

“Behind Locked Doors”

John 20:19-31

2nd Sunday of Easter

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I’ve told you before that one of my phobias is snakes.

A few weeks ago, late on a Sunday afternoon, I had just returned from walking the dog. Went up the front steps to our house, unleashed our dog, and I was headed back outside those same front steps when I noticed—right there, on the bottom step leading up to our front door, the same step I had just walked up with the dog two minutes earlier—a baby copperhead.

What do you think I did?

I darted back inside, slammed the door, locked the door.

Then I yelled, “Honey, Copperhead! I need a shovel!”

So my wife brought me our shovel...and I unlocked the door, opened the door, held the shovel over the snake...and the snake slithered off the steps and down into the dirt.

No problem.

I took the shovel, and I hit the snake.

I hit it a couple more times, to make sure I got it good.

But much to my surprise, even after I attacked that copperhead with a shovel, part of it was still moving...so what did I do next?

I figured better safe than sorry.

I shoveled the snake onto the driveway and got into our car and did about five laps around the driveway in the car, running over the snake each time.

Now...I share that with you not because I’m proud of my phobia when it comes to snakes.

I share it, because I want to talk about LOCKS.

Why in the world, when I first saw that snake, did I dart inside and lock the front door?

What's the snake going to do?

Open the door that I had just closed??

It's funny, sometimes, why we lock the things we do...

In our text for today, John writes:

“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...”

Stop right there!

Let's get this straight.

It's Easter evening.

Peter has seen the empty tomb.

The disciple whom Jesus loved “saw and believed.”

Mary Magdalene told all the disciples: “I have seen the Lord!”

And yet...that first Easter evening finds the disciples doing what?

Not rejoicing, not celebrating.

They're huddled together.

Out of fear.

Behind locked doors.

It's funny, why we lock the things we do.

But actually, when it comes to the disciples, I get it.

It's not like any time you and I lock a door, it shouldn't be locked.

There are appropriate times to exercise caution with a lock.

There are many times, in the world we live in, when locks are the right and logical way to go.

I get locking the doors.

Every night when everyone is headed to bed, what do I do?

I go around the house, making sure every door to our house is locked.

What's the routine when we leave for vacation?

Everyone gets in the car, but I'm always the last one, because I need to double check all the doors, make sure they're all locked.

But you know as well as I do...it's not just doors that get locked in our lives.

You and I can lock just about anything, if we try hard enough.

We can lock our minds against different ways of thinking.

We can lock our hearts against more faithful ways of loving.

Mrs. McIntyre inherited a run-down farm somewhere in the rural south. This is the way Flannery O'Connor tells it in her short story, "The Displaced Person," which was first published back in 1954.

Mrs. McIntyre has a few workers who are Black, whom she calls by another derogatory designation in the story. Mr. and Mrs. Shortley are a couple who manage the farm. The displaced person is Mr. Guizac, a refugee from the Second World War. He's from Poland.

Mr. Guizac knows his way around a farm.

He can fix anything, grow anything, and he works like a machine.

But he doesn't know the first thing about racism in America.

He crosses the line by treating everyone on the farm the same.

Even though Mr. Guizac is the best employee she has ever had, Mrs. McIntyre determines she must get rid of him. She "has no other choice," she says. She knows he has nowhere else to go—he's even got a wife, and two children, all refugees.

But she says, "It's not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go...I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world."

Later Mrs. McIntyre is talking to a priest.

The priest suggests that her Christian faith ought to shape her relationship with her neighbor.

Mrs. McIntyre replies, "Father Flynn! As far as I'm concerned, Christ was just another [displaced person.] I'm going to let that man go," she said.

And in one of her many strokes of brilliance, the way Flannery O'Connor writes the story, when Mrs. McIntyre says, "I'm going to let that man go," you can't tell if she means Mr. Guizac or Jesus.

But the truth is, it doesn't matter.

If she lets either of them go, she lets them both go.¹

Can I can put it like this?

Flannery O'Connor wasn't just confronting the xenophobia and racism of her day.

¹ For this summary of the story, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Tom Are, "Christmas at Luke's House," December 16, 2018, found at [Thomas Are, Jr. - Christmas at Luke's House | Day 1](#) [Thomas Are, Jr. - Christmas at Luke's House | Day 1](#). The story can be found in *Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

She was trying to break down a locked door.

Have you ever thought about what might be locked in your life?
It doesn't have to be fear of another person that causes you to create a lock.

It can be fear of something that's a part of your own person.

That place where things are so tender, you're on the defensive.
That place in your heart, where the wound is so large, you don't want to let anyone else in.

I heard an interview that Stephen Colbert gave recently, and during that interview, Colbert told a story that he said he had never shared in public before.

When Stephen Colbert was 10 years old, two of his older brothers, Peter and Paul, along with Stephen's father, were killed in an airline accident, Eastern Airlines flight 212, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

This was 1974.

It was a "before and after" kind of event.

Perhaps **the** defining event in Stephen Colbert's life.

In the interview, Colbert said the following:

"...a few years ago...my son Peter, he needs a belt for something. Got a growth spurt and nothing was fitting him. And I said, 'Oh, I might have a belt that'll fit you.'

And I went into my closet. I pulled out a belt.

It's this...woven belt, which I never wear, but it's a hanging in my closet."

And Evie (Colbert's wife)—she's standing there in the room.
And she says to her husband: "What's that belt?"

Colbert replies, "That's Peter's [belt]."
Then it occurred to Evie what Stephen had just said.
Somehow, Evie knew that Stephen wasn't talking about their son,
Peter, who needed a belt.

He was talking about HIS brother, Peter...who died all those years ago, who used to own that belt.

"That's Peter's belt," he said.
There was a pause.
And Evie says, "That's your brother's belt?"
"Yeah," he says.

Evie says, "You've been carrying that belt around for 40 years?"

Stephen Colbert goes on:

"...it didn't even occur to me that I had done that...
How many places have I lived since I was ten?

"I mean, I used to move every two years when I was a young actor.
And every place I went, I found a place to hang up that belt.
Never looked at it. Never touched it.
Until I moved to the next place.
Until my son named Peter needs a belt.
And I gave it to him.

"And that gave me," he went on, "a very interesting perspective on how I had, in some ways, quite physically and overtly carried [my

brother] around, but subconsciously never recognized it...I'd literally moved that belt from peg to peg for 40 years without thinking about it."²

Do you see what happened there?
Colbert's wife, much to his surprise...unlocked a door!
A door to Colbert's past, to his grief.
A door to his love for his brother...and it was ok.

It was a door that needed to be unlocked...

Do you get what we're talking about this morning?
We're talking about locks.
Whether they're steel locks, or emotional locks, or spiritual
locks...

These locks have something to do with Easter.

Now, in our text for today, Jesus—
does not unlock a door,
or knock down a door, or open a door.

The risen Christ just goes right through the disciples' doors.
I don't know how he did it.
John doesn't explain how he did it.
But John says: that's what Jesus does.
That's what Easter is about.

Easter...is about Jesus...*ignoring our locks,*
getting behind our defenses...
opening that in our lives
which really needs to be open.

² As told to Anderson Cooper, on Cooper's podcast, "All There Is with Anderson Cooper," on the September 21, 2022 episode, "Stephen Colbert: Grateful for Grief."

I think this text tells us something very important about being an Easter people. Being an Easter people is about examining OUR OWN locks, taking a closer look at whatever fears or loss we've buried deep inside, and we've locked those wounds and that pain up so tightly, no one can see them.

And what this text tells us is that living behind locks—
that's not what being an Easter people is about.

Easter faith is about looking our fears squarely in the face,
it's about accepting our losses and our grief and not burying
them deep inside...
it's about stepping out of the small worlds that we create for
ourselves, those rooms that cause us to hunker down and huddle up,
and moving into the much larger world
that the risen Christ has already given us.

As Christ says to his disciples on that first Easter evening:
"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

In other words, no more huddling in fear.
Get out beyond your locked doors.

And as you consider what that might mean in your own personal
life of faith, let me toss out a few ideas about what that might mean for
us here at Westminster in our congregation's life of faith.

In your bulletin, on the back of the insert, is a list that you've seen
before. It's our vision, our pillars, and our goals. We spent the fall
talking about these in a sermon series...they appear in almost every
bulletin we print.

So...if I asked you to close your bulletin right now and gave you a quiz, you could ace it, right?

What's the vision of our church?

Open Minds Open Hearts.

Good.

What's the first pillar that we name as a core value of this church?

Hospitality.

Good, good.

You get an "A" on the pop quiz.

Let me invite you to think about that first pillar for a moment.

Hospitality.

What does hospitality mean to you when it comes to being God's church?

Hospitality is not simply a reactive thing: someone comes, and we say, "So glad you're here."

It's also a proactive thing: "We'd like you to make your church home here." Sometimes, hospitality means being proactive about stepping outside the comfort zones we didn't even know we had.

Don't misunderstand, this is a warm and welcoming church. But I wonder if there's more we can do....practicing hospitality as a congregation is about taking active steps to let others know that they ARE welcome, to make the odds much more favorable that people who might not otherwise show up, do in fact show up.

For example, in the past couple months, I've had a few conversations, with members of this church and with my colleagues in ministry, conversations about people who may want to be a part of

Westminster but they're not sure yet that they would feel welcome at Westminster.

One of those conversations was about families who have teenagers who are transitioning. Would families with a teen who is transitioning their gender identity be welcome at Westminster? What can we do as a congregation to let those families know that yes, indeed, they would be welcome here, and help them feel like we had already been planning for them to arrive?

Another conversation I had recently was about families with children who have disabilities. Of course, we already have families with children who have disabilities in our church. And we need to do everything we can to make sure those families and children are welcome.

But the other question is, "What can we do for families who are not yet here, for those who have children on the autism spectrum, or children with developmental differences, or children with disabilities...who are currently wondering, could Westminster make my children feel at home?"

You see, part of what I'm hearing in these conversations is a very important question. Not just how do we practice hospitality for the people who are here, the people who have already found us.

That's an important question, but it's not the only question.

The other question is "Who's not here?"

Who's not here, but would like to be here?

Who is Christ calling to our church home?

A third conversation I had recently was with one of you about Soteria. As I hope you know, Soteria supports formerly incarcerated men and women as they reintegrate into society, and we have a good relationship with Soteria.

If some of these women and men are looking for a church home, could Westminster be that place? What would we need to do as a church community to welcome them, to let them know that we would be honored to have them here?

Let me get at it like this:

How many of you have known the love of Christ in this place? Think for a moment about those who are hungry to know that love, and they haven't found a church yet that knows how to show them that love, and they're wondering whether Westminster could be that place?

Hospitality is a pillar of this church.

If we lock all the copperheads out, I am just fine with that.
But it's not copperheads that God wants inside these walls.
It's our neighbors, our fellow children of God.

Who's not here?

Ask yourself that question in the coming months, and then ask yourself what you can do, how Jesus might be sending you to bring them here...and who knows what God might do...

Amen.