

Second Sunday of Easter  
April 8, 2018  
John 20:19-31, I John 1:1-2:2

## Through Locked Doors

My middle name is Shive. I had a cousin named Rob Shive. Rob was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December and I was born on the 13<sup>th</sup>. That made him my senior by one day, and he never let me forget it. Rob lived on a farm that was part of the homestead staked out by my great granddaddy Shive under the Homestead Act. As children, Rob and I were constant companions for at least a month every summer.

Not only was Rob older, he was also stronger. When we got into a wrestling match – which was often – he'd almost always win. I'd find myself on my back with Rob's knees pinning both arms to the ground. Rob would grin with cousinly triumph and say, "I won't let you up till you holler 'calf rope.'"

Only occasionally could I pin Rob down and make him holler "calf rope."

Each week, when I enter the ring to wrestle with the texts for the approaching Sunday, I remember what it was like to be the loser in a wrestling match. Therefore, I often start with the question, what will the congregation hear in this passage of scripture? Will what they hear interest them? Confuse them? Prompt them to pull out their cell phones and check their e-mail?

Sometimes I'm pretty sure I know what you will hear, and that will give me the advantage as I enter the ring. I might manage to get the text in a half-nelson early in the first round – pin it to the mat, make it holler "calf rope." If I can manage that, I might not have to preach what the text actually says.

What did you hear in the passage I just read to you? I'm guessing it was the bit about good old "doubting Thomas." Poor Thomas. Nobody remembers him for his profession of faith in the risen Christ, "**My Lord and my God.**" What sticks in our minds is his reluctance to believe his fellow disciples when they tell him, "**We have seen the Lord.**"

Love him or loathe him, Thomas becomes the focus of this passage every time it comes up in the 3-year cycle of the lectionary.

I know because I checked. I looked up my own sermons on this passage, going back more than three decades. Guess what? I got suckered by Thomas every time. In every sermon, Thomas steals the show.

By digging into Thomas in the second half of this story, we tend to miss the nuggets in the first half. Before you pull out your cell phone to check your e-mail, consider the gold we're missing.

I'm talking about those closed, locked doors. Did you notice those doors? **"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week (that is, Easter Sunday,) and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them . . ."**

Locked doors and fear – those were the bitter fruits of the first Easter. According to John, Mary Magdalene had already seen the risen Lord and made her report to the disciples. She'd talked to Jesus outside the empty tomb. He'd called her by her name and she'd called him "Teacher."

Mary has made a full report, and still, those doors are locked. Easter is met with fear, not joy. How in the world did we miss that?

Perhaps it's because of our own fear. We made a big show of joy last Sunday with our anthems and our hymns and our repeated "Alleluias." But now that the high holy day has past, it's time to face the other music – the chorus of cynicism, the drumbeat of violence, the vulgar epithets spewed from the White House, the neighbors in the street whistling "Dixie" who used to keep the volume low, but who are getting louder and louder.

It's a nasty world outside those locked doors -- a world that is growing ever hostile to God's love and justice revealed in the risen Christ. Who wants to take all that on? Who wants to swim against the cultural tide? Why should the disciples of Jesus in John's account open those doors and face the very forces that put Jesus on the cross in the first place?

Why should we?

The forces of oppression, both imperial and religious, hated Jesus for challenging their authority. They still do.

Remember, Jesus was charged not only with blasphemy but also with sedition. He was a threat to Rome because Rome had no ultimate power over him. He was a threat to the religious authorities because he brought God's light too close, and they could not bear the scrutiny.

Rome conspired with Jerusalem to pin Jesus to that cross. Together, they thought they had neutralized the threat Jesus posed to them. Now, three days later, the word is getting out that Jesus is not in that borrowed tomb. He's just as alive now as he was three days ago. Maybe even more alive than three days ago.

Mary Magdalene says as much. **"I have seen the Lord,"** she says. And what do the disciples say? *Better check that lock again and double-bolt that door. It was scary enough when we thought Jesus was finished. Now we're really in for it.*

The way John tells it, Easter caused more fear than joy – at least at first. Jesus must pass through locked doors in order to stand among his disciples and say, **"Peace be with you."**

What might those locked doors look like for us today? Or to put it another way, what keeps us Easter people from acting like Easter people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Are we afraid that the Easter message can't stand up to the nastiness that lurks outside these church doors? Are we too shy to challenge our own brothers and sisters who hail the current President as the best friend the Christian church has ever had? In our heart of hearts, do we fear that the Good News is no match for Fox News?

If so, we need to keep the doors of our meeting place tightly locked, our voices quiet, our alleluias *pianissimo*. Because, if word gets out that Jesus is alive, we'll be in for it, too.

These are trying times, beloved. In some ways, the challenges of the twenty-first century resemble those of the first.

Those first Christians didn't have to deal with internet trolls, but they did have to deal with folks who mocked the idea that in Christ, God is reconciling the world to God's own self. They had to reconsider the deeply-engrained prejudices they held against people who were not from their tribe. They had to wrap their brains around the idea that God loves the world. They even had to come to grips with the reality that the Easter message was borne first by women, and not by men – that there was something subversive about Easter from the very start.

The forces of religious bigotry and imperial hubris pushed back against the Easter message. They knew full well the threat Jesus posed for them; that's why they crucified him. He is an even greater threat now that he is risen.

But listen to John's story. Those locked doors did not keep Jesus from standing among the same disciples who had deserted him, the same disciples who had fled from the garden when the soldiers showed up, the same disciples who had dismissed Mary's report that she had seen and conversed with the risen Lord.

You could say that, in the opening verses of this passage, everyone in that room is named Thomas. But that does not keep Jesus from showing up, from saying "**Peace be with you,**" and from anointing them with the Holy Spirit.

The way John tells it, the *disciples* become *apostles* in that moment. No longer mere followers, but missionaries, advocates, people charged with a task and sent out to serve. "**As the Father sent me,** says Jesus, **so I send you.**"

I set out this morning to pin this text to mat, but it wriggled free. Maybe this passage not so much about doubt as it is about unlocking the doors and letting the Easter Gospel out into the world.

Doubt is not the enemy of the Gospel. The enemy is fear, but God's perfect love casts out fear. Unlock the doors of your hearts, beloved. Don't be afraid. The risen Christ is our peace and the ultimate victory is his.