

Text: John 20: 19-31  
Title: Locked on the Inside  
Date: 04.11.10  
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*I am indebted to an essay by Craig Barnes for this take on this text....*

What would you do if you heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead?  
What would you do if a friend told you that they had seen the resurrected Jesus?  
What would you do with the news that the three-days-dead-Jesus was alive?  
What would you do?

The disciples were hiding behind locked doors. The text says that they were afraid of the Jews. Maybe they were worried that they were next in line for the court and the cross, but scholars argue that there was no evidence that the religious establishment had the means or the moxie to initiate a campaign to clean up the followers of the one who had just been crucified. If they were afraid it may have been a fear of their own making.

Maybe they were afraid of being ridiculed as fools for following one who was crucified.

Maybe they were afraid of Jesus. From the cross Jesus could see that most of his disciples had deserted him in that dark hour. Maybe they were prisoners of their own shame. If Jesus was alive now..... Yikes!

Maybe they just didn't know if they could believe the women. After all, as it reads in the  *mishna* , "From women let not evidence be accepted because of the levity and temerity of their sex." They could just be women overwrought with grief. Better to just wait it out. This too shall pass.

Maybe they were befuddled and just didn't know what to do. If he was raised from the dead ~ where do you start looking? So, they huddled together: timid, troubled, worried, ashamed, afraid, confused.....

What would you do if you heard that Jesus was raised from the dead?  
The ones who knew him best were hunkered down behind locked doors.

They weren't out looking for Jesus.

They weren't the seekers or the spiritually savvy.

They weren't the courageous or the convicted.

They were "the church of sweaty palms, shaky knees, and firmly bolted doors."

(William Willimon)

They were hiding in fear, when, according to John, Jesus appeared among them.

The greeting that Jesus offers could be heard as a common salutation. Except, that he offers it twice and he spoke the same to them the last time they were together.

John records a long final conversation between Jesus and his disciples before his betrayal, and in that exchange he promises them peace and the gift of the Spirit of God.

Rev. Tony Van Zanten used to paraphrase that promise as a benediction. Saying:

*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives give I unto you. Don't let your hearts be troubled, neither be afraid; I give you my peace.*

So, in this first post resurrection appearance Jesus fulfills that promise. Before they can get out a word, before they can apologize or verify, he blesses them with peace, and breathes on them.

Previously this verb for breathing is used twice in scripture: when God breathes life into Adam and when life is breathed into the dry bones in Ezekiel. This is not just Jesus blowing bad three-day-dead resurrected breath on them. This is John's Pentecost. This is John's account of Jesus giving to his disciples the very breath of God ~ the Holy Spirit.

He gives them peace, breathes on them, and sends them out with a mission.

Now, Don Henley, lead singer for the Eagles and a fine theologian, penned a song that has this chorus:

*I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter  
But my will gets weak and my thoughts seem to scatter  
But I think it's about forgiveness...forgiveness...  
Even if, even if, you don't love me anymore...*

Dear friends, it strikes me that in this first resurrection appearance Jesus gets down to the heart of the matter, and I think it's about forgiveness, forgiveness.

He doesn't tell them to preach about a path to heaven.

He doesn't chide them about morality or challenge them about faith.

He doesn't tune up their moral code or polish up their piety.

He doesn't invite their worship or stump a social agenda.

He doesn't lay out a series of things to believe in.

One of the last things he says on the cross is, "Father, forgive them..."

And one of the first things he says after the resurrection is about forgiveness.

Huston Smith, a great scholar of world religions, has framed the most notable or peculiar aspects of each major religion. For example, Islam ~ prayer, Judaism ~ family, etcetera. Christianity? Forgiveness. It is unique to the faith of Jesus and to faith in Jesus to forgive enemies.

(William Willimon.)

Now, gifted preachers and good theologians will remind us that what Jesus is getting at here are the enemies of God....

Jesus was crucified and is resurrected.

Sin is paid for and death is defeated.

Therefore, the universe swings on a different hinge.

And, now, the church embodies and is empowered to proclaim this good news. As people accept it, their sins are forgiven.

As people reject it, their sins are held.

*Hallelujah! Pass the mustard!*

And, I am sure that is all fine and dandy. I am sure that it churns up a familiar comfort, positions us safely in God's fold, and energizes a mission of proclamation. But!

But, what if the heart of the matter is forgiveness?

What if first and finally it is about forgiveness?

What if lost in all of that certainty is the simple invitation to forgive?

What if the key to unlocking hearts of fear is forgiveness?

I have a friend whose moral and marital failing would make Tiger Woods blush. He has deeply wounded his wife and children. He has deeply wounded friend and family. He has deeply wounded me. There is a horrible knot of anger, shame, victimization, rationalization, incredulity, sickness, deception, and denial. It is all a kind of death. A death that we're all dying. But, rather than face this together and enter into the hard journey toward forgiveness.

I hold onto the anger and hurt.

I keep the doors locked because it is easier.

I stay hunkered down in the upper room because it is safer.

What would you do if you heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead?

I know that there are people with whom we harbor hurt; there are old wounds that fester and old angers that we can't release. I know that in our families, and on our jobs, and on our faculties there are relationships that are shackled with resentment. I know that even sitting in our company this morning there are those who can't let go of the feeling that they were wronged by others in our company. And, it is easy to stay there. It is easy to get tangled up in the knot of victim and vindication.

And yet....

would the breath of God breathe upon us,

would the resurrected Jesus walk through the locked doors of our hearts,

would we be those who....

without first getting even,

without waiting for repentance,

without making sure that we get the last word,

would we forgive?

Is there somebody whom you could forgive?

Is there some relationship that would be served by forgiveness?

In doing so you just might discover that fear and whatever else it is that binds you begins to be unlocked. Lew Smedes says it this way:

*When you forgive you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you.*

There are no misgivings about the brutal terrain and lifelong burden for those who have been abused or are being abused. There are no misgivings about the slow process it is to unlock those chains. And, none of this is to suggest that speaking the truth, demanding accountability, and remembering rightly, aren't part of the journey. But, would we forgive? Is there somebody that you can forgive?

We're not called to produce forgiveness. We're simply called to be the priests pronouncing that which has been produced on the cross. We're called to click open the locks, throw open the door, and walk back into the world as those who are not afraid. The only alternative is to live in shrinking prisons of hurt. (Craig Barnes)

My friend, Jerry Sittser, was driving the van when he was hit head-on by a drunk driver. As he tended to three of his children ~ his mother, wife, and daughter died before him. Jerry says it this way:

*Victims can choose life instead of death. They can choose to stop the cycle of destruction, and in the wake of the wrong done, do what is right. Forgiveness is simply choosing to do the right thing. It heals instead of hurts, restores broken relationships, and substitutes love where there is hurt. Though forgiveness appears to contradict what seems fair and right, forgiving people decide that they would rather live in a merciful universe than a fair one, for their sake as much as anyone else's. Life is mean enough as it is; they choose not to make it any meaner.*

Dear Friends, even this morning, may the resurrected Jesus slip in among us, breathe on us, and unlock our hearts in forgiveness ~ that we may be those who bear forgiveness and proclaim forgiveness. May we be those who forgive liberally and repeatedly.

What would you do if you heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead?  
Amen.