

Grace Episcopal Church
Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. Brian C Justice

Acts 5.27-32
Psalm 118.14-19
Revelation 1.4-8
John 20.19-31

Locked Doors:
The Anti-Gospel of Fear and the Gospel of Easter¹

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O God of Easter,
Unlock the doors of lives
That we may live, and live fully.
Amen.

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“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, ... the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear...”

Every year on this day, the Second Sunday of Easter, we hear this same text from the Fourth Gospel. According to St John, the disciples gather in a house in Jerusalem. They are trying to make sense of the tempest: that storm of events during the Passover with Jesus.

They are afraid. They lock the doors.

And, it is understandable. The power brokers of the Jewish community have rejected and condemned Jesus; the power brokers of the Roman polity have crucified him; and the crowd descended into a state of collective hysteria, begging for blood and demanding a death. Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” have seen the empty tomb, but nothing else. Only Mary Magdalene has encountered the risen Christ.

The disciples are in a state of fear.

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¹ The inspiration for the title of this sermon is the Rev. James Liggett, who is the retired rector of St. Nicholas’ Episcopal Church in Midland, Texas. He is a native of Kansas and a graduate of the University of Houston and the Episcopal Divinity School.

When we look at the disciples, whom do we see?

On one level, the literal level, we can see the first followers of Jesus who were reasonably terrified of the priests, scribes, and elders who condemned Jesus, of the Roman procurator and soldiers who tortured and executed him, and of the bloodthirsty crowds who so readily called for his crucifixion.

On another level, the metaphorical level, we can see ourselves in them. Can't we? We recognize the locked doors ... we recognize the fear of the disciples in that house for whom Easter, the Gospel of Easter was not yet a reality.

A culture of fear pervades our society and our world at this moment. If you listen to the politicians, the public figures, the pundits, the personalities on cable tv news, what message do you hear?

Be afraid. Be very afraid ... of these people, of those people, of this, of that ... be afraid.

Fear.

Fear.

Fear.

The anti-Gospel of fear.

Yet there is something more sinister, more dangerous in the media's message of fear. We need to be afraid of "those people," they tell us, because "those people" are not like us, we have nothing in common with them, they do not share our humanity ... *they are "other."*

And so, if we yield to the anti-Gospel of fear, we lock the doors. Not the doors of our houses and our vehicles. The doors of our hearts and minds ... the doors of our spirits. If we live in fear, we lock the doors of our lives and we are isolated. We are cut off. Remember what C.S. Lewis said about hell ... the doors of hell are locked from the inside.² Nobody else locks you in hell; you do it to yourself.

While we can understand the fear with which the disciples of Jesus lived in those first hours after his crucifixion, we can also see in them a reflection of ourselves when fear overtakes us and we lock ourselves in and we lock the world out.

But then ... there is the Gospel of Easter.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. New York: 1962. p. 127.

The Gospel of Easter into which we are baptized is a Gospel of love and peace and life and connection. Not fear. Not isolation. Not writing others off. Not locking ourselves behind the doors. But living ...

A Gospel of life. Abundant life. New life. Resurrected life. And this radical, revolutionary Gospel is proclaimed over and over again throughout the Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 31.6 “Be strong and bold; have no fear ... it is the Lord your God who goes with you; God will not fail you or forsake you.”

Psalms 23.4 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me...”

Luke 12.32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.”

1 John 4.18 “There is no fear in love ... love casts out fear.”

John 14.27 “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. And I do not give to you as the world gives ... Do not be afraid.”

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So what happened when the disciples were huddled behind the locked doors of their hiding place? St John writes, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘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 ... Peace be with you.”

In Greek, the language in which the Gospel of John and the whole New Testament was written, *pneuma* is the word for both breath and spirit.

So Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit and the Holy Breath. And he gave them peace, the peace of the spirit and the breath. In the Christian meditative tradition, as in all of the world’s great spiritual traditions, the “prayer of the breath” is an ancient spiritual practice. To sit in a stable position and focus on the breath, on the rhythm of the breathing, is to dispel fear and generate peace, to open ourselves to the peace of God, to let the Gospel of Easter transform our lives into what God intends for us.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, that remarkable priest and poet of Victorian England, famously used Easter as a verb. He wrote, "Let God easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east ..."

Can we let God "easter" in us? Let the breath, the spirit, the peace of Easter live in us that our lives might be Easter lives?

Not dimness. But dayspring. Not fear, locked doors, isolation. But peace, open doors, and connection.

Happily, the disciples did it. They let God "easter" in their lives and they renounced the fear that had initially imprisoned them.

St Luke reports in our text today from the Acts of the Apostles,

"When the temple police had brought the apostles, 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 ... And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'"

Like Peter and the apostles, it is our baptismal calling to witness to the Gospel of Easter, to let God "easter" in us, to reject the anti-Gospel of fear by which people who covet power and profit would engorge themselves and enslave us.

Like the doors of this sanctuary at Grace Episcopal Church, let the doors of our lives be wide open so that the Gospel of Easter can shine through and change the world.

Amen.