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Easter 2B, April 8, 2018
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.

We get this scripture passage every year.

Like we have the retelling of Jesus' death—the Passion, on Good Friday...or Matthew's warnings by Jesus that we hear every Ash Wednesday: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So we get this passage from John's gospel every year the Sunday after Easter. Why? Because this passage is so important, so necessary for us who claim to follow Jesus, being his present-day disciples.

This year, something different struck me (I've preached on this passage at least the last 5 or 6 years now):

Where do we find the church at the start of this passage: locked away behind closed doors. Sitting in fear, confused, powerless.

This is the same room into which Mary Magdalene burst all out of breath proclaiming: I have seen the Lord earlier that morning.

What has that news done for the disciples? NOTHING.

What has her announcement of the greatest news that's ever been shared with another human being—death has been defeated—do for those who are the students, the followers, the friends of Jesus? NOT A DAMNED [DARNED] THING.

At the end of the day they are still behind that closed and locked door. Afraid. At the end of the day, the words of Mary have fallen on apparently deaf ears.

They are afraid to go out into the world that killed their leader, their Messiah, their friend. They are afraid to go into the world after hearing this incredible news from Mary: "But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

As one commentator put it, "A chronic temptation for the church is to stay behind closed doors. IN the experience of the Western church since the advent of the modern world, enlightenment pressures have conspired with this perennial temptation to place the church squarely behind the closed door of the private and personal domain."

For too long in our society—since like the 1950's (heck, let's be real: since this very moment in John's gospel on that first Easter evening) the church has placed itself outside of the public domain, locked itself away, afraid that sharing this incredible news of our salvation that Mary proclaims that VERY MORNING, will somehow harm us, will somehow ostracize us, will somehow get us "in trouble."

My brothers and sisters, Jesus was the biggest rabble rouser that there ever was. Jesus came to shake things up, to tell the world of God's love and mercy, that the old system of follow all the rules and do everything right and you'll be OK, was outdated, outmoded, and set up to make everyone an outcast—NOT bring everyone to the banquet table.

In the world beyond those closed doors is found the things that occupy most of our minds most of the time: economic considerations, political parties, civic responsibilities and all of the rest of the realities that bother and otherwise take up our waking thoughts. In that world, the good news of the gospel is barely acknowledged...or if the gospel IS glimpsed that message of forgiveness, mercy, love, justice, compassion, accountability, are seen as out of place, or anathema.

For a majority of those people we know—I'm talking everyone you know—they are so far removed from this thing called faith or religion that they aren't even up to the level of being a Doubting Thomas. They've got MILES to go before they are even there. But at least we are in the room...doors shut and locked though they may be with us safely sequestered away from the world with whatever level of faith we have.

But is that enough? Being locked away—keeping our faith behind closed and locked doors doing nothing? Even when we've heard that Jesus—our Messiah is alive, back from the dead having destroyed death itself and given us new life for eternity?

I'm going to cut straight to the chase here: WE—Christians, WE—affluent Episcopalians, WE—members of St. Martin's Episcopal Church, WE—YOU AND I—have got to unlock that door and bravely and purposefully step out into the world and bring the life-giving light of the

risen Christ to the world that desperately needs to see this light, this justice-infused love of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ.

John has those disciples in that locked room. Nothing getting in, nothing getting out. The status quo is being maintained...even IF that status quo is being terrified...even IF those who have shut themselves away have heard the amazing news of new life and that death has been defeated, Jesus is alive.

But is precisely behind those impenetrable doors that the risen Jesus appears. Nothing is going to keep him out. And his first words are the words that he said over and over again—which were the principal upon which the promise of his ministry with them rested: Peace be with you.

But this peace is not the peace that they were expecting. This peace is not the: “I know you are afraid, settle down, it is going to be alright.” This is not the peace that says, “Just keep doing what you are doing, being safe and secure locked away up here.” This peace that Jesus shares with them comes with something attached. This peace that Jesus shares with them brings with it a commissioning. Jesus says to them: “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21). And with that he breathes the Holy Spirit into them—literally re-creating them afresh not just as disciples—those who follow, but as apostles—those who are sent.

We too are those disciples-turned-apostles. We too are to be those who have to come out from behind closed and locked doors--where we keep our faith hidden neatly and quietly away when we are out in the world...or when friends come over for dinner. This peace that Jesus gives to those who would claim to follow him is a peace that pushes us today out into the big bad world where things like the rampant surge racism, human suffering with opium addiction, senseless acts of gun violence...and all other kinds and manner of evil exist and must be not only met—but battled.

From behind that closed and locked door the disciples-turned-apostles were sent on a new mission, out into the world...carrying with them the Holy Spirit to literally do battle with the forces of evil that existed then...and still exist today, wherever we find those battle lines drawn.

As another commentator put it so clearly: “The commission to contend with sin as it afflicts and affects the world is the wedge that holds the door open to the public domain for the church in the present.”

This past Wednesday our country commemorated the 50th anniversary of the assassination of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On Tuesday afternoon I read an article published in the New York Times on Easter Sunday, written by Michael Eric Dyson, a professor of sociology at Georgetown and an ordained Baptist minister, entitled: “Keeping the Faith: We Forgot what Dr. King Believed In” In the article Dyson states, “Dr. King passionately believed that a commitment to God is a commitment to bettering humanity, that the spiritual practices of prayer and worship must be translated into concern for the poor and vulnerable. Dr. King would want us to live his specific faith: work to defeat racism, speak out in principled opposition to war and combat poverty with enlightened and compassionate public policy.”

In short: get out from behind the closed and locked doors of keeping our faith here in this room only and get out into the world as those who are sent and commissioned by Jesus, the risen Christ to make a difference in this world in His holy name.

Dyson continues in his Easter Day article: "Today, in the midst of resurgent bigotry and deep divisions in this country, faith is too often viewed as an oasis of retreat, a paradise of political disengagement. On this Easter Sunday as we mark 50 years since Dr. King's death, it is a perfect and necessary time to remember his faith—and rekindle its urgency."

Jesus did not breathe the Holy Spirit into the disciples in that closed up room for them to go and do nothing. He gave them—and US today—the empowerment to go out into the world bearing that same peace, and the same forgiving, and truly life-transforming love of God—and taking those gifts out into every place, every space, every moment we find ourselves in.

As disciples of the risen Jesus, we must come out from behind those closed doors—which means leaving behind the safety and security they provide. We must, therefore, step across the threshold and boldly venture—with the love of God in the risen Christ—out into the world, becoming the apostles that our world so desperately needs. And we do this knowing that the same urgency that the disciples faced that Easter evening is the same urgency Dr. King faced, and is the same urgency that we see all around us now. Come out from behind the closed and locked door and find a way to be the very light of Christ to those all around us who are sitting in darkness yearning to see the face of Jesus and believe....and in doing so, "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."