

Sermon Notes for 4/3/16 (Easter 2)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: John 20:19-31

Theme: DOORS AND KEYS AND LOCKS AND THINGS

Hymn: LBW 139 (O Sons and Daughters of the King)

The Point: By His death and resurrection, Jesus has opened heaven's doors to all people, and it is our joy and privilege to go on opening doors to life for those around us.

Introduction: “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Some important themes run through today's Scriptures, and we want to pick up on a few of those themes as we consider **DOORS AND KEYS AND LOCKS AND THINGS**. We sit here a week after this year's Easter celebration. But the Gospel lesson has not moved that far from last week's reading. It pictures the disciples the very evening of that first Easter Sunday. We are told they are hiding behind locked doors “for fear of the Jewish leaders.” They are hiding behind doors of oak or cedar, but they are also hiding behind iron bars of fear. They have not been able to process everything that has been going on. Their minds are locked into their standard ways of thinking and experiencing. But this stuff that has been happening around them just does not fit!

On Friday their Master and Lord has died on the cross. That they understood – or thought they did. Emptiness and despair overwhelmed them. And now just a couple of days later, what is going on? Women finding angels, but no body, at the tomb. Peter and John seeing grave clothes, but no Jesus. Reports from most unlikely sources – Mary Magdalene the wild one and Peter the denier – of having seen Jesus face to face. Would you have believed them, if you had seen Him die on Friday, then on Sunday He is alive? Two disciples returning in haste to tell of their earlier stroll to Emmaus, with a story of a first-unrecognized, then a suddenly-disappearing Jesus. What is happening? Threats still surround them. The leaders who hated Jesus will surely not stop with ridding the nation of the leader of the Way, will they? Won't they be coming after His followers next? Slam the doors! Lock the doors! No laughing, no loud talking, only whispers, lest they be overheard. Locked down in fear!

Are we locked down and locked in also? We have pledged to make changes in our lives – maybe some of those came in the form of our annual New Year's resolutions. But those have failed over and over again. We have made promises to God and to one another, promises that we have not kept. We seem to be locked into patterns of deception and self-interest. We, like the apostles, have professed our loyalty to our Lord, but when push comes to shove, we cave in to the expectations of others, especially those in power.

We confess here within these walls that we believe in the Triune God, in the Creator Father, in the Savior Son, in the Sanctifier Spirit. But what happens when we step out onto the sidewalk and climb into the car and walk down the corridors of our living and working spaces. Is He remembered when we have jobs to do and places to go and people to see and lists to check off? Or are we locked into the standard, routine, expected ways of behaving and speaking that have no reference to the saving work of our Lord Jesus? Do our tongues freeze when we have open opportunities to speak of the Savior's love and of His Easter victory in the presence of those who may not know Him in the least?

Those who remain locked down and locked up will finally find themselves also locked out, locked out of eternal joy and fellowship. Jesus' parable of the ten virgins gives the sad outcome for those foolish virgins who came to the wedding feast after the door, the feast having begun, was shut. Though they stood outside the door and appealed, the master said, “Truly I tell you, I don't know you.” The Revelation reading for today pictures the Son of Man in shining brilliance saying, “I hold the keys of death and Hades.” We

confess that He is coming again as Judge of the living and the dead.

But wait! Jesus does not want to be known primarily as Judge, but as Savior! He does hold the keys of death – but, even more importantly, He holds the keys to LIFE! Our Lord Jesus is not one to be barred in or out by doors, locked or not, or by stones that close up tombs, sealed or not. He doesn't stand at the apostles' door and knock on Easter evening. No, He simply enters the room without regard to the locked doors. Our Lord has conquered death in His rising to life, and He holds all the keys to life and death – as well as to parlor room doors. Not only does He hold the keys, but He actually claims, "I am the door" and "I am the gate." If we are seeking the Father's face, the only entrée is through the gate which is the person of God's Son, Jesus, the Messiah. We need to give devout attention to the One who holds the keys.

Jesus does not stand off in the distance watching people suffer and die. He comes right into our mess and suffers right along with us, for His suffering is redemptive. He suffers and dies because that is the key to heaven's glory for you and me. The authorities who put Him to death thought they were slamming the door on this Christian menace that was troubling them. But Christ would not be shut out of the history of the world that His hand had created. He insisted on becoming one of us, at offering Himself into slavery and humiliation, locking Himself down to death so that His wandering creatures could now be free.

And because He was willing to subject Himself to this mistreatment, we have had the gate to heaven thrown wide open for us. Just as the thief on the cross, so we hear the words of the Savior, "Today [or very soon] you will be with Me in paradise." If this earthly life were all there is, we would be (in Paul's words) of all people most miserable. But Christ is the door to a new and eternal reality, which begins the moment you put your trust in Him.

On that Easter Sunday morning, the tomb door was thrust open for all time. One gospel author says the angel rolled back the stone from the door of the tomb and sat on it. This tomb-closing stone had become a lounge chair! Jesus rose from death, not just as one barely snatched from death in the nick of time (as we read of many people who have been through a "near death" experience). He rose victorious, full of life, not just barely breathing, but breathing on the disciples the very gift of God's Spirit to empower them to live and to serve.

From *Parade* magazine comes the story of self-made millionaire Eugene Lang, who greatly changed the lives of a sixth-grade class in East Harlem, New York. Mr. Lang had been asked to speak to a class of 59 sixth-graders. What could he say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school? He wondered how he could get these predominantly black and Puerto Rican children even to look at him. Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart. "Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you." At that moment the lives of these students changed. For the first time they had hope. Said one student, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school. (*Parade Magazine*).

Today more than 15,000 lower-income students (whom Mr. Lang calls "dreamers") have gone on to pursue postsecondary education. The promise of support from this man who was willing to pay their way through school has given hope to many thousands. You and I have been the beneficiaries of something far greater than college tuition being paid for us. We have received the full payment of our salvation through what Jesus has done at Calvary for us. Our lives have been touched with His mercy so that we could extend that mercy to others.

Prison doors are locked to keep prisoners in. But Jerusalem's prison doors could not keep the apostles locked in. We just read about the apostles' experience from Acts 5. Some weeks or months after Easter,

the whole group experienced the very thing they had feared on Easter evening. Soldiers or temple guards found them and arrested them. They may have wondered whether they were about to experience what Jesus had gone through with His arrest, trial and execution. But God had other plans for them. By night the angel of the Lord led the apostles out through the open door of that prison, no longer God-forsaken. God's plans will not be hindered by the attacks and hatred of men, even powerful and influential men.

So the apostles found themselves out on the streets of Jerusalem once again. And the angel did not instruct them to go back behind locked doors in their safe and secure hidey-holes or homes. No, he said, "Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people all about this new life." They had been entrusted with the keys to life in the proclamation of the Gospel. This message about the new life in Jesus, the newly-risen Lord, sets people free from the prisons of their sin and hopelessness. They could not just hold onto it; it had to be shared.

What was the reply of Peter and the others when they were accused of filling Jerusalem with their teaching? They did not deny, but confessed, "We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." Their tongues were unlocked and their hearts were courageous. No longer would they hide behind locked doors! They could not just stand around holding the keys to life and freedom while so many around them were locked into their own dungeons of fear and anxiety and guilt. They were determined to use those keys to open doors, to set people free.

Not only does Jesus exercise the right to forgive, to open the door to heaven to His lost and wandering people. He even hands over the keys to them (to US). That very Easter evening, in an unforgettable moment, we are told that "he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'" What power He has entrusted to these erstwhile followers! Despite their weaknesses and their failures and their fears, He bestows on them the power to usher others into the kingdom of grace by the power of forgiveness.

And that power is handed to us today, to all who are followers of this merciful Savior Jesus. That power is certainly exercised by the pastor within the liturgy of the church as he pronounces forgiveness. But that is not the only place where that power is put into action. That may be the beginning point, but the power spirals outward in a circle of mercy. Indeed, when you are victims of unloving treatment, when you have been hurt by another, when people have ignored and disrespected and rejected you, right there in those moments you have the opportunity to enact the same power which Christ called on as He was being nailed to the cross. "Father, forgive them," He prayed, "for they know not what they do." And this is the same power that raised Him from the grave so that we today are alive.

In the current issue of *National Geographic*, a story tells of a group of people in Indonesia who often keep their dead loved ones around in the family home – even for years on end, sometimes until just a skeleton remains. Perhaps the following story builds on that sort of experience. A missionary in Turkey wished to teach a group of people the truth of Christ's resurrection. He said: "I am traveling, and I reach a place where the road branches off two ways; I look for a guide, and find two men: one dead, the other alive. Which of the two must I ask for direction, the dead or the living?" "Oh, the living," cried the people. "Then," he said, "why send me to Mohammed, who is dead, instead of to *Christ, who is alive!*"

Conclusion: By His death and resurrection, Jesus has opened heaven's doors to all people, and it is our joy and privilege to go on unlocking the doors to life for those around us. We do that by living authentic, hope-filled, joyful lives even in the midst of the world's mistreatment. We open doors to life by speaking

openly of the One who has died for the life of the world. We open doors to life by supporting the ministry of the Word of life around the world as we pray for and give to support missionaries who take that Good News of Jesus to distant corners of the globe. We open doors to life as we live, right here in St. Paul, MN, as those who have been set free from the dungeons of guilt and fear – free to live in the brilliant sunshine of the One who is the First and the Last and the Living One, our Lord and Savior risen from the dead, Jesus the Messiah. AMEN!