

John 20: 19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Acts 5: 27-32

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'

Now What?

Reverend Joel Kershaw

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If you're prone to reading ahead, you may have noticed that today is a very important day in the life of the church. It's Confirmation Sunday. It's the Sunday when we invite young people to commit themselves to Christ, and commit themselves to a church. I just want to take an opportunity, while I've got the big microphone, to say how proud I am of them. I've had five wonderful classes of confirmands, and I think somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty youth have come through that program in the last five, years, which is pretty cool, but I'm really proud of the 14 who stand before you this morning, and you'll get a chance to greet them and welcome them, but I just wanted them to hear that I was proud of them.

Grace be yours, and peace, from Jesus Christ our Lord. This is, of course, the Sunday after Easter, and we hear for the first time all year about the disciples without Jesus, and then he appears. We can only imagine what these disciples were thinking. They'd followed this Jesus around Galilee for three years, followed him to Jerusalem to a hero's welcome, saw him back down the religious authorities who tried to outwit him, only to wind up on a cross. I don't know about you, but I think I would be locked up in a room too, with my friends. They were trying to lay low, process what had happened, come to grips with the realities of life without a Jesus. And no sooner had they been faced with the reality of Jesus' death, than they were faced with the reality of his undeath, so to speak. These followers of the slain Jesus are terrified, terrified that they have just lost their leader, terrified that "My God, we may have been wrong." Terrified that they were next, and who could blame them for locking those doors? What these disciples faced is the reality that they are on their own, they're on their own.

Up to this point, they had been followers of Jesus, who taught them faith, and about ethics, and about breaking down the walls that people worked so hard to build up between themselves and others. In the wake of the crucifixion, they are now on their own, wondering what to do and where to go. Wondering how this could have happened, and are they next? Wondering if they should just go back to their lives as fishermen or tax collectors, plain old ordinary, anonymous Jews, or should they go somewhere? Should they do something with the words of Jesus, with the stories he told, with the message he brought? These disciples were at a crossroads, of sorts. "Do we stay followers, or take up the light of Jesus and lead the people? Do we stay followers, or take up the light of Jesus and lead the people?"

Now, we read in Acts, but what we didn't read is beautiful. That's a great part about Scriptures, there's always something that came before it, except in the beginning, when there was light. But before this passage in Acts, the reason that they were dragged before the Sanhedrin and chastised for preaching in Jesus' name, the reason for that was because they had been preaching in Jesus name and they arrested them. Threw them in jail. God sends an angel of the Lord to set them free, and tells them "Go right back to preaching," so they do. They go right back to preaching, and a rather nervous Guard go and collect them back up again, and so they're before the Sanhedrin again. "We told you not to preach." And the disciples, of course, say, "We must listen to God, and not to you." Now, as we see in Acts, they decide to leave, and find themselves locked up for teaching about Jesus. They went from locking out the world, to being locked up by it. In a sense, there's no cage big enough to contain their faith. There's no cell large enough to contain God. There is no way God could allow the disciples to just go back to being plain, old, anonymous Jews.

Like the disciples, we're trying to lock up faith, from time to time, to lock up our own faith, when we try to cram our faith into a nice, neat little box. Faith tends not to fit, have you noticed? No matter how we build our box for God, we just cannot seem to keep God contained. Like the disciples in the wake of the crucifixion, when we try to lock up our faith, God will find us. As most of you have heard by now, I've accepted a new appointment, to start July 1, to serve Brighton United Methodist Church, just down the

road a bit. As I was going through that process, I was telling my father about remembering having been on the child end of this process, being dragged around to introductions at new churches, and moving. My Dad said to me, "This is kind of new for you, isn't it?" I had to stop and think about that, but this is the first time I've gone through the process not as a son, or a husband, but a father, considering what it meant to say "Yes" when my kids will have to deal with that. That was interesting to me. Our kids are always interesting in the way they reflect what we do, in the way they perceive who we are. My younger son Paul, who will be three, if you can believe it, in May, comes to the Mom's Day Out program here with his mother Abby, who teaches there. In the two-year-old room they have this box of dress-up clothes. One day Paul goes over to the box of dress-up clothes and grabs a scarf and puts it around his neck, kind of like a stole, and says, "I'm a minister man. I'm going to my meeting." It was at that point I thought, "Maybe I go to too many meetings." But I'm Methodist, right? That's what we do.

If only it were that easy to be a minister. If only it were that easy to be in ministry as people of faith, we'd just put on our stoles and go to our meetings. If only it were that easy, we would all do it. We would all put on our stoles and go to meetings. We'd fit in our nice, neat little boxes, locked tightly away, never challenged, never growing, never doubted, just there like a trophy on a shelf. But faith in God is never that simple, is it? Serving God is never as simple as putting on a stole and going to a meeting. Faith in Jesus' teachings led those disciples to the foot of the cross, so they locked themselves up. Now the reason Jesus was unlocking the door, sending them out again into a world not quite ready for them, a world that might not like them, a world that just might kill them.

Now if we, like the disciples, decide to unlock our faith, and open up to the possibilities that exist, we run into another kind of cage, the cage of conformity. The cage that others want to put around our faith, to define faith, and the people who have it. Like the Jewish authorities of Jesus' time, we can get caught in the traps of trying to draw that line of faith so carefully around through faith, and lock people into our ways of thinking, or lock them out. To contain people of faith in a covenant, but a convenient mold of Christian, so we might never be challenged by another's faith. That is what the Sanhedrin was doing all along when they dragged those disciples before them. It's what they were doing when they arrested Jesus and sentenced him to death. They were trying to lock up their way of thinking about God by containing or eliminating the faith Jesus taught, and the disciples could not hold back. They could not hold back.

As a minister, you get into all sorts of strange conversations, over the years. I was doing a wedding for a friend of Abby's, and she was doing the catering, we're kind of a package deal, sometimes, and I had finished with the ceremony. It was at this beautiful outdoor place outside Limon. We were just waiting, Abby was busy sitting up food and making sure everything was perfect for the reception, and I was just sort of standing there waiting for her to finish, and a woman came up to me. Her shoulders were bare, and she had this sleeve tattoo all over her arm, real big, real noticeable. She walks up to me with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of wine in the other, and she says, "Do you think Christians can have tattoos?" I'm searching desperately for a change of subject, wondering how God got me into this. And then I stopped, and I thought, and I asked her

the question, "Why do you ask?" It turns out, she has a mother, as we all do, who had some pretty definite ideas about what it meant to be Christian, and tattoos weren't one of them. Her mom was trying to fit her into a box, a mold of what she thought was Christian, and when she didn't fit, she felt bad that she didn't fit, because she wanted so desperately to. She didn't fit.

But we all fit with God, don't we? When we try to lock up our faith, God will find us. When others try to lock up our faith, we must stand up. We must step out of the shadows. We must unearth our deeply personal and beautifully unique faith, that others might come to know God more deeply. That others might be inspired to seek God more clearly, and break free of the locks that seem to hold faith back, or try. When we unlock our hearts and unlock our minds and unlock our doors to the possibilities of faith, we unlock a God that is too big for our locks. Too big for our locks. We tap into a love that is always going to overflow our neat little boxes, and overwhelm our neat little world. It is in the overwhelming, the mind-blowing, mold-shattering possibilities of faith, held in tension with one another, that we find God.

I happened to be listening to NPR on the way to the church this morning, and heard a story with Jerry Weintraub, who apparently was organizing back-to-back concerts in Miami for none other than Elvis Presley. He got to the Coliseum where the concerts were to be held, to discover in horror that five thousand seats had yet to be sold for the matinee. So he goes to the Colonel, you know the Colonel, right? Not Colonel Sanders. Elvis's colonel, right? and says, "We have a problem, we have five thousand seats left for the matinee." The colonel looks at him and says, "I don't have a problem. You have a problem." So he went about solving his problem. He went next door to the correctional facility, and talked to the administrator. (You think you know where this is going, don't you? You don't) And he worked out that these inmates could come over and remove five thousand seats from the Coliseum and stick them in the parking lot, cover them with a blue tarp. So Elvis could play to a packed house that afternoon, and then they came back and they re-installed the five thousand seats for the night show so that Elvis could again play to a full house, and never know the difference.

Sometimes a faith might seem full. Sometimes our belief in God might seem complete and all there is, and sometimes there's five thousand seats in the parking lot. Just waiting to get in. We need to bring our seats in. We need to bring in all the varieties of people, with all of their experiences, young and old, so that we might have a more complete understanding of faith. Try as we might, we can never completely know the ultimate. We can never set limits on the limitless. We can never possibly catalogue or pin down or document or record for all posterity the awesome complexities, and yet the pure simplicities, of faith and God. But we become open to the possibilities of faith in God, too big for any one imagination. Too big. When we unlock our doors and throw off the shackles of unquestioned conformity, we find a love too great for the cross. We find a spirit too active for the grave. We find a gospel too exciting for a house locked shut. We find a faith too freeing for the bars of any cell. We find God. We find God in each other. Amen.