

Through the Locked Door
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
April 16, 2023 Second Sunday of Easter
Psalm 16; John 20:19-31

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Second Sunday of Easter. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

The first Christians were Jews, and they worshipped on Saturday, but they extended worship into Sunday because Easter happened on a Sunday, so really every week we are celebrating the power of resurrection at work in the world.

We are just more conscious of it during Easter season. We are more intentional in our joyous celebration of a Spirit that raises new life from the dead, a God who is unconditionally forgiving and gives infinite second chances, a Christ whose love is a light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome.

We can celebrate that love and life and light today by filling with it and then shining it with joy to those around us after worship, and then carrying it out to the world around us. The power of resurrection means we can be free from whatever holds us back from fullness of life, including shyness, so please linger after the service to extend yourself especially to those you do not know or do not know well.

Call to Worship: Today is the Second Sunday of Easter, but you could also call it Little Pentecost. We will be hearing the story of Easter night in the Gospel of John when Jesus breathed his Spirit into the disciples and freed them from all that held them back. He sent them out to be the first church, doing his work in the world, and we a continuation of that story today.

The real significance of Easter is the creation of a community with the peace and love of Christ at its core that serves as an outpost of the realm of God on earth. God's realm is where the force of life overturns the forces of death, where reconciliation and forgiveness triumph over

strife, where compassion and lovingkindness make a unity of our diversity, where inclusion and oneness are extended to all. Let us worship together in the joy that we can be that kind of beloved community...

Children's Time—Good morning! Every year on the Sunday after Easter we read the story of Easter night before the disciples were really convinced that Jesus was alive again. They were confused and scared that the people who killed Jesus would come and arrest them, so they had locked themselves in a house where they were hiding.

They were locked in a prison of their own making, in a way, a prison cell of fear, and the miracle we celebrate this Sunday is of Jesus freeing them and sending them out into the world full of the Spirit with a huge release of energy and powerful love that is still going today.

Every Easter this release makes me think of Nelson Mandela from South Africa. Mandela spent 27 years of his life in prison because he saw that things were very wrong in his country and he tried to fix them—people with white skin did not allow people of other color skin to use the same public bathrooms or schools or lots of other things. White people forced all the other people to live in poverty and treated them like slaves, even though it was not the white people's country, they stole it from the black people.

Nelson Mandela saw that it was not fair, and he wanted to do things to make it so all would have a chance at having enough to live a good life, and have an equal democratic say in things. Mandela fought hard for that, and the white people sent him to prison for it.

But here is what made Nelson Mandela truly great. He suffered 27 years in prison, he got angry, hurt and very sad, but the Spirit of love and light came through that locked cell door and freed and inspired his heart, so when he finally got out of prison he was able to be kind and forgive the people who had put him there. He was able to help black and white people who hated one another learn how to live together. He became president, and created a nation where all had equal rights and at least a chance to live comfortable lives.

That is the kind of love Jesus taught us to have that forgives and seeks peace and well being for all. Here in church we are trying to be like Nelson Mandela. One of the things that helps us is to pray, because prayer helps us find love and light and courage whenever we feel locked up and alone and hurting, it helps us walk out into freedom and joy, so let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

Through the Locked Door

The room was crowded and hot on that first Easter night. The windows were shuttered, the door bolted. Oil lamps flickered and their smoke mingled with the scent of anxious sweat. Some people were quietly weeping. Some sat in silence, a look of devastation on their faces. People spoke in the shadowed corners in low, urgent tones, arguing or looking wildly hopeful and nodding insistently.

Their wise and holy teacher, a powerful but gentle and loving young man, had just been publicly humiliated, tortured and executed. All of the men in the room had deserted him when he was arrested, their spokesman had denied him three times and their treasurer had betrayed him. Now a leading woman claimed to have seen their teacher alive, and two leading men had confirmed her story of an empty tomb, but what did it mean?

They were expecting a terrifying pound on the door, afraid that the authorities would discover their safehouse and arrest, torture and execute them, too. If one of their most trusted leaders could betray their teacher, then anyone might betray the rest of them. They kept glancing nervously in the direction of the door, and yet no one had seen it open when suddenly Jesus was standing among them.

Imagine the explosion of emotions. Terror that they were seeing a ghost, doubt that they could believe their eyes, shock at the impossibility of him rising from the dead and someone alive coming through the locked door.

He said, "Peace be with you," but they were incapable of peace. He showed them where the nails had punctured his hands and where the spear had pierced his side, and only then were they able to let go of doubt and feel exultant joy.

Jesus repeated, "Peace be with you," and they began to understand that he was indeed the Messiah, but not the one they expected. Jesus was there for liberation, lifting people out of inner and outer oppression, but not by overthrowing the government with an armed rebellion.

He was there to free them from their fear, to free them from the path of violence, to free them and send them out into the world to do what he had done the way he had done it.

He sent them to lead others to healing and peace and to recruit others to join the struggle to establish God's realm on earth, a human society ruled by compassion, love and justice for all. He

formed them into the first church, breathing the Holy Spirit into them. He empowered them to organize themselves using forgiveness as a tool for holding the community together.

Jesus came through the locked door and it changed everything from the inside out. He did not change the outside world first, he did not make it safe to unlock the door. He came into the place where they were guarded, where they had retreated, and he changed things inside that innermost room.

The authorities were still after them, but they unlocked the door and went out because now they were at peace with whatever would come. They had a joy and a love and a mission that they were bursting to share. The Holy Spirit was alive in them, resurrection power was alive in them as a force of nature, and they were no longer stopped by the threat of pain or failure or death.

The good news is that Jesus is still coming through whatever is blocking us from experiencing God's peace and joy and love. Jesus comes through doors locked by conflict, by guilt, by doubt, by grief, by fear, by rage. He comes through the scars of old wounds. He comes into our prisons of addiction or compulsion. Christ comes and says "Peace be with you," and sends us back out through those doors with gifts to share.

I imagine many of us could bear witness to the truth of this. Many of us have experienced it ourselves or have seen someone become miraculously resurrected to live anew. Therapists, 12 Step Groups, grief support groups and of course churches exist to help liberate people locked in oppressive rooms.

It can happen to whole nations. Bishop Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, describes how South Africa emerged from the locked prison cell of apartheid.

A change that began inside people enabled them then to change their behavior, to forgive and heal and be reconciled. The transformation took a long time, the better part of a century, and it evolved through much hateful violence and suffering.

Nelson Mandela led and embodied that change. He did not always feel peace in prison. He struggled, he came close to despair, but he grew through suffering to a deeper spiritual state and a higher developmental stage. In the end, at age 73, he was able to forgive and embrace as one the people who oppressed his nation and robbed him of 27 years of his life. He was their prisoner, but he was free. He suffered their violence, but he had a core of peace they could not reach.

Saint Seraphim of Sarov said, “Have peace in yourself and thousands will find salvation around you.” Mandela’s inner freedom and peace saved millions of blacks and whites.

Imagine a church filled with that power. Imagine what it could do to change the world around it. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a collection of churches, pastors and lay people whose inner liberation from hatred and violence led to the legal, door-opening liberation gained by the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement.

Transformation and resurrection are always approaching. The Spirit that created life on earth needs humanity to evolve and undergo a revolution of values as King called it, a spiritual awakening to a new consciousness as Gus Speth has called it. We need to progress to a new developmental level as many psychologists have called it. We are waiting for the Spirit to come through the locked door as it has countless times before to transform us so that we may go out and help it transform the world.

We each have unique gifts that the Spirit’s movement to transform the world needs. We have a role to play as individuals and as a church. Let us pray in silence inviting the Spirit through the door of our heart, expressing our willingness to be called and sent...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

We eat on the porch.
A gentle breeze. Last year’s chives
show a little green.