

## **“The Easter Evening Church”**

John 20: 19-23

*“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. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, you are retained.’”*

Today we’re in the middle of a chilly January week. Nothing could seem further away than blooms of spring. We haven’t even yet begun the journey through Lent, but today, in the heart of winter, I want to remind you of an Easter story.

To frame our discussion today, I’d like you to listen to John 20: 19-23.

I want to talk with you about a particular church, a small membership church that had just 11 folks in attendance. It’s called the Easter Evening Church. There was no sign out front, no steeple on this church, not even a sanctuary, likely just a group of 11 disciples, minus Thomas, meeting in an Upper Room. The Easter Evening Church gathered on the first Sunday night after Jesus’ death. And because I picture them as a United Methodist congregation, they had come together for a covered dish dinner; and because at least a few of them were bachelors and several of them hadn’t had time to cook they had mostly just picked up pizza or fried chicken or run by Food Lion for some drinks.

As the Easter Evening Church gathers, it is a struggling church. It’s hurting. A few days before, they had witnessed their beloved leader and Lord arrested in the night, and even though most of them were too cowardly to see it with their own eyes, their leader and Lord had soon been brutally beaten and then crucified. The Easter Evening Church has just suffered a horrible trauma. Now each one of them is afraid there may be a cross with their name on it, too, that they will be next. The whole world seems to have changed around them in the blink of an eye, from one that seemed like only yesterday was safe and full of possibility and promise, to one that just seems to hold in it now violence and heartbreak.

Have you ever felt that, ever felt like the whole world had changed on you in one event, or in a series of events over decades? Then you understand something of the Easter Evening Church.

It’s all enough to just make them scared, so they’re just trying to hold onto one another in this world of change.

The Easter Evening Church is a fearful church.

The Easter Evening Church is not only afraid, it is also ashamed. The Easter Evening Church, deep down, knows all too well the ways that it has failed its Lord. It knows that Jesus had tried to prepare them for his going away. It knows that it has been capable of better. And so, it remembers with shame how it had argued among itself over who was greatest minutes before Jesus knelt with basin and towel to show them greatness. It remembers with flushed cheeks all of the times that it has fallen asleep on him in the garden. It remembers with profound guilt and regret how its promise to never deny him went up like the smoke from that fire, that fire Peter was standing by when he denied him three times before the cock could crow that very night.

If you've ever felt the ache of knowing the difference between what you are, and what you could be, you know something of the Easter Evening church. It looks in the mirror and sees its lack, powerlessness, its weakness. Its members on that Sunday night feel unworthy, insecure, and ashamed, wishing they were more.

The Easter Evening Church is a church that has lost faith in itself.

Maybe it's even lost faith in God.

Earlier that morning, there had been a ray of light and hope shined into the Easter Evening Church. The women had reported that the tomb was empty. A few of the members of the Cemetery Committee had even been delegated to run to the tomb, and they had seen the stone rolled away with their own eyes. What had happened? Had the authorities stolen his body? Mary claimed to have seen Jesus alive again, but . . . well, you know, she had been so upset, maybe she's a little delirious in her grief . . .

Could it be true? Jesus is raised? And maybe that possibility of resurrection makes the Easter Evening Church even more fearful. Maybe they are afraid that Jesus really IS raised, and that if it's true, then because of their failures he might come back to judge or condemn them. I mean, after all, when you really wronged somebody, even somebody you love and that you know loves you, don't you kind of want to avoid them, because seeing them is just a reminder of what you have done? Isn't that why we don't pray sometimes, because we find it hard to face God when we know we've done wrong?

Or maybe some part of them is afraid that if Jesus is raised, it really would change everything: it really would mean that their life would have to have a whole new center. They could never look at family, and money, and career, and government, and the poor the same way ever again. They might really end up following him all the way, giving their lives for him, and to be honest they're just getting comfortable with the idea of settling back down into mediocrity and returning to the predictable rhythm of their nets again.

There are plenty of people who don't come to church not because they don't find anything there, but precisely because they do, and the prospect of what it might mean that God is real scares them to death.

The Easter Evening Church is a church that has heard the stories of Christ's resurrection, but is not yet ready to trust that resurrection, and especially not yet ready to risk or to change anything for it.

The Easter Evening Church is a congregation whose pews are filled with fear and shame and disbelief; maybe even add in a dash of anger that things haven't turned out the way they'd hoped: and that potent mixture, fear, shame, disbelief, with a dash of anger, is the devil's cocktail.

*(I've begun talking about the Easter Evening Church because I think it offers us not only a picture of the early church, but a picture of many of our churches, urban, suburban, and yes, rural. I want to stop for a minute and let you talk with the other members of your group about your response to a couple of questions: "What are the followers of Jesus that you know fearful of today? What have they had taken away from them?" Those fears may or may not be much different from the fears of others, but think particularly of folks who might live in rural places. )*

The Easter Evening Church is a congregation whose pews are filled with fear and shame and disbelief; maybe even add in a dash of anger that things haven't turned out the way they'd hoped: and

that potent mixture, fear, shame, disbelief, with a dash of anger, is the devil's cocktail. And so the Easter Evening Church does what we all do when we feel fear, shame, and disbelief: it locks the doors, it locks others out. It chooses safety over salvation.

Scripture says that on Easter Evening, the doors were locked.

The Easter Evening Church is the church of the locked door.

I've visited a locked church before. A big, busy church, in the city. You walked in the front door in the middle of the day and were met by another sealed door. I pulled the handle but it wouldn't budge. Pulled again and felt only frustration, was reminded that I was an outsider and needed a pass. I looked to my left and noticed the intercom system. I pushed the button, heard the beep, waited a few seconds and then explained to the secretary who I was. I waited again until I heard the buzz as the door unlocked and I was finally allowed entry to the foyer, where I had to be admitted through another locked door. Extra security, you see. More safety. Down the hall was a banner with the United Methodist Cross and Flame and one of our sayings: The People of the United Methodist Church: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.

Contrast that with the time I heard Peter Storey, who spoke here this week, talk about the Johannesburg Central Methodist Mission. The Central Methodist Mission is located at the heart of one of the most violent and crime-ridden cities in the world. But when Dr. Storey was its pastor, the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg didn't lock its doors. We asked him, "Why would you leave the doors open like that? What about theft, all of the things that got stolen?" He said, "We wanted to be open to everyone. So we just budgeted for a certain amount of theft each year. We didn't want to lock out Jesus."

The disciples had locked the doors. And I can't sit in judgment on that. I know why they did that, why they locked the door. You lock the door when you're afraid of having something taken from you, or when you've had something taken from you. A few weeks ago, my wife Margaret and I had the experience of coming home to find out that our house had been broken into. Someone had kicked in the door. The strange thing was, that whoever broke in hardly took anything except for Margaret's jewelry box: and the next day we found her jewelry box in the nearby woods, with all her jewelry still inside. Which made my Valentine's Day shopping considerably less expensive than it was about to be. Sometimes it pays to not have anything worth stealing: I think the burglar opened the door to our house and said, "Oh man, a preacher lives here."

There were some funny things about this break-in. Margaret was the one who came home to find the door kicked in, and she immediately left before entering to call the sheriff. The sheriff's deputies came and went in first, and when they came out they said, "Well Ma'am, we're not sure what they took, but it does seem they went searching through your drawers." Then Margaret went in and looked at my dresser and said, "No, that's just the way my husband tends leave his dresser."

When Margaret asked them about whether they might dust for fingerprints on the dresser where the jewelry box was taken, the deputy said, "Well, ma'am, to be honest, there's so much dust on top of that dresser that we don't think we'd be able to put any more dust for fingerprints up there."

But even though we didn't lose anything in this break-in, we suddenly had a very different relationship with our door. We weren't overly afraid, it was probably just a goofy and frightened teenager who did this, but we looked at the woods around us a little differently now. I'm from a community where

you leave your doors unlocked in the day. I found myself checking the locks now. A local security company was running a special, and because I travel a lot, we decided to get a security system. That's what you do when you become more afraid. You lock the doors.

But can I tell you that getting that security system has proved more traumatic for me than having our house broken into? Now, when someone pulls up my driveway, they see this big red security system sign that looks like a stop sign in front of my house that has the word "WARNING" on it. This has become our welcome mat. And the first time we turned on the system as we were leaving the house, we messed up, and accidentally set the system off, but we didn't know how to turn it off properly so it alerted the sheriff and made our neighbor get out of bed, so that now, to be honest, I am almost more afraid of my security system than I am of a thief.

And I wonder, in my attempts at man-made security, who exactly is getting locked out, or if I am just getting locked in.

The Easter Evening Church has locked its doors. They think they've had Jesus, their precious jewel, taken from them, or that they might have more taken from them. The world around them has changed, but they think, "Well, at least we can keep this the same, the way it was before and has always been." So they set the security system. Barricade the entrance. Make a warning sign their welcome mat. The Easter Evening Church, in its fear and in its shame, has circled the wagons, turned inward, made itself a closed system, locked itself in its own little panic room for its own security. Keep the evil out. Keep the different out. At least that way it will be safe. At least that way things won't change. At least that way they'll only have to be around the other disciples, people they know well and who think like them and who talk about the same kind of things. Maybe if a few people come to them, if they say the right pass words, they'll open the locked door, but overall it will be safer inside.

And in doing so they haven't just locked their doors, they've locked their hearts, locked their souls.

There is a sea in Israel called the Dead Sea, a body of water that contains very little life. One of the reasons it is the Dead Sea is that there is so little fresh water flowing into or out of it, nothing to stir it up or infuse it. It is a closed system.

Martin Luther once said that sin is what happens when the heart curves in on itself: it becomes a selfish closed system, becomes a vain person living in a hall of mirrors, a dog forever chasing its tail, becomes a dead sea.

The Easter Evening Church, behind its locked doors, faces the danger of becoming a dead sea, a fellowship turned in on itself. And maybe in that moment there is a temptation for the Easter Evening Church to live the rest of its life on the nonrenewable resource that is the fossil fuel of its past. They can just stay there in that locked room, trading their memories of the dead Jesus, reminiscing about the days when they used to be a much larger crowd. They can continue to go through the ritual of prayer. They can continue to try to be a moral people, living by their rules and moral code. They can continue to support each other, even. Their most daring goal can become survival. But in doing that they face the risk of becoming a preservation society, a museum of what used to be, until one day they will be gone.

By the very act of circling the wagons, making themselves safer and more comfortable, they will have actually dug their own grave.

But we are here because the Easter Evening Church, this small membership church of eleven people, by the grace of God chose to be a different kind of fellowship. And how that happened is what we'll talk about in just a minute.

*(But first, I'd like you to talk in your groups again and answer this questions: "In what ways does a church or a congregation symbolically or spiritually lock its doors? Where have you seen or experienced this? What is the result?)*

There's a book out now that's called "Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear," written by named Scott Baeder Saye. The author writes about the kind excessive fear that so many of us have and he says, "We fear excessively when we allow the avoidance of evil to trump the pursuit of the good. When we fear excessively, we live in a mode of reacting to and plotting against evil rather than actively seeking and doing what is good and right." The Easter Evening Church, huddled together behind its locked doors, had that kind of excessive fear of evil that kept it from actively doing good.

But then Scott Baeder-Saye writes something else. He says, "Our overwhelming fear needs to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things." "Our overwhelming fear needs to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things."

Do you know what happened to the Easter Evening Church? It's overwhelming fear got overwhelmed by a bigger and a better thing. And that bigger and better thing was the living presence of the risen Jesus. Their locked doors, their security system, even their closed hearts cannot keep out this living presence of Jesus. The Lord is apparently a Locksmith.

I wonder, in reading the story, if Jesus had been there among them all along, but there comes a moment of realization where they finally see him, really see him.

The Scripture says that Jesus came and stood among the Easter Evening Church. Because Jesus loves his Easter Evening Church, arguing-over-the-greatest church, his fall-asleep-in-the-garden church, his deny-three-times church, his pastor-we've-never-done-it-that-way-before, his wounded locked door church. Jesus loves these people. He even likes them. He doesn't just want to use them for his own ends, he loves them, and wants to them to be whole: and that is why he does all that he is about to do. So if for a moment they were afraid that he might condemn them for their failures and sins the very first word out of his mouth is, "Peace. Peace be with you." I think the most accurate translation from the original Greek is "Shalom, yall." And if they doubted, if the disciples needed proof of his love for them he shows them the wounds on his hands and his side, wounds he suffers for love of them. And somehow it is in seeing Jesus' wounds, seeing the suffering of God, that they recognize the risen Jesus for who he is.

There is a lesson here for us clergy on fire with our image of what the church should be, indignant at the hypocrisy of our Easter Evening churches. Apparently, if you want to do what Jesus did, the first thing you do if you want to unlock a church is you come to your people and you stand with them where they are, in their fear and shame and disbelief. You experience that with them for awhile. And then after you've just stood there and listened for awhile, the first word out of our mouth must always be a word of peace. Not a word of prophetic condemnation. A word of peace. And then we show our people, by our willingness to suffer and sacrifice for them, how much we love them. There will come the time when we must speak the truth with boldness, but love is what unlocks the doors.

When the disciples realize that Jesus has come to stand among them and hear Jesus' word of peace and when they see his suffering love, the Scripture says that the Easter Evening Church rejoiced when they saw the Lord. They rejoiced. No fear and shame: they rejoiced.

When a church begins to laugh, when it begins to be thankful, when it begins to praise God, when it can rejoice, the doors are being unlocked.

But Jesus doesn't just come to the Easter Evening Church with comfort, he comes to Easter Evening Church with a commission. "Peace be with you," he says again, only this time it's not a greeting, it's a gift. A gift of peace. And then he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. I didn't just wait up in heaven for you to come to me. I came seeking you. I was sent, like the Shepherd who leaves the 99 to find the one that is lost. Don't just wait here: I am sending you, out there. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. Open the doors. Leave the building. Do not let these four walls become the church's cage. I don't just want you to receive peace, I want you to know the joy of being peace-makers. Let yourself be loved, but then I want you to be lovers. Let yourself be forgiven, but then I want you to be forgivers. And I don't just want you to open your doors that are on hinges, I want you to unlatch your hearts, to the stranger, to the child, to elderly, to the poor, to the immigrant, to the prisoner, to whoever everybody in your community calls a sinner. You have seen my wounds: I am wounded still in the suffering of my children. See their wounds. Know them intimately. Don't wait for them to come to you from behind a locked door, I am sending you to them, and when you go, I will meet you there."

And then the Scripture says that Jesus breathed on them. I always thought this was a little strange. I somehow pictured Jesus blowing this big burst of air across the room like an action cartoon superhero. But now, I think it was more simple than that. My little daughter Ada loves it when I'm holding her on my hip and I blow her hair across her face. It made me realize that to breathe on someone, you must get close to them. Jesus gets close to each one of his disciples, they let Jesus get close to them, as close as their breathing. Jesus becomes the air they breathe, and the kind of breathing he does, it's the meaning of a breath of fresh air. Breath, you see, was a symbol of spirit. By giving them his breath, Jesus is giving them his Spirit. And that breath, it's a cool breeze in a cramped airless space. It's God breathing life into clay to create Adam in the Garden. It's the breath that brings Ezekiel's dry bones to life.

The Risen Christ. The word of Peace. Suffering Love. Joy. A commission. Receiving the Spirit. These are the keys that pick the lock on a life, on a heart, on a congregation.

I have so much of the Easter Evening Christian in me. I comfortable with my life, and just want to stop right there, want to lock everything down. No more changes. Or, I get fearful or shameful or worried about the future and just want to lock out things that might threaten me, that might challenge me. Both ways, I am trying to exert control, because I think the future is up to me alone.

At heart, in such moments, I disbelieve the truth of the resurrection. And I wonder if that kind of disbelief is at the heart of so many of our church's struggles today. The Christian writer Philip Yancey once asked in a letter to himself, "Do you act as if Jesus is alive?" And that's a question I need to ask myself, that we all need to ask. Do we act as if Jesus is alive?: not alive in a far-away heaven; but right here, right now, with us, changing us, giving us power to do good, offering us opportunities and new people to meet every day, bringing good even out of what seems bad to us? Knowing that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, no things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor locked doors or budget problems or mill closings or frightened or ornery congregations, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of Christ? Do we act in our lives and in our churches with the joy and the peace and the security that Jesus is alive? Do we look for his presence even in our

Easter Evening Churches, or do we live more like the disciples did that Sunday night, hearing the story of resurrection, but to be honest, trusting our deadbolts instead?

Clarence Jordan said that the resurrection is God refusing to take humanity's 'No' for an answer. Through Easter, God is saying, "You can kill my boy if you wish, but I'm going to raise him from the dead, and put him right smack dab down there on earth again! I'm going to raise him up, plant his feet on the earth, and put him to preaching, teaching, and healing again.' . . . God raised Jesus, not as invitation to us to come to heaven when we die, but as a declaration that God has now established permanent, eternal residence on earth. The resurrection places Jesus on this side of the grave – here and now – in the midst of this life. . . . The good news of the resurrection of Jesus is not that we shall die and go home to him, but that he has risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick, prisoner brothers and sisters with him. . . . And we say, 'Jesus, we'd be glad to have you, but all these motley brothers and sisters of yours, you had better send them home. You come in and we'll have some fried chicken. But you get your sick, naked, cold brothers and sisters out of here. We don't want them getting our new rug all messed up.' . . . The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church."

To this day, the greatest evidence for the truth of that resurrection has been given to us by a small membership church that met the risen Jesus in its midst, and heard his word of peace, and witnessed his suffering in the world, and received his Spirit, and allowed themselves to sent and messengers of his forgiveness. And that kind of transformation still happens today whenever a group of people, within a large church or a small church, an urban, suburban, rural, subrural, rural congregation, it can be just two or three, choose to stake their lives on the resurrection, on Christ's power in them, and hear his peace, and witness his suffering in the world, and receive his Spirit, and let themselves be sent as forgiven forgivers into the world.

Will Willimon tells a story about his first church, in rural Georgia, the way only he can. He says, "I was fresh out of seminary, eager to be a good pastor in my first parish. I was in graduate school at the time, commuting out to the hinterland on weekends. Most Sunday mornings at dawn, it was a tough trip out there from Atlanta. I used to say, 'This trip only takes thirty minutes but takes us back thirty centuries.' It was a long way from Atlanta to Suwanee, Georgia."

"My first visit to one of the churches," Willimon says, "I found a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, I was told, by the local Sheriff. 'The Sheriff, why?' I asked."

"Well, things got out of hand at the board meeting last month, folks started ripping up carpet, dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff come out here and put that there lock on the door until the new preacher could come and settle things down."

Willimon says, "I spent a year there at that church that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take. It was tough and I was glad to be leaving them behind."

"A couple years later," Willimon says, while visiting at Emory, I ran into a young man who told me that he was now serving that church. My heart went out to him. Such a dear man, and only twenty-three!"

“They still remember you out there,” he said.

“Yea,” I said glumly. “I remember them too.

“Remarkable bunch of people,” he said.

“Remarkable,” Willimon said.

“Their ministry to the community has been a wonder,” he continued. “That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families around the church. The free day care center is going great. Not too many interracial congregations like them in North Georgia.”

Willimon said he could hardly believe what he was hearing. “What happened?” he asked.

The young pastor said, “I don’t know. One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn’t anything in particular. It’s just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.”

Of course, Bishop Willimon knew what had happened. John 20: 19-23 had happened.

The Risen Christ had come to stand among his Easter Evening Church.

He spoke his word of Peace.

He showed them his wounds of love.

And the church had seen him.

It rejoiced.

It heard his commission.

Received his Spirit.

Shared in his forgiveness as it did so.

Their overwhelming fears were overwhelmed by a bigger and a better thing: the presence of the Risen Christ. And soon that locked Easter Evening Church would become a church in the open air of the street: the Church of Pentecost Morning.

Thanks be to God.