

The Doors of Faith
Sermon on John 20:19-31 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, April 15, 2007

Have you ever given much thought to a door? Except when the door is clearly marked “pull” and I am pushing with all my might, or my hands are full of grocery bags, I seldom think about doors. Doors are simply there, a means of entry and exit to the places we live and work and shop and worship. As a minister I didn’t have much occasion to think about doors until I served a church in England. The Newport Methodist Church sat at the top of Quay Street in the heart of the county town on the Isle of Wight. This magnificent structure had been built in the 1880s with an imposing edifice that looked rather like a castle to me. And castles are wonderful places to visit, unless you are an invading army, in which case the residents don’t particularly want you to find the door. And that seemed to be the problem at the Newport Methodist Church: the massive wooden doors, which were set off to the side and slightly hidden, made it seem that we didn’t particularly care to have visitors of any sort (except on Tuesday mornings when you were very welcome to come in for coffee or tea and a biscuit at 50 pence a cup).

Some faithful soul or group of souls decided that this simply wouldn’t do. Faced with an aging population and declining attendance, the Methodists of Quay Street were concerned about our doors: Did they welcome people inside or did they keep people out of our church? Then someone suggested the unthinkable—they suggested a change. Rather than that imposing stone edifice, why not replace it with glass doors so you could look inside and see what was going on? And that is just what they did. That church took a leap of faith, changed the building, and put glass doors out front so that all and sundry who passed by could see what was going on inside.

Of course, not every faith community wants to have glass doors so that everyone who passes by can have a look-see. Certainly the group of disciples who gathered together on the

first Easter Day didn't want that kind of transparency. They had locked the doors behind which they met "for fear of the Jews," meaning the religious authorities who had so recently played a role in the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Their fear was both "quite natural and understandable."¹ For three years they had followed Jesus, listening to his teaching, observing the miraculous signs he performed, watching in wonder as his every word and deed proclaimed him to be the Son of God. But it was just this claim that had landed him in trouble with the religious leaders who had denounced Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, as a threat to law and order in the region. Pilate had wavered, not entirely convinced that Jesus represented a real danger, but the authorities had persisted, so he ordered Jesus to be tortured and crucified.

Would they be next, the disciples wondered? They were pondering this and other questions, as well as a strange report from some members of the group who had gone to Jesus' tomb that morning. When they reached the tomb, they didn't find a body, but only the linen cloths that had wrapped the corpse. When they didn't find what they expected to find, they were puzzled and confused, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead" (Jn. 20:9). Easter didn't come as a sudden realization or a flash of insight. The reality of resurrection wasn't immediately accessible to the rational mind or explicable by means of drawing a conclusion on the basis of the evidence presented. In fact, the discovery of the empty tomb that first Easter morning wasn't even an occasion for joy and celebration. Peter and the beloved disciple simply went home.

Later that same day, a group of disciples gathered, perhaps to talk over the events of the preceding days, to wonder aloud about what it all meant. And they were afraid. Afraid not

¹ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1958) 472.

simply of the religious authorities who had the power and means to do to them as they had done to Jesus, but also afraid of the future. Afraid of the unknown. Afraid of being alone. Afraid of life without the One that they had called teacher and master and Lord. They were afraid, and so they locked the doors, shutting anxious disciples tightly inside and a suspicious world outside.

Then something totally unexpected happened: “Jesus came and stood among them” (20:19). He passed right through those locked doors, doors that gave the disciples a place to grieve the sudden and unexpected death of Jesus away from the prying eyes of a hostile world. Doors meant to hide them from the curious, who could offer them platitudes, but who could not explain what had really happened. Doors meant to protect this vulnerable little group of men and women whose lives had been changed by a relationship with Jesus Christ. As Susan Andrews puts it, “Defying locked doors and locked hearts and locked vision, Jesus simply appears.”² He appears and grants his followers his peace and shows them his once-wounded hands and side and sends and breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, sending them out into the world to do his work.

Curiously, it is this very scene, a scene meant to reassure anxious disciples that Jesus was alive, truly raised from the dead—a scene meant to inspire faith— that has caused so many not to believe. How, these ask, can a body pass through locked walls? It seems like magic or a gimmick or a fairy tale. Dead men don’t tell tales and they don’t walk through locked doors; it’s a matter of simple logic or physics. The dead can’t be raised; we all know that.

But God is famous for breaking the rules, for going his own way, for doing the least expected, most surprising sorts of things. And so it is with the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus changes all the rules and creates God’s new way. The resurrection is a most surprising kind of thing, allowing God to appear in places you would least expect, even behind locked

² Susan R. Andrews, “Jesus Appears,” in *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, p. 341, found at <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/getarticle?artid=ATLA0000992868>.

doors. This ability to pass through doors is what C. K. Barrett calls “the mysterious power of the risen Jesus, who was at once sufficiently corporeal to show his wounds and sufficiently immaterial to pass through closed doors.”³ I don’t know that logic or reason or physics can take us any further than that to explain how Jesus did it.

But to try to understand the resurrection from the point of view of logic or reason or physics is to miss the point entirely. Resurrection is not simply a matter of cell biology, God’s reanimating Jesus’ heart and lungs and muscles. Resurrection is a matter of new creation, a matter of doing something entirely beyond the realm of what we see and know. Resurrection is a matter of unleashing God’s mighty love and power into the world through the transformed body of his Son, Jesus, and the transformed lives of God’s children, the Church.

The crucifixion was the world doing its best to shut God out of the life of the world. Resurrection is God’s overwhelming determination not to leave us alone. Resurrection means that God can pass through all kinds of doors—locked doors of sin and shame, locked doors of fear and guilt, locked doors of grief and doubt—to be with us. Resurrection means that Jesus has passed through the painful doors of loneliness and suffering to offer us the abiding presence of God’s Holy Spirit. Resurrection means that Jesus has passed through the prison doors of sin to liberate us from our bondage to evil. Resurrection means that Jesus has passed through the powerful doors of death to new and everlasting life. Resurrection means that Jesus throws open doors we have locked and opens the way to the reality of resurrection.

³ Barrett, 472.