

Title: The Myth of Locked Doors  
Text: John 20: 19 – 29  
Date: May 05, 2019

Apparently the persecution that Jesus had predicted had come to pass. In John 10 Jesus had said, **"If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."** (John 10: 18, 20) In John 16 Jesus warned, **"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. . . . But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them."** (John 16:2, 4)

So then it is not surprising that on this Easter evening that **"The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear . . ."** (John 20:19) The crucifixion clearly would have left them in a state of shock and confusion. And then there were these "idle tales" relating to the empty tomb. That just added to the confusion. What were they to make of that? And Mary had said she had *seen* the risen Lord. Oh really?

I think that most of us could have some sympathies here. Since their lives in recent years had revolved around Jesus with such intensity, when Jesus' physical presence is suddenly removed from the equation it is as though a Black Hole had opened up which sucked the life right out of them.

I am sure that there are those in this room who can relate – those who have experienced such a profound loss in your life that you have withdrawn from the world and locked the doors to your heart. The last thing you want is a pep talk, or reasoned words about a window being opened every time a door is shut. We may withdraw in a locked room of our own making for days, or maybe even years.

If that sounds like you, I think this passage is uniquely encouraging. Even when we have been utterly masterful at locking ourselves in "a safe room", the Spirit has wonderfully mysterious ways of breaking through our defenses, and showing up uninvited. It is not always about "preparing our hearts." Sometimes the Spirit just shows up out of nowhere, and totally takes us by surprise.

So then this is the context in which **"Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."** After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Jesus said to them again, **"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."** (John 20:19-21)

When you think about these various "resurrection stories," have you ever noticed how it takes time to recognize The Beloved? So often the disciples couldn't quite "see" Jesus at first sight. In a book entitled *Geography of Grace, Doing Theology from Below* we read, **"Seeing the resurrection requires a second look, another glance. It takes a while for our eyes to adjust to the light of the resurrection, and then all of life looks radically different... Seeing God's "new thing" is about seeing an old thing in a new way through a new lens. Such is the miracle of Gospel sight—to see what has always been there in such a radically new way that it becomes a new thing. This is always a work of grace, and we can only handle so much of it at once."** (by Kris Rocke and Joel Van Dyke) When our eyes get adjusted to seeing things in a new way, we recognize the Beloved in our midst, and we are ready to unlock the doors and begin re-entering the world.

Please believe me when I say that I do not have a Messiah Complex. I know better. So I don't want to hear any stories of you as a faith community gathering behind locked doors with the news of my retirement. It has never been about me, *or* my predecessor. It has always been about allowing your eyes to adjust to see the Beloved in your midst, and hearing the Beloved say, **"Peace be with you."**

The next line (v. 22) is fascinating. We read that, "He breathed on them and said to them, **"Receive the Holy Spirit."** It is interesting that the word **"to breathe"** here is not the common one. In the Greek version of the Old Testament the word "to breathe" used in the creation story, as well as in the story of Ezekiel and the dry bones, is the same as the word used here. Rather than breathing *"on"* them, a more literal translation is that Jesus breathed *"into"* them. So the image is that of Jesus breathing new life *into* these fear-filled, good-as-dead, dry-boned disciples. It is this animating presence of the Spirit within that then empowers them (and you!) to be sent forth. Jesus said, **"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."**

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There is lots more that could be said about this first section, but I would really rather move on, and spend a little time talking about Thomas. But rather than focusing on the important topic of doubt – *and* the real cost of demanding certainty – I wanted to take this in a different direction. While we did not read this part, our text continues by referring to **"Thomas (who was called the Twin)."** Interestingly enough, Thomas is not a proper name, but simply means "twin" in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. So it is really something of an Aramaic nickname.

Since Ed Zahniser is currently leading a class on a non-canonical gospel, I thought I might tie this in with a tip of the hat to the Gospel of Thomas. One of the differences you will find when comparing the traditional gospels with gnostic literature relates to *how we know things*. The account of the resurrection appearance we are dealing with in John relates both to direct evidence of the resurrection, as well as the power of verbal testimony. Yet Gnostic literature speaks to the power of inner testimony. There is a line in the Gospel of Thomas that reads [as translated by Prof. George MacRae] **"Jesus said: 'If you bring forth what is hidden within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'"** I don't know about you, but I find that premise to be extremely compelling. It represents a significantly different portrayal of one on a faith journey. Rather than relying on logic, and debating concepts, there is an assertion that significant knowledge can be realized by looking within. More than just navel gazing, this is founded on a sacred view of self – a high view of being made in the image of God.

This sounds like a different orientation towards believing. One Johannine scholar, Karoline Lewis, writes: **"Belief in John is never a noun, but always a verb, and believing in Jesus is to be in relationship with Jesus. . . . believing is not credal, but relational."** I believe Thomas would agree.

We already mentioned that Thomas was a twin, but whose twin is he? In the gnostic Gospel, Jesus reveals to Thomas that **"whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become that person, and the mysteries shall be revealed to him."** Elaine Pagels is convinced that, for the Gospel of Thomas, encountering **"the living Jesus"** means recognizing **"oneself and Jesus as, so to speak, identical twins."**

Now *there* is an invitation for you today! Rather than thinking of an exalted Jesus reigning from on high, think of the Beloved as your identical twin. Discover what you have in common, and grow into that vision.

In a different gnostic text [Book of Thomas the Contender], Jesus addresses Thomas as follows:

**“Since you are my twin and my true companion, examine yourself, and learn who you are . . . Since you will be called my [twin], . . . although you do not understand it yet . . . you will be called ‘the one who knows himself.’ For whoever has not known himself knows nothing, but whoever has known himself has simultaneously come to know the depth of all things.”**

Do you see a whole new world opening up to you? Think of these two lines of thinking as complementary, not contradictory. It's not “either / or;” it's “both / and.”

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As we prepare our hearts for communion, may our gaze be softened to take another glance, and from the corner of our eyes see the Beloved in our midst. We imagine locked doors as having more power than they really do, for it is the signature act of the Beloved to make a surprise appearance behind our defenses. May we receive that life-giving Peace breathed into us, be emboldened to open the locked doors, and find our place amongst those who have been sent.

Amen

John 20: 19 – 29 (NRSV)

19 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 for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "**Peace be with you.**" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then 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 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "**Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.**"

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told 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 in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.**" 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "**Peace be with you.**" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "**Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.**" 28 Thomas answered him, "**My Lord and my God!**" 29 Jesus said to him, "**Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.**"