

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Easter Sunday- April 4, 2010

Scripture lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25 & John 20:1-10, 19-23

BEHIND LOCKED DOORS

It's the first Easter. John's gospel says Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb in the early morning dark. She sees the stone door has been removed and assumes Jesus' body has been stolen.

She runs to tell Peter and John, and they run to the tomb immediately. John is faster so he gets there first. He looks in, sees grave clothes, but doesn't go in. Peter arrives, goes in, sees what John has seen, but also notices that the wrappings that had been around Jesus' head are rolled up apart from the rest of the grave clothes.

John goes in and his gospel says that right away he believes that Jesus has risen. Oddly, the next verse reads, "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." But it just said that John *did* believe Jesus had risen!

So maybe it's best to say that they're all running around dazed and confused. Peter and John return to their homes while Mary stays at the tomb. She's still thinking that Jesus' body must have been stolen. None of them really knows what to make of what they've seen, and understandably so. They're dealing with something absolutely unprecedented.

Jesus' resurrection is the totally, awesomely, strangely, radically, and unbelievably new, new, new. It's no wonder that people run around confused, uncertain, and soon enough afraid. Try to imagine how a first-century news anchor might speak of it. I think it would have been too mind-blowing. I imagine there would be attempts to cut it down to size.

Alan Jones, the Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco suggests this report: "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified Friday afternoon on order of Pontius Pilate, reportedly has been raised from the dead. His disciples are nowhere to be found, and the authorities are looking into the matter.

"In other headlines today- the emperor has sent two more legions to the north provinces. The price of olive oil has risen on the Antioch mercantile exchange and there's more trouble in Spain. We'll be back after this word from our sponsor."

We call it the news, but usually there's nothing new in it. We get sound bites of the same old, same old, day after day- troops on the move, economic ups and downs, troubles, unrest, and conflict. As the old philosopher in the book of Ecclesiastes wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun."

But Alan Jones goes on. He says, "The resurrection is an event that changes everything. It's not news- it's brand new. We don't know how to experience the genuinely new. It frightens us; it upsets us. We long for more news, but we don't want to open ourselves up to the invasion of something radically new, of something that changes everything."

The early church called Easter the eighth day of creation. In the first creation story in Genesis, God makes the world in six days and rests on the seventh. The church therefore sees Easter as creation's eighth day, the beginning of the new creation, the second Big Bang, so to speak. It sets the world on course to God's new heaven and earth, to the time when death and sorrow and crying and pain will be no more.

In the darkest years of World War II, a remarkable woman named Simone Weil wrote: "At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there's something that goes on indomitably expecting- in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed- that good and not evil will be done. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being."

The news of Easter, the news that really is new, speaks directly to this profound expectation and raises it to the highest degree. The biggest hope for us and for all that is breaks forth from Jesus' tomb on the first Easter morning. From that moment on, the whole of history skids around and peels down a new path leading to ultimate restoration in Jesus Christ. That's not news, a la Brian Williams or Katie Couric. It's brand new, stupendously new, so radically and absolutely new that it is scary.

Can it really be? Will our holiest expectation be fulfilled even beyond our wildest imaginings? If so, what will it mean for us? If so, what will it require from us? No wonder we run around dazed and confused. No wonder we disbelieve, scoff, become bewildered and afraid. With creation beginning again, it's easier to cope if we huddle behind locked doors.

That's where Peter, John, and the remaining members of Jesus' chosen Twelve are after Jesus has appeared to Mary. They're hiding out in fear. They're frightened that those who had killed Jesus might come after them now. They're equally if not even more afraid of having to face up to what they have done. They had abandoned Jesus in his hour of deepest need. If he's alive again, how can they face him? Ashamed and afraid, they huddle behind locked doors. They wonder anxiously about what will happen next.

How many of us are behind locked doors? I'd bet all of us are- in one way or another. We all hide something or from something. We all have our hurts, failures, and wrongs that we've done or that have been done to us. We all have wounds of our own or of others' making that are so hard to deal with openly that we keep them tucked away, often even from ourselves.

They get bound up with our anger, shame, self-righteousness, and guilt. They get tangled and wound up so tight that sorting them through and setting them straight seems impossible. We hide them or hide from them, trying to go on as if they're not there

But they are there and we know it, even as we pretend otherwise. As Garrison Keillor once put it, "We all have a backstage view of ourselves." We make sure others get the gussied-up, front stage view, but behind the curtains we know there's still that mess of dusty old props, cast off costumes, and crumpled up scripts. We know there's still that heap of tangled hurts, failures, and wrongs bound up with our anger, shame, self-righteousness, and guilt. The chaos of it can be so messy that we keep pushing it backstage or behind locked doors. We're scared it will break into the open.

Yet today we learn that we don't have to be afraid anymore because here comes Jesus, fearlessly. He walks right through the locked doors of the disciples' room and says, "Peace be with you." He's not giving a casual, "Hi, how ya doin'?" He's bringing the good news of Easter, the great gospel word that God has taken the full backstage view of us. God, in the crucified and risen Christ, God has taken it all in, sorted it all through, and straightened it all out.

"Peace be with you" from the risen Jesus means that all is forgiven. God's new day is dawning and God's re-creation is underway. The old is passing away and the new is coming. In the scars that he carries, the risen Christ brings all the locked-up and backstage stuff into the open. He shows that as far as God is concerned it's been dealt with and healed. No one has to pretend any more with a gussied-up, front stage self. In the shining freedom of the Easter Lord, all the old hurts, failures, and wrongs, all the old anger, shame, self-righteousness, and guilt can be let go. We can be at peace with ourselves, with each other, and with God. Alleluia!

But is all of this just a load of unreal and pious blah, blah, blah- nice to hear, but ultimately only a sad illusion? Let's look at what it means when people take it truly to heart and then judge. We remember first our church's dear friend Rose Gakwandi. In the Rwandan genocide, scores of her family and friends were murdered by their neighbors, by people Rose knew and still knows and lives with. In the power of the risen Christ, she has forgiven them. She is a free woman, free to love and not hate even those who have wronged her terribly. She says plainly that if she did not forgive, she would live in a self-chosen prison of anger, self-righteousness, and bitterness. In the shining freedom of her risen Lord, however, she lets go of all the old hurts, failures, and wrongs, of all the old anger, shame, self-righteousness, and guilt. She is an Easter woman who lives in peace.

In recent sermons I've made many references to movies, and here's another for today. Late last year Clint Eastwood's *Invictus* was released. It recalls the marvels of new life brought to the people of South Africa through the Easter practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. Nelson Mandela, emerging from 27 years in prison to become his country's first black president, led his people in it.

He invited his jailer to join him on the platform during his inauguration day. In the story that *Invictus* tells, he embraced the Springboks, South Africa's virtually all-white national rugby team. He did this even though the country's black majority, the core of his own political support, saw it as one of the most

hated symbols of the entire apartheid era. The Springboks responded by winning the Rugby World Cup in 1995. It was a moment of great national unity and achievement.

Early in his presidency, Mandela also appointed Archbishop Desmond Tutu to head his government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission was designed explicitly to foster forgiveness, confession, and reconciliation among people who had been torn apart for decades by the gross evils of apartheid. As Easter people, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu understood that this was the only real hope for breaking the cycle of violence and revenge that usually follows the political triumph of long-oppressed peoples.

The Commission's rules were simple. If a policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and admitted his guilt, he would not be put on trial or punished. He would be set free.

The whole procedure was extremely controversial and still is. Desmond Tutu, however, insisted that his country needed the long-term healing that forgiveness, confession, and reconciliation bring much more than it needed the short-term catharsis that harsh, strict, and capital punishments can provide. As an Easter man, he had learned this through the truth and reconciliation brought to him through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At one of the Commission's hearings, a policeman named Van de Broek recounted the wrongs that he had done. He told of an incident in which he and other officers had shot an 18-year old boy and then burned his body like a piece of barbecue to destroy the evidence of their crime. He told of how, eight years later, he had returned to the same house to seize the boy's father. He had forced the man's wife to watch as he bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and ignited him with a match.

After this testimony, the judge turned to the elderly woman who had lost her husband and son to this man and asked, "What do you want from Mr. Van de Broek?" The woman said first that she wanted him to go to the place where he had burned her husband's body. She wanted him to gather up the dust from there so that she could give her loved one a decent burial. With his head bowed, Van de Broek nodded his assent.

She added a further request. She said, "Mr. Van de Broek took all my family away from me, but I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month I would like for him to come to the township and spend a day with me so that I can be a mother to him. I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him, too. I would like to embrace him now so that he can know my forgiveness is real."

As she made her way to the witness stand, the courtroom erupted with spontaneous singing of *Amazing Grace*. But Mr. Van de Broek didn't hear it because he had fainted. He had been overwhelmed by an Easter woman who came to him saying, "Peace be with you."

Is all of this just a bunch of unreal and pious blah, blah, blah? No, it is the totally, awesomely, strangely, radically, and unbelievably new life that Easter brings. It is a life so free, so full, and so liberated by God's forgiveness and reconciliation that it is frightening. Jesus breaks through all of our locked doors to offer it again today.

He sees the full backstage view of each of us. He sees how we're hidden and hiding with all of our old failures, hurts, and wounds, how we're bound up and locked away with our tired but tenacious anger, shame, self-righteousness, and guilt. He comes to us saying we can let it all go. He wants us to be free. He comes to us, saying, "Peace be with you."

And the choice is ours. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of life, we rejoice that through Your mighty love, You have raised Jesus from the dead. In his glorious resurrection, You have walked through all of our locked doors. You have taken in, sorted through, and straightened out all of our old failures, hurts, and wounds, all of our old anger, shame, self-righteousness, and guilt.

You have come bidding us Your peace and offering us Your reconciliation that can make our lives so totally, awesomely, strangely, radically, and unbelievably new, free, and full that it is scary. But it is the life we want and are made for, so we pray that You'll help us to embrace it completely. Enable us to live joyfully and peacefully as Your Easter people.

In Jesus' resurrection You have broken through the doors of death itself, bringing new life out of the most crushing loss. We ask You to keep us brave and free in Your Easter truth so that we will resist every temptation to despair no matter how deep the losses may be that will come our way. Help us to bring fresh hope to any of Your children weighed down with grief.

In Jesus' resurrection You have opened wide for us the gates of life eternal. Keep us free and brave in Your Easter truth so that whenever and wherever death raises its ugly head we will stand firm and bold in living with Your love towards all.

Through the Risen Christ with us, through his powerful and tender call to us, we ask You to draw us deeper and deeper into Your Easter life. Work Your new creation into every corner of our being so that we will live Your love with energy that does not quit and courage that never fails.

You are the God of life, the God of all creation, and the God of our new life in Jesus Christ. We praise You in his name and we pray as he has taught us, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.