



John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

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When I was a kid, I was not allowed to read comic books, because they would rot my brain.

When I got to middle age, and skilled at rotting my brain on my own, I discovered the world of comic book superheroes by way of the Avenger movies, and then the Justice League, and I loved all the tragic, flawed heroes with strange superpowers. I didn't have to think twice about the superpower I would choose. Not strength, not invisibility (though I'd like that one). I would choose: time travel. I love history. Mostly, I'd like to go back in time and see what really happened, what people really said.

And of all the events of human history, this one, the day that changed everything – like many of you, I'd use up the whole superpower just to see that.

Be careful what you wish for. In some ways, this year, we all have been given that superpower. In some ways, at least emotionally, we are living in those days.

On Sunday, the day of Resurrection, the reading began, "early in the morning, while it was still dark ... nobody knew it was Easter, as Bishop Curry reminded us last Sunday. It was just dark.

Many preachers have observed the parallels between that Easter, that first day of the week, that first day of the New Creation, and this Easter. Darkness covered the land, a deep gloom enshrouds the people, because the angel of death escaped the pages of the Passover story and stalks the land. Usually, it takes the drama of Ash Wednesday to force our attention to the reality that Death comes to every living thing. It takes Good Friday to force our faces toward the death of Jesus. Most years, we manage to whistle past it all, most of the time. This year, as 10,000 people have died just in New York in a month. Nobody is whistling.



It was driven home hard for us this year by the loving decision to worship at home – without brass and strings, without lilies, without church buildings overstuffed with hopeful crowds in old-fashioned Sunday best, belting out “ah-ah-ah-alleluia!” far about our natural singing ranges. We are used to Easter bursting out of the papier-mache tomb like a giant gilded egg stuffed with confetti, but this year, we were left standing by ourselves in a lonely garden.

Yes – Christ is risen – alleluia – the grave is empty; there is great good news to tell. We sing it out – the powers of death have done their worst, but Christ their legions hath dispersed. BUT... this year ... The miasma of Covid-19 has not, yet, been dispersed. It has not, yet, done its worst. It's Easter, the day of Resurrection, and it's somehow still Good Friday, the day of death; and over it hangs the shadow of Holy Saturday, the day of despair and mourning,

It's not all happening in the story's appointed, tidy order. They seem to be all jumbled together. It feels like our time machine has a short. It's on the fritz, and we only get glimpses of the rest of the day, that first day when resurrection began in the dark. The accounts are jumbled.

The women were at the empty tomb first. They got up in the dark. I'm guessing that in their grief and fear, they hadn't slept much anyway. They had been through a week of very real and embodied horror. They had kept the Sabbath, most of them away from home, a Sabbath of heartbreak and mourning. They showed up with their burial spices and shrouds, ready to take on the guards if necessary. That was all very concrete and straightforward, but at the empty tomb, reality got very hard to pin down.

Some say the women fled in terror. Some say they reported what they found and were dismissed as foolish gossipers. Some say the men believed *something* had happened, but then got into an argument about which of *them* got there first. At first, only the women actually saw the risen Christ, the firstborn of the new creation. What happens next gets more jumbled, from one Gospel account to another. The women witnessing to the men, with mixed results. Matthew seems to have the men heading out to Galilee. A later account reports clergy bribing soldiers to tell people the body was stolen by the disciples. A couple of people walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus had a conversation with the risen Jesus. But by most accounts, by sundown, the disciples, the men, were gathered in a room in Jerusalem and the door was locked. They had self-quarantined.

Stop and think about that for a minute. All those people, on that crazy day, in a room locked from the inside. This is when I really want that time machine to work. What were those conversations, this weekend after the worst Passover since the Exodus? The women, who stuck around to endure the day of crucifixion, witnesses to the risen Christ? Peter, last seen denying Jesus three times in the courtyard at Herod's house, now in a footrace with to the tomb? The other men, scattered somewhere around Jerusalem, hiding from the crowd, hiding from the priests, hiding from the government – hiding from death?

There were the cold, hard facts: Jesus and Judas were dead and buried – that was a fact. The hoped-for savior was dead. The movement was dead. The guards and soldiers were definitely alive, and now the disciples were being accused of stealing the body of a recently executed enemy of the state.

And there were the feelings. Fear. Regret. Grief... surely denial, anger, bargaining, sadness. You can bet these people were exhausted, weary to the bone, on edge. They were isolated, cut off from society for their own safety. It now appeared that some of the steadiest people in the group had lost their minds – possibly even hallucinating. Or, even more disorienting, maybe it was true. Jesus might be alive. He might come around. I'm guessing there were strong words. I'm guessing there was some yelling. Maybe some arguments about whether locking the door would lock Jesus out, if he was in fact walking the earth again. I'm guessing that the sword that had cut off the servant's ear a couple of nights ago was sharp and close at hand. I would love to know what the women were doing, and where the supper came from. Were they also locked in for safety, or had they gone to the market?

So what would you do? Go out looking for evidence? Lock the door? I'm not sure what I would do.

What I do know is what John and Luke tell us. When it was evening on that day – that same day, and the doors were locked, out of fear of death, Jesus stood among them. And, according to Luke, helped himself to some supper – even though he'd already had a bite over in Emmaus. This, as you know, is quite impossible – appearing in a locked room. Just as rising from the dead is quite impossible. Now it is not just time that is jumbled – it is matter and space.

When I was younger, I thought that this whole locked-room story was just evidence that the people who wrote it were superstitious, or just didn't really fully understand the laws of physics, or were prone to magical thinking, and that this "embellishment" cast doubt on the whole resurrection claim. Which would have the evangelist John rolling on the floor with laughter, as I obtusely missed the whole point, which he carefully hammered home with the doubts of Thomas, who didn't believe a word of it.

I had it completely backwards. It's exactly the other way around. Of course these people knew, as a certain fact, that everyone dies and that dead is dead. Of course they knew that human beings with solid bodies who eat fish for supper do not appear in solid rooms with locked doors. And that is exactly the point. Within our human frame of reference, this is impossible. But we don't set the frame of God's reality. No building built with human hands can contain God, and no room or lock, or lack of a room, can keep God out.

Quarantine cannot keep Jesus away from you. The setup of the room where you meet does not matter to Jesus. What the government says or does concerning Jesus does not concern Jesus.

Whether or not you are fully convinced that Jesus rose from the grave, he shows up, bringing peace. Whether or not you say carefully crafted words, whether the bread is here or in the next town over, whether you were the first one at the tomb or were out of the room when everybody else got it – Jesus shows up for you.

Having fully lived into his and our humanity, Jesus is no longer contained or constrained by it. Jesus, who, fully human, died a fully human death, is showing us that, in his resurrected state, he has brought humanity into some level of existence that isn't bound by limitations of time and space that we by currently inhabit. God is not constrained by our boundaries. God CAN – and does – bring life out of death. God CAN – and does – enter into locked rooms. Jesus leads the way into a new creation, a new universe of possibility, that we cannot yet fully see. We are always operating in the morning, while it is still dark, and in the evening, in a locked room. But the resurrected Jesus walks through walls. It doesn't matter, ultimately, if the timeline seems jumbled to us, if matter isn't behaving the way we expect. In God's time, all things are being made new.

Has a virus has locked us out of our church building? Jesus shows up in our locked room. Remember that he first showed up not in the Temple, but in the garden, in a room full of self-isolated and panicked people, on a country road, at a simple secular supper.

On the first day of the week, the first day of the new creation, the one who had breathed his last up on the cross – breathed on them, as the holy spirit had breathed over the darkness and chaos on the day of the first creation – he breathed on them, and said, “receive the Holy spirit.”

It's a jumble now. It's darkness and chaos and resurrection, cries of grief and songs of resurrection, and the time machine, and life as we know it, is on the fritz. God is with us in all of it. You can't lock God out. Jesus walks out of the grave and through walls. Into locked rooms and into locked hearts. So in this time of jumbled darkness and broken time machines and mortal bodies and locked doors: know this, as Carl Jung said: Bidden or unbidden, God is present.

Jesus is with you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you. Jesus is with you now, in the room you are in.

Peace.