



Sunday, April 26, 2020  
*Easter Sermon Series: We're All in This Together*

All Locked Up and Not Sure Where to Go  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**John 20:19-31 NRSV**

<sup>19</sup>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." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

A number of states have been lifting their stay-at-home orders this weekend. There's been lots of discussion about it, pro and con. On the one hand, people are sick and tired of being on lockdown—cooped up at home, unable to go to work or school, prevented from seeing family and friends. On the other hand, if we do open up, we worry about spreading the virus further,

putting more pressure on our strained healthcare system, and inadvertently leading to the loss of more lives?

Here's a question for you. Imagine Governor Walz lifting our stay-at-home order in the near future. Whether you think that's a good idea or not, the thought is bound to have crossed your mind. So, where are some of the first places you'd want to go - besides church, of course? Your worksite? An outdoor restaurant? A movie theater? A concert hall? A library? A visit to the grandkids? And last but not least, your hair salon? I suspect that wherever you go, you'll be more than a little cautious at first—Who's going to be there? Has anyone tested positive? Do I still need my mask? Only gradually will we feel that it's safe to go outside again, and that our lives are no longer on hold.

In the midst of our pandemic, I've continued making birthday calls to those who are 85 and above. I enjoy these conversations. Lately I've been impressed with the perspective of some of our senior members. A couple of them, Dorothy Molde and Elaine Anderson, turned 90 this past month. They had big plans for celebrating their milestone birthdays: family coming, dinner at a nice restaurant, cake and candles, and singing. What Dorothy and Elaine both told me was that, since they didn't get to celebrate in proper fashion, they had decided to hold at 89 for now. I took it as a sort of a Minnesota-Nice protest against Covid-19 and the way it has so upended our lives.

In our Bible reading for today, the lives of Jesus' disciples have been upended too. They're gathered in the house where they been staying for the past week. It's Easter evening, just three days after the terrible tragedy of Friday. Life is on hold. From the sounds of it, the disciples don't have plans to go anywhere, anytime soon.

Where would they go? Oh, Mary Magdalene had been to the tomb early that morning. She said it was empty. Peter and another disciple ran to check it out for themselves. They didn't find anything either, just some rolled up graveclothes. Mary made the incredible claim to have met up with the Risen Christ later in the garden. She hurried to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord."

That evening, as the disciples gather, they seem out of sorts. Maybe they aren't sure what to make of the day's events. Or maybe they simply do not believe Mary - who's ever heard of someone coming back from the dead? But either way, their doors are locked up tight.

Why do you think that is? I suspect there might be a few reasons. John tells us they're afraid of the Jewish authorities. If a tragedy like this could strike down their rabbi, what about them?

Another reason for the locked doors might be more personal. Maybe – if what Mary said is true – they’re fearful of running into Jesus himself. Think about it. They’ve failed as his disciples. They’d pledged their loyalty to him, but then deserted him in the end. To be honest: haven’t we all got things inside we don’t want to admit to others?

Yet another reason for the locked doors might be the sheer uncertainty of it all. As Marne Gade shared earlier, uncertain times can lead to feelings of grief. They can disrupt our sense of safety and security. Suddenly we’re not sure who or what can be trusted.

Mavis Scheurle of Zumbro has been going through an uncertain time. Mavis has lived in a care facility in Winona for the last couple years. Her son, Sigurd, lives nearby. When Coronavirus broke out, the facility went on lockdown, like most facilities have done. There’s been lots alone time. One night Mavis woke with a start. It was shortly after midnight. She thought she heard a sound. She was making her way to the bathroom to investigate when she found a man hiding inside. Her heart started to race. Fortunately, Mavis was able to call for help and help soon arrived. The man was removed. It turns out he was from the same rehab facility and was being treated for mental health issues.

Understandably, this midnight encounter was deeply upsetting for Mavis, and for Sigurd too. The uncertainty was almost too much to bear. Sigurd wasn’t supposed to visit his mother, but he was determined to try. So, he got a long extension ladder, one reaching up to the second floor. He climbed up and knocked on her window. Sure enough, he got a glimpse of his mom inside. He could see she was safe. Soon enough, Mavis was moved to a different floor. And for peace of mind, she got a room with a lock on it.

How are we supposed to live in uncertain times? Get better locks for our doors? Climb up the highest ladder we can find and hope for a glimpse of a loved one? Stop counting our birthdays? Desperate times call for desperate measures, right?

Let me remind you of what happens to those early disciples. The Risen Lord shows up in the midst of their fear and uncertainty. Evidently there’s no lock that can keep him out. He doesn’t chide them for being afraid. He doesn’t scold them for deserting him when the chips were down. Instead he offers them peace. His peace is more than a lock on the door. Rather, it’s the steady assurance that they still belong to him. And their future, uncertain though it may be, is in his hands.

One of the disciples is not there. It's Thomas. A week later the Risen Christ returns and finds him too. Again, there's no chiding, no scolding. Jesus shows him the wounds on his hands and side. Thomas exclaims: "My Lord and my God." In so doing, Thomas joins a very exclusive club: those who've come to believe in Easter because they've seen Jesus with their own eyes. But did you hear it? Jesus offers a special blessing to all the rest of us who have not seen him, and yet have come to believe.

Our gospel story ends. Notice that the doors are still locked. The disciples are still wondering where to go next. Has anything actually changed? They've gotten a glimpse of the Risen Christ. It's not much to go on, but it will have to be enough. They're been assured that they're still his disciples. They're all in this together. And finally, Jesus breathes his Spirit on them and gently nudges them toward the door. "Trust me," he says. "Your future, uncertain though it may be, is in my hands."

All these events happen in a few chapters. We get the sense that things are developing quickly, but really they're not. There will be 50 days until Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit. Then months will go by as Jesus' followers slowly unlock their doors, push beyond their uncertainties, and decide that it's finally safe to go outside again.

Re-opening is one word for it. Whether for a houseful of disciples or the state of Minnesota, is bound to be an anxious time. Rob Bell addresses some of what we'll be facing in his new book *How to Be Here*. Bell is not talking about Covid-19 per se, but about any challenges we face. He encourages us not to rush ahead, but rather to embrace and learn from the here and now.

Bell's chapter on suffering is particularly poignant. He writes: "How we respond to what happens to us, especially the painful, excruciating things that we never wanted and we have no control over, is a creative act.

"Who starts cancer foundations? Usually people who have lost a loved one to cancer. Who organizes recovery groups? Mostly people who have struggled with addiction. Who stands up for the rights of the oppressed? Often people who have experienced oppression themselves.

"We have power," Bell writes, "more power than we realize, power to decide that we are going to make something good out of even this."

Bell continues: "There's a question you can ask about the things that have come your way, that you didn't want. It's a question rooted in a proper understanding of the world, a question we have to ask ourselves continually throughout our lives. The question is this: *What new and good thing is going to come out of even this?*

“When you ask this question,” Bell concludes, “you have taken something that was out of your control and reframed it as another opportunity to take part in the ongoing creation of the world. Death, disease, disaster, whatever it is, you will have to grieve it, and maybe be angry about it, or be in shock, or shake your fists at the heavens for the injustice of it. That’s normal and healthy and needed. But then as you move through it, as time does its healing work, you begin to look for how even this has potential, even this.”

Friends, there’s wisdom in Rob Bell’s’ comments. Whatever it is we’re facing, whether it be the fears of Easter evening or the uncertainties of Covid-19, we often sit with our doors locked. And we aren’t sure how to get them open again, and where to go when we do. Truth be told, the answers are seldom easy.

Hopefully some perspective helps. Today we are worshipping in our sanctuary – in its current form – for the final time. This worship space has been here since 1969. Do you want some perspective? Back in 1969 the Beatles were breaking up; Neil Armstrong was walking on the moon; Senator Ted Kennedy was driving his car and a female companion into a lake near Chappaquiddick Island; and thousands of soldiers were dying in Vietnam. Let’s not kid ourselves. None of these events were easy. Unlocking our doors, heading out of the house, and finding our way forward rarely is.

How are we supposed to live in uncertain times? We need the Risen Christ to come to us. No locks can keep him out. Like Mary Magdalene, and Thomas, and the other disciples, we need glimpses that he’s alive and well. We don’t get these glimpses with our own eyes, but we do get them in the words Jesus speaks to us, and the meal he shares with us, and in our life together as a church. He comes with peace. He assures us that we belong to him; that we’re all in this together; and with the leading of his Spirit, we will find the way forward. He promises us: “Trust me. Your future, uncertain though it may be, is in my hands.”

It makes me wonder: what new and good thing is going to come out of even this? Amen.