

## **Locked or Open, John 20:19-29**

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### **Introduction**

Of the gospels Luke includes the most resurrection appearances to the most people. In John we find the fewest number of appearances to the fewest number of people, but with Luke he includes that Jesus appeared to the male disciples late in the day of his resurrection where, as John states, the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews.”

It is true that the disciples were afraid of the temple authorities and of those who superintended over the faith of Israel, mainly the members of the Sanhedrin, which was the assembly of these leaders which functioned a little like the United States Congress and little like the Supreme Court. These leaders, whom John calls “the Jews,” had contrived to seize Jesus and put him on trial when most people were asleep. However, this text has fostered hate and suspicion across the centuries as part of a larger Easter story that tries to put Jewish people and the Faith of Israel in the worst light possible. I suggest that John wrote it this way to show that Christians have nothing to be afraid of, and *least of all* to be afraid of Jews.

One lesson of this text is that whatever fear locks down, the power of God can open up again. Part of this is the power to forgive, the fruit of the Holy Spirit breathed upon us by Christ.

**Let us pray:** Lord God, unlock and open our hearts today by your Spirit, that as we are forgiven we might have the strength to forgive others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

### **1. Of Whom Are We Afraid**

On the third day after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, three groups in Jerusalem were living in fear of the Sanhedrin. In the first group were the close followers of Jesus that stuck

together after Judas Iscariot had turned traitor. No one knew how wide a net was being dragged to destroy the movement. There was every reason for them to be afraid.

The second group was the wider following of Galileans, of whom there were probably hundreds. We are given that clue in First Corinthians 15, that Jesus did finally appear to over five hundred eye-witnesses in the weeks after his resurrection. On that third day before anyone except a few women were claiming he was alive, many of those same hundreds of people were very likely living in fear. They had followed Jesus on that last Passover Pilgrimage, had seen his miracles, and had ushered him into Jerusalem with waving palm branches. Suppose they had been recognized? This healer in whom they had hoped had been crucified, dying a shaming death that no true Christ could ever have suffered. Their faces might be fresh in the minds of the priests and their informants as those who had been calling the Galilean on the donkey the Son of David and Savior of Israel. Might that lay them open to a charge of blasphemy, and a death sentence?

Third was the large group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem, likely numbering in the thousands. The ripple effect of the crucifixion of the healing rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, might cast the shadow over them of guilt by association. One wonders, as early Sunday morning dawned, with the Sabbath over and travel allowed, just how many Galileans decided to leave the city quietly rather than wait out the full week of the Festival. Security measures such as “racial profiling” were the m.o. of Rome’s occupying force and its collaborators. Remember the woman gate-keeper on the night of Jesus’ trial, who denounced Peter, saying, “Surely you are his disciple: You speak with a Galilean accent.”

Racial profiling is described on the one side, and hostile paranoia on the other. *Too bad the Bible is so irrelevant. It just doesn’t connect to today’s world.* Obviously, profiling and paranoia do connect to today’s world. The resurrection of Jesus Christ brings with it the power to

unravel the fears that cause us to lock our doors and close our hearts to people. Fear is a self-defeating feed-back loop. The more we are afraid, the more afraid we get. When fear inspires us to lock people out, we enter a cycle of alienation. The followers of Jesus and the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem were spiraling in a cycle of alienation. At that time, when it came to the political access to raw power in that conflict, the Sanhedrin had the upper hand.

Then Jesus appeared, heaven intersecting with earth, which no locks on doors can prevent. The first word he spoke to them was, “Shalom.” This is the Hebrew term that translates “Peace and well-being.” Then he showed them his hands and side.

As we put John alongside the writings of Luke we can fit together the sequence of resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost. Even so, John tells a story that stands on its own. For John does not write about waiting fifty days for Pentecost. Instead we have the mission given by Jesus right here, to disciples whose doors were locked in fear. “Shalom be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” In other words, Jesus busts the locks on their doors and their hearts from the inside out. The Great Commission, in John, is given inside a safe-house where frightened disciples are huddled together.

As we are reminded in *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary, Jesus is saying this while his wounds are visible on his risen body. The Father sent Jesus to be vulnerable in the world and to take up the cross, and now Jesus sends his followers out beyond their locked doors and into the world, with the promise of God’s Shalom in direct contrast to the wounds and shame that may very well be inflicted on them.

More must happen than a command and the inspiring example of Jesus. The disciples are incapable of obeying Jesus in mission to a hostile world except in the power of God. So that is what Jesus provides: **And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”**

Of whom are we afraid today? From whom would we rather hide behind locked doors, in a holy huddle, hoping that Jesus shows up among us but in no way eager to take the risks of the cross? Followers of Jesus, we are in no greater danger of our lives than were those disciples on that night. In most respects we are at less risk, at least in our society.

This is our world. This is our mission field. Those are our doors, and the ministry and mission we are called to is beyond them. Our mission is nothing we can perform on our own. It is the God-breathed power and Spirit alone that makes us make a difference for the gospel. So do not pray for Jesus to keep you “safe,” or to keep us “safe.” Pray instead for Jesus to anoint you with power, to anoint US with power, the power of the Peace of God.

## **2. Forgiving Sins**

The Peace of God functions in the power to forgive sins. Let us connect that command to another gospel writer, Matthew, who recorded Jesus calling his followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Forgiving what your enemy has done to you, and forgiving what your persecutor has done to you, that is love, and there is no greater kind of love than that love. There is nothing self-seeking in that love. It is the love that comes from the assurance of being a child of God, it is agape love, that love which is the very character of God. That is what Jesus breathes on those who follow him: The Holy Spirit, God’s very person, very character, very personality, very mind, with its preferences and priorities. Love, mercy, forgiveness – these are inseparable from each other because they are the woof and weave of God’s own nature breathed upon us.

We are sent beyond the locked doors into the world to minister to the very people who make us afraid, the very people who persecute us, the very people who declare themselves the enemies of Christian, evangelical faith. We are sent in the power of God, with God’s ability and

God's intention to forgive sins. We expect to be insulted or worse, we expect to be shamed or worse, we expect the world to hate us because it hates Jesus, for our power and our peace comes from God, it does not depend on whether we are popular in the world or approved by the world. A Christian does not carry the gospel into the world with delusions of saintly honors and church growth, all on the strength of one's own virtue and charisma, for if all a Christian brings is one's own strength, that Christian will burn out on the world's indifference and hostility.

But to those who are less bold, less self-confident, this mission belongs to you too. Do not pray for safety. Do not pray that God will grow the member rolls and budget by some magic while you sit here. Pray for anointing. Pray for the power of God. Seek God's Kingdom first.

Anointed by the Christ-breathed Spirit, in the power of God you will have the strength to forgive even if the world does its worst. You will also have the strength to forgive and forbear the shallow stuff, as when a worldly person calls you a superstitious, narrow-minded bigot. This is where the power of forgiveness, the anointing of the Spirit, enters in, bearing fruits within you of kindness and patience rather than bitterness and defensiveness. For Jesus showed them his hands and side and then said, "As my Father sent me, SEE??? So I am sending you."

The disciples had an immediate opportunity to practice sharing the gospel and of being forgiving. Thomas was the first person with whom they shared the gospel, and guess what? He did not buy it, he did not believe it. Yet the believers persevered with him, during what must have been the longest, most torturous week in Thomas's life. They understood that they had all the good news and joy on their side, and that the insult of Thomas's unbelief was shallow by comparison, reflecting the misery of his own darkness and grief.

## **Conclusion**

This mission beyond our doors into the world is not the road to church growth and a remodeled sanctuary; it is the road to the resurrection. You walk it because the Spirit, breathed into you, gives you power, Christ brings you his Word, and the Father prepares your way. We walk together on the same road because we are the Church.

Verse 23 also states that sins we do not forgive will not be forgiven. The NIV renders that a little awkwardly. More literally John's Greek would read, *Whatever you retain will be retained*. *The Bible Speaks Today* suggests that sinners who are offered forgiveness but reject it will continue in their alienation from God. There is nothing magic about forgiveness. We as the Church are not able to decree, "Sin does not matter anymore. Do what you like." The forgiveness of sins restores the relationship as God intends, recreating life anew as one born again, born from above, in the Spirit breathed on a person by Christ. The alternative is that a person retains their sins who refuses to repent and surrender them to God.

So while our doors and our hearts must not be locked, there are real boundaries to our faith. It is NOT our gospel to say, "Because Jesus died you can do what you want." It is our gospel to step outside of our doors and fears and call out: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only way to know God, and you will be saved. Weep for your sins and repent, for it is for them that Christ has died, and for your sake that he rose again from the dead." That is your gospel, and what God has done for you in forgiving your sins is your power for mission in the world. Amen.