!

The Risen One breathed reconciling power into the disciples drowning in despair. This power was for them and for the world. He opened the Door!

The next verses are often used to support the teaching of “The Office of the Keys.”

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”—John 20:23 (NRSV)

Hmmm ... In the liturgy we confess our sins together, then the pastor, with the authority of Christ, offers the assurance of forgiveness. But we *all* have the key to unlock the doors that divide us.

The second part of this is the conditional statement, “if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” I can’t think of any time in all of my ministry, that I retained anyone’s sins. What else could this mean?

Well, there is another translation and interpretation door for us to open here, another possibility. If we look carefully at verse 23b in the Greek, we will see that there is no word “sin” in the second clause.

So, this verse could read:

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven to them ... and

“Whomever you hold fast (or embrace), they are held fast.”

So, it’s the *persons*, not the sins, that are held fast! If you forgive anyone, they are forgiven! If you embrace anyone— they are embraced!²

Forgiveness sticks and Embrace holds! This translation and interpretation makes sense to me! Jesus, in the second part of our lesson, holds fast to Thomas. As he did throughout the Gospel: with Nathanael, the woman at the well, the man born blind,

Mary, and the disciples. They are all embraced, held fast as they receive what they need.

Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto the disciples, filling them with new life and opportunity to continue his work by holding fast to others.

Throughout the centuries Thomas has been dubbed, "Doubting Thomas." He's kind of the patron saint of skeptics. But, really, he wanted only what the others had experienced. He wanted his own experience of the Risen One. Even if the disciples had had a body camera on Easter evening, I bet that Thomas would still have said, "I want to see him for myself."

We want and need our own opportunities. We need our own forgiveness, a new chance; we need our own embrace. We can't just read about it or hear about it.

At Patricia Russ's funeral lunch last week, I sat with Pat's friend of sixty years and her husband. They are delightful people. The husband asked me, "Pastor, have you ever seen a miracle?"

I answered that I interpret miracles broadly as God's surprising presence in the world. So, yes, I have seen many miracles.

He proceeded to tell me that he *is* a miracle. The fact that he was sitting there eating lunch is a miracle. The friend went on to describe his near-death experience. When he coded during risky surgery, he had a vision much like that of the poem "Footprints in the Sand," where one set of footprints ended when the Lord carried a person through a hard time.

"Do you know who was walking with me?"

"I have an idea."

"I am grateful for every day and make the best use of my time." He went on to tell me about the ministries he is able to be part of. I completely believed him and appreciated his story. (But I am not particularly eager for *this* type of experience of the Risen Lord!)

In our ministry with children and youth through Sunday School, Faith and Daily Life, Confirmation, Senior High Youth, and VBS ministries, we teach Bible stories, the Small Catechism, liturgy, and church teachings. During Lent every year, our second graders learn about the gift of Holy Communion and what it means to be part of the community in a new way. They are learning to read and are ready to take more responsibility in relationships. To say "I am sorry" and mean it; "Please" and "Thank you." "Do you need help?" ... and "I love you" ...

We pass the tradition to them, not so that they can become their parents, *but so that they can become themselves*. They will have their own opportunities, their own stories.

Remember: God has no grandchildren. We teach the stories, so they can see the resurrection in their own lives ... and participate in God's *shalom*.

Over and over I encourage the confirmation students, "Open your eyes. Where do you see God's presence and power?" During the Epiphany season, we are sent from worship with these words: "Go boldly into the new week fully expecting opportunities for greater love to be placed squarely in your path."

In May, I will have cataract surgery. I am very eager and hopeful. There is a good possibility that with fancy intraocular lenses, I will be able to see distance without glasses, which I haven't been able to do since I was eleven. It seems too good to be true.

I have heard the great stories—yours; my husband, Ed's; and others. Recently my cousin Peter said after his surgery, "It's like a miracle. You won't believe it!" My pastoral colleague (also a Peter) told me the same thing. I trust their testimony.

I am happy for you all, delighted in all of the restored vision. But I want to experience it! I need the curtain lifted, the door opened for myself. I need my own vision.

Long ago, the Wounded and Risen Jesus came through a locked door—*thura*—to frightened friends. His new presence was not held back by a bolt or by fear, by a boulder or a tomb. He came to empower and embrace them with opportunity to continue his work in the world. To share *shalom*.

In an article titled "When Seeing is Believing," Karoline Lewis writes: "The truth was never something to be believed – but someone that makes believing possible."³

Someone who redefines believing as relationship. Someone who recreated community in and by relationship.

We are invited to trust, like Thomas, that Jesus will keep showing up, that he holds us fast—in relationships with each other and the world.

In one of his meditations, Richard Rohr wrote:

Christianity is a lifestyle – a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared and loving. However, we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's "personal Lord and Savior"... The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.⁴

Jesus was revealed as the GREAT I AM. He was—for us and the world—the bread of life, the light of world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the

truth, and the life, the true vine, and the door for the sheep. He turned out a lot like his Father! We trust in the One who was born in a barn. Who left the door open.

We are held fast by empowering embrace that has the power to change lives. We are calmed by peace that passes understanding. We are pushed out of the doors into the rest of our lives to reveal the Risen Lord the world waits to see.

Amen.

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1. Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*, March 28, 2018, pg 3
 2. Sandra Schnieders, "The Lamb of God and Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel," cited by Mary Hickie Shore, workingpreacher.org, "Gospel Reading Commentary," April 8, 2018
 3. Karoline Lewis, "When Seeing is Believing," workingpreacher.org, April 1, 2018]
 4. Richard Rohr, Meditation 37, cited by Katherine Lewis, "When Seeing is Believing," workingpreacher.org, April 8, 2018

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