

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 30, 2023

ACTS 2:42-47 | PSALM 23 | 1 JOHN 4:15-21¹ | JOHN 10:1-10

One of the things that made the teachings of Jesus so captivating to his first disciples was that he used images, metaphors, and stories that were common in first-century Palestine. Mustard seeds, nets full of fish, and, of course, shepherds. When Jesus said, *The kingdom of God is like this...* everyone knew what he was talking about.

One of the things that makes the teachings of Jesus so frustrating to his disciples two thousand years later is that he uses images, metaphors, and stories that were common in first-century Palestine. We're left to google "mustard seed size" or "first century shepherd middle east what like?"

But there is at least one image in today's gospel reading that we know well. And as it just so happens, it's an image that we've been hearing repeatedly this Easter season: the door. When the risen Jesus appears to his disciples in St. John's gospel, he finds them huddled together in a room. And because the disciples were afraid, they had locked all of the doors.

That is John's image of communities, relationships, and systems deprived of life and headed toward death. Not a stack of dry bones or a pile of rubble but a people who have pulled themselves together and locked all the doors so that nothing of value can get out and nothing new can get in.

It isn't difficult to think of examples of this from our own context. Times when we have metaphorically or literally locked all the doors. Sometimes the results can be absurd and comic. The bishop occasionally tells a story about a congregation that proudly told her that they no longer invited people to become involved in their congregation's mission. And when the bishop asked, *Why would you stop doing that?*, they replied, *Well, we already have all the people we need.*²

But sometimes the results can be depressing and tragic. Think of the stories in the news this month about people killed or injured for doing benign things like ringing a doorbell, joining a carpool, or making a wrong turn. It isn't just threatening or menacing behavior that we're afraid of, but just the mere presence of someone new or something unknown can set us on edge.

You can see why John used this image of the locked door to symbolize a community grown accustomed to living in the shadow of the cross, a community that has given itself over to death. Because when we get so turned in on ourselves, everything becomes a threat. Even good things like new relationships, new experiences, and new neighbors come to be seen as something to be kept out. Systems like that—whether they're families or congregations or towns—may be able to exist. But they'll never be able to experience what John calls abundant life.

Because abundant life is not something that we can conjure up from our own resources or expertise or talents. Abundant life is something that is always something that we receive from outside of ourselves.³ And it's difficult to receive that gift if we keep locking the doors.

And this is why Jesus makes a point to call himself not only the shepherd but also the door. Jesus the shepherd protects us from other people, other forces, other systems that would cause us

¹ This departs from the appointed lectionary reading from 1 Peter 2:19-25. That selection deals with suffering in a way that is confusing and problematic if not addressed. The 1 John 4 text connects with the earlier resurrection appearances from John's gospel.

² At the risk of killing the joke by explaining it, the point is that this congregation forgot that they existed for the sake of their community, not the other way around.

³ *Extra nos* or "outside ourselves" is how Luther and the reformers used to talk about it.

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harm. But Jesus the door saves us from getting trapped in the narrowness of stories and projections and fantasies about the world around us that we create.

In his resurrection, Jesus opens up a way for us to connect with God and our neighbors. When the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples that first time, they surely asked, “How did Jesus get in here if we locked all the doors?” The punchline is that Jesus *is* the door. And that in triumphing over death, Jesus not only leaves behind his tomb, but brings us out from our own locked rooms and gives us the confidence to boldly bring our praises and petitions before God.

We know this even if we don’t talk about it explicitly a lot. Every time we worship, we begin with a prayer of the day. And how does that prayer end? We ask this... *through*. When we pray, we don’t just toss in our requests to God and hope God happens to hear them. We enter that conversation through the words, the relationship, the posture of Jesus. Jesus is the gate that lets us talk to God intimately, freed from our fear of rejection or inadequacy. Not *Dear God* but *Our Father, Our Mother, the ground of our life*. Because we pray *through* Jesus, even our imperfect and roundabout prayers carry the inflection of his desire for wholeness.

And the same is true for our relationships with other people. Jesus opens us up to see one another freed from our own projections and stories that serve mostly to bolster our own interests. So often, we go through our days thinking that we really know other people. That when someone annoys us or angers us or frustrates us, it’s because of their character. Why hasn’t this person thanked me? Because they’re a selfish person. Why does this person always text me at 3 AM? Because they’re an inconsiderate person. Why does this person always dump their problems on me? Because they’re an emotionally incompetent person. These stories make us feel alive because they make us feel important and superior and—most important—right. But they only lock us into resentment and cynicism and lead us toward death.

But something changes when we see each other through Jesus. This is one reason why you shouldn’t just receive communion regularly, but every once in a while you should serve communion. Because you see people literally and metaphorically through the body of Christ. And for many people—including me—that’s when we learn to encounter people the right way again. Because Christ the Door cuts through all of those narratives that we use to protect our egos and agendas and lets us see one another in the light of his resurrection.

Unlike Jesus’s first disciples, we may not firsthand what a mustard plant looks like or what it’s like to be a shepherd, but we know all too well what it’s like to build our own tomb by locking all of our doors. And whenever we do that, Christ comes to meet us again and again, inviting us into his new life. Christ the Door opens us our hardened hearts so that we may have life and have it abundantly.

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