

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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FROM BEHIND THE DOORS

23rd April 2017

John 20:19-31
Acts 2:14a, 22-32

We are picking up the story of the resurrection as John tells it, exactly where we left off on Easter Sunday. We pick up with Jesus coming to his disciples to show them that all is well and that all has changed. He comes to them, despite the locked door, which is a symbol of their fear. They have locked themselves in, made prisoners of themselves, so that no one can find them. Jesus said that he was the life, and that he came to bring fullness of life and new life and abundant life; and his followers felt that they needed to give up all freedom and lock themselves in.

What a symbol of the church, so often, far too often down the ages. Sometimes we lock ourselves in physically. When I began serving as church officer and Alan was organist at Broughton St. Mary's in Edinburgh, one of my tasks was to sit in a particular little bit of a pew at the back where a small light bulb was installed on the book-board. This was to light up if someone rang what looked like the church bell during the service, so that I could go and let them in. Only it never did light up, because the large, forbidding front doors were locked when the service began and no one thought to ring the bell. If anyone came by, they went away – maybe thinking the church was closed. Eventually we changed this, and had the doors stand open, with the minister's wife sitting in the vestibule to welcome anyone who chanced by (she said she heard the minister enough at home and she could do this service).

The locked doors behind which the disciples hid reminds me of the story of the little boy who was being hushed in church. Shhh...Shhh...Shhh. Eventually he asked, "Are we hiding from God?"

Well, are we? The disciples were so frightened for themselves that everything Jesus had told them went out of their minds and they hid. And Jesus found them anyway. He found them and he offered them Peace. Shalom. The usual greeting, but surely with a very pertinent meaning. They are frightened, he brings peace. Once they have got over their joy, once joy has driven out fear, Jesus offers them peace again. "Peace I give you: as the Father has sent me, so I send you." This time it is not a greeting, but his gift to them. Jesus called them and us, not for a quiet, leisurely life, but for an active mission that faces challenges, problems, and various trials. They are afraid for their lives, and not without reason. We too fear when we are called by God to go out in his name – when we ask our family or friends to come to church with us; when we know that we need to speak of our faith in a conversation; when we think as a church about trying new ways of reaching out to our community with God's love. Fear – we know about it. So Jesus gives us first of all his peace to carry out the mission. A true peace over and against fear, and doubt.

When you think about it, the fears we have are about us. The disciples feared for their lives, as many Christians around the world still do. We tend to fear loss of face.

We are afraid that if we make a remark or offer an invitation, our family or friends will say no, and if they say no to us we will feel personally rejected, even if that is not the intent. We are afraid that if we speak of our faith, we will be asked questions that we cannot answer. We are afraid that as our relationships with people move into what is very personal to us – our faith, which is the foundation of our life - we will be exposed as who we are: flawed and fallible. Our fears are mainly for ourselves. And Jesus, when he sends us out, gives us his peace.

Because send us out he does. His purpose for his followers was never that we be armchair theologians, locked up in an upper room, but apostles, people sent out, moving to people, taking the Good News to them. As he was sent by the Father to save the world (cf. John 3:17) we are sent with the message of the very same salvation. The word “Apostle” comes from the verb *Apolstolein*, to send: the disciples, who became friends, and then, in the light of the resurrection who Jesus calls brothers, now also become apostles: those who are sent.

Of course that is a scary, weighty thought. We are sent with the message of the salvation of the world. But don't forget, we are sent with the message. We are not asked to accomplish the salvation of the world. Jesus did that on the cross and said so when he said, “it is finished.” Finished, completed, accomplished. We are the heralds with the good news, not those who have to make it true ourselves. One classic description of the mission of the Christian says that we are beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.

And of course, Jesus does not expect us to do His mission just on our own, relying on our own abilities and strength. He gives us His strength, His power, the Holy Spirit. The mission can be accomplished only through His Spirit. By giving his Spirit, Jesus transformed his followers, then and now. He gave them the same life that flowed through him, the life that is God, God around and God within, and God in close familial relationship. We are not asked to accomplish the salvation of the world, and we are not even asked to be messengers in our own strength. God within us gives us courage when we determine to do as we are asked and step out as an apostle.

We read this morning a portion of Peter's first sermon, the first time he took his courage in his hands and did what Jesus had asked him to do – to go with the message of salvation. Peter was able to say what he did, because he had the courage, because Jesus had given him peace and his Spirit, and because he was bearing witness to what he knew. The part of the sermon we read finished: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.” (Acts 2:32) Peter was speaking of what he knew. And the more that he obeyed God, the more that he conquered his natural fears and did what Jesus commanded, by speaking up, the more he had to witness about. He began as an eye-witness to the resurrection – an advantage none of us have! – but as he lived his life in apostleship, in being sent, he could also bear witness to God being with him, to God rescuing him from present dangers as well as from eternal dangers, to God teaching him new truths. Being sent as an apostle is still a scary thing, even though Jesus gives us his life, but it is never as scary as before we being to go, before we begin to speak to people, before we begin to invite people to join us in our journey of faith, in our worship, in our service of others. The first step is always the hardest.

And Jesus knew and knows the needs of individual apostles. Thomas was absent when he came that first Easter day. Thomas was not hiding with his friends – maybe

he had begun to drift off to find a way back to his old life, whatever that was. Maybe he felt it was more dangerous to be with the disciples in a group. Maybe he just needed time on his own. Like Peter, Thomas had been willing to die with Jesus – as he had said when Jesus set off towards Jerusalem to raise Lazarus from death; his feelings of connection with Jesus went very deep. Thomas is not there, and Jesus knew very well Thomas would not be able to fulfil the calling on his own, so he came back for him, to empower him also as he empowered the other disciples.

Jesus knows our doubts, and faith must also have doubts otherwise it is not faith, but certainty. Jesus knows our doubts and our fears. He knows our tendency to think that the success of God's mission depends on us – when in fact God's mission was accomplished and succeeded in Jesus. He knows that we would rather hide behind locked doors, and either hope that the world does not see us, or that God does not see us – because if God sees us, he will give us a task to fulfil. He knows too our tendency to hide behind doors and wonder why the world does not come flocking to us.

Jesus was not one to sit and wait for the world to come to him. If he had, we might never have heard of him. Instead he went out to where there was need in the world, actively seeking to bring God's message of love and healing, of hope and life where it was most needed. He went out in the power of God's Spirit, given him at his baptism, and as his followers, we must go out as well. Remember, our faithfulness as apostles will not be measured by God in terms of how many people we brought to the faith, how many came to church because of us, how many were stunned by our great knowledge and divine wisdom. Our faithfulness as apostles is measured by how many we reach out to, whatever their reaction, whether they respond to our invitation, or our halting words of faith with joy or with embarrassment, with interest or with indifference. Our calling is to be faithful: the response of others, as the salvation of the world, is in God's hands.

We are the people of the resurrection, let us move in the peace of the Lord to fulfil his purpose as he enables us by his power. Amen.