

April 19, 2020 — Second Sunday of Easter St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

ACTS 2:42-47

42 They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.43 Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need.46 Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1Pt 1:3-9

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you 5 who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith, to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final time. 6 In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 as you attain the goal of (your) faith, the salvation of your souls.

Jn 20:19-31

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, the doors of the place where the disciples were having been locked, out of fear, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. 23 Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." 24 Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples said to 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 into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." 26 Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe."28 Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book. 31 But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

What images stood out when you heard today's Gospel? The doubt of Thomas? The blessing on those of us who believe 2000 years later? The promise of peace? Like you, I have heard all these themes preached around this Gospel. But I became fascinated with the evangelist taking the trouble to note that the doors were locked. Why did John specify 'locked doors'? What can 'locked' doors tell us?

I think the answer is in the Apostles' Creed we sometimes recite on Sundays. When we recite the words *thoughtfully*, we may puzzle over the phrase "he descended into hell" - what could this mean? isn't hell a place without God? We have been taught that Jesus opened the doors of hell and took those who had desired Baptism and had lived just lives with him to heaven, leaving the sinners behind the locked doors of hell. We believe that not everyone is bound for heaven, not everyone will be among the elect either by the Protestant idea of predestination or by our Catholic idea of personal failure to cooperate with grace. Ultimately, heaven is a gated community. We have even stationed Peter at the entrance.

Thomas Merton castigated those who make the cross contradict mercy, he wrote, "*This is of course the ultimate temptation of Christianity! To say that Christ has locked all the doors, has given one answer, settled everything and departed, leaving all life enclosed in the frightful consistency of a system outside of which there is ... damnation, inside of which there is the intolerable flippancy of the saved- while nowhere is there any place left for the mystery of the freedom of divine mercy which alone is truly serious, and worthy of being taken seriously.*"

Locked doors. We all tend to lock doors. And this is why studying theology has been one of the great adventures and blessings of my life. Because this description of what we have been taught is the end product of a long theological trajectory in the West. Eastern Christianity used to understand this phrase quite differently; something we lost when Eastern and Western Christianity divorced a thousand years ago. Our Western understanding has Jesus in the tomb on Saturday, in the silence of death (with the exception of his Ninja raid on hell) until he bursts forth on Easter morning. All our artistic representations of the Resurrection have Jesus emerging from the tomb- victorious for sure - but most importantly *alone*.

Resurrection was great for Jesus- what did it mean for us? In the West, if Jesus became our personal savior- it meant personal salvation- a ticket into heaven - and we spent the last 500 years since the reformation trying to figure out how to do our personal salvation: is it the 'faith alone' of the Protestants? or do 'good works' also count according to the Catholics? Is it all God's doing for a select few or does each of us have a role, too? But in the East, Paul was understood literally when he called Jesus the first fruit: the resurrection of Jesus was for *all* of us, we each will follow with our own resurrection. An Eastern icon of the Resurrection is unlike anything we see in the West because the Eastern understanding was radically different. Their icon has Jesus straddling hell and pulling *every single soul* out- we know it is a salvation for all because some souls have halos and others do not. They all come out. It is a corporate salvation- the entire cosmos is saved.

And we are coming to understand that it is not Jesus the man, the manifestation of God in matter in one time and place who effects this salvation but the Christ. It is the Christ in Jesus who was

God's way of being among us, the Word through whom all things were made and in whom we move, and breathe, and have our existence. The Christ exists outside of time and the salvation of the Christ does, too. The entire cosmos has been, is being, and will forever be saved- one and all- once and forever.

This takes us back to 'locked doors.' The disciples in that room locked the doors *themselves*. The doors were locked from within. The doors of hell are not locked from without either, but from within. Hell is not a place here or hereafter- but a state of mind. It is a state of mind we lock ourselves in.

Pope Francis said, *"There may be a few obstacles that close the door of the heart. There is the temptation to lock the doors, or to live with our sin, minimizing it, always justifying it, thinking we are no worse than others; this, however, is how the locks of the soul are closed and we remain shut inside, prisoners of evil. Another obstacle is the shame of opening the secret door of the heart. And there is a third pitfall: that of distancing ourselves from the door. It happens when we hide in our misery, when we ruminate constantly, connecting ourselves to negative things, until we sink into the darkest repositories of the soul."*

But while we do all these things in the freedom of our willfulness, in the end, locked doors are no barrier to the Christ. That, I believe, is what John is saying in today's Gospel.

The Divine Presence is always whispering, prodding, yearning for our love, for our attention, always calling us to our true identity, our authenticity, our integrity, breathing peace. God gets in.

Have we ever stopped to ask ourselves the question: If Jesus is our Savior, what is Jesus saving us *from*? I believe that Jesus is saving us from ourselves. While we may have our reasons, not letting others into our inner rooms – including the vain attempt to keep God out - makes life unbearable.

When I was assigned this 'reflection' months back, we were not mindful of the coronavirus beginning to explode on the other side of the world. It's paradoxical that we are speaking of locked doors when we are enjoined to shelter in place behind our doors. But we shouldn't mistake the doors on our dwelling with the doors on our heart. Those should be wide open to the many workers risking infection to assist in hospitals and nursing homes, to those stocking shelves and checking us out, those keeping order in our streets and safeguarding our homes, those keeping our electronic connections functioning. Our hearts need to be wide open to nurses crying at the end of a shift in frustration, to doctors moving in exhaustion from one patient to the next, to parents and partners and children being kept from a loved one's last moments. We can take all we are seeing and hearing and feeling and pour it all into the communion cup of our heart for the Spirit of God to sanctify it and return it to us in courage and hope and blessing for the world. Every prayer changes the tapestry of the universe. Believe it.

Happy Easter!

Audrey Rogers