

John 20:19-23

Locked. If I had to describe the disciples on Easter evening, that would be the one word I would use to describe them. Locked. Literally- they locked themselves in the upper room of a house because they were so afraid of the Jewish authorities and the priests- the most powerful people in Judea- if they could crucify Jesus, their teacher, what *couldn't* they do to them?

Locked emotionally. Not only are they paralyzed with fear of the Jews, they are paralyzed with regret, guilt and grief. They were failures! They failed to be at Jesus' side when he needed them most. Especially Peter! And now their teacher and friend who had given them so much hope was dead- and they were next.

Locked spiritually. They knew Jesus was a special teacher- a prophet from God. How would God deal with them since they abandoned his special prophet? They were locked not only inside this room, but also locked out of Heaven. God could never forgive them for this.

But God shows up. No, not at the door- in the middle of the room. Whatever fear the disciples had was replaced by sheer terror. What was coming? Some kind of payback. Getting fired from disciple work. A list of things to do to get Jesus' trust back. But what does Jesus say? "Peace be with you."

This isn't just a polite greeting. The Jewish concept of "Shalom," which is translated "peace," doesn't only mean "peace." It means "wholeness" and "security" and things being the way they are meant to be. Jesus isn't just saying, "hey, calm down." He is saying, "I know what you've done, and I forgive you. I want you to be at peace, because I fully and wholly forgive you of everything. Peace be with you."

What does he do next? He shows them the holes in his hand and the wound in his side. Why? Firstly, to prove that it's actually him, and that he's actually physically alive, not just a ghost... But he also is showing them the reason why they can have peace. He was punished for them. And now he's alive. If Jesus had only died, they could never be forgiven. But because Jesus was crushed, and because he was alive, the disciples knew with absolute certainty that they were forgiven, and therefore, full. Whole. Complete. At peace. The result? Joy. Shalom peace-knowing I am truly, wholly, radically, okay. This wasn't only for the disciples. We need it too.

Have you ever wondered why we'll work ourselves to death, even when it's hurting our relationships and ruining our health, just so we can make a little bit more money or achieve a little more success or buy one more new thing? Have you ever wondered why we stay in relationships that are obviously toxic with people who hurt us and abuse us? Why do we keep putting things in our bodies and keep feeding our addictions when we know it's killing us? Why do we feel the need to compare ourselves to others and get so bothered when people get more facebook/ instagram likes, more recognition for their work, more satisfaction in their relationships, more happiness in their lives than we do? Because every one of us knows deep down we are not whole, and we think more money, more stuff, more pleasure, more likes, more health, more beauty will fill that gaping void in the deepest corner of our souls that says to us,

“You aren’t ok.”. Maybe some of you have figured it out. None of those things can fill you. In order to fill that pang in your heart, you need more than success or happiness or entertainment or affirmation. You need forgiveness. Your deepest desire, whether you know it or not, is for Jesus to come to you and say, “Peace be with you.”

And he does. Jesus comes and says to you, “Peace be with you. I forgive you. I’m not going to condemn you. I’m not here to give thought provoking wisdom that can’t solve your deepest issues. I’m not here to provide a list of rules to follow. The only way I can accept you and love you is if I do it because I’m good, not because you’re good. In order for you to have true peace and wholeness, I have to freely forgive you. And I do. Don’t look to yourself for wholeness and comfort. Look at the holes in my hand! Look at the wound in my side. Look at my death for you! Look at me, I’m alive. Peace be with you.”

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He says, “Just as the Father sent me, I am sending you, and he breathes onto them and gives the Holy Spirit- he equips them with the power to be a beacon of forgiveness and reconciliation to the world. And notice how it happens, the Spirit comes through and in connection with Jesus’ declaration of forgiveness. Because they have been forgiven, they can declare forgiveness. Heaven has been unlocked for them, and now the keys are in their hands. When they forgive people of their sins, it is just as valid and liberating as when he forgives them himself.

Just like Jesus said “Peace be with you” not only to the disciples, but also to us. Each of you who has been forgiven by Jesus and has his peace has the authority from him to communicate that peace to the people in your life who desperately need it. Jesus could easily appear to every poor sinner in the world, but he would rather send you. One of the most powerful ways the Holy Spirit will work through you is when instead of getting back at the ones who have hurt you the most, you say “Peace be with you. I forgive you, and so does Jesus.”

And if you have people who have abused you in your life, forgiveness doesn’t mean letting them hurt you again. Forgiveness means refusing to get even and telling them that Jesus’ forgiveness is just as free as yours, even if you don’t let them back into your life. And if they aren’t sorry and aren’t repentant, then there is no forgiveness. Your job then, is to warn them of the wrath that’s coming for them if they decide to reject God’s mercy, letting them know that Heaven is locked to them. That’s what we call the “ministry of the keys.” And it belongs to all of us. Because an open grave means an open door. And we have the keys.

And then there’s Thomas; who missed the whole thing. Really unfortunate day to be absent. What exactly do you make of him? Is he just stubborn or more scientifically- minded than the other disciples? Maybe you relate to him. I would argue that his doubt is much more serious than we normally make it out to be. Here’s why.

Evidence was not the problem. Think about what Thomas is saying here. He's calling all other ten disciples liars and lunatics, along with the women and other people who saw Jesus alive. That's a little insulting, isn't it? All ten of my friends whom I've known for years are all lying or they're all out of their minds, but I'm not. But you know what's worse? He's calling Jesus a liar. Jesus had said time and time again that he was going to be raised from the dead. Thomas would have heard this from Jesus' mouth countless times. So as he says, "I need to put my fingers in his wound and hands for me to believe," he's not just struggling with doubt. He's speaking blasphemy.

Evidence was not the problem. There was plenty of it— the testimony of dozens of witnesses and the words that Jesus himself had spoken. Put yourself in Thomas' shoes. Would you want this to be true? Would you want to have to look at Jesus eye to eye after you sprinted away from him like a coward when he needed you most, especially when you swore to stand by him? If the disciples are right, and Jesus has risen, he's not simply a prophet sent from God. He is God, and that means you, Thomas, you abandoned him. He doesn't want it to be true. Just like the disciples, Thomas was locked. Locked by fear and doubt. Given the choice, he'd rather not see Jesus alive.

Well, Jesus doesn't give him that option. He shows up in the same way and says, "Now you're in for it Thomas. Payback time." No. Peace be with you. Look at me Thomas. You think I'd lie to you? You think your brothers would lie to you? You think I would condemn you, or that I would make you earn your way into my heart? No Thomas. I forgive you simply because I love you. It's done. Look at my hands and my side. The punishment is done. Look at me Thomas. You don't need to be afraid. You don't need to doubt. Trust my sacrifice. Trust my power. Trust me.

Thomas doesn't need to put his hands anywhere. The power of Christ's forgiveness and the proof of his resurrection melted his heart. And Thomas believes. And he gives one of the most beautiful confessions of faith in the entire Bible: "My LORD and my God." Not a teacher. Not a prophet. The uncreated, eternal Lord of Heaven and Earth. And He's mine. Yes, Thomas had been locked by fear and irrational doubt. But the open grave, and Jesus' open arms opens Thomas' heart.

I don't think I can overstate the importance of this account for you, modern American Christians. Because (from my estimation) the majority of Christian resources, teachers, books, podcasts, and honestly, churches in America are likely telling you something along these lines: "We can disagree about all the minute theological differences. We shouldn't focus so much on all the doctrine that has caused so much division. What really matters is that we all live according to Jesus' teachings, that we love each other like he taught us, that we protect life, uphold marriage, feed the hungry, defend the poor. That's what really matters. Not theological dogma." I can think of no teaching that more quickly disembowels Christianity. It's gone. Because if Christ isn't who he said he was, if he hasn't risen from the dead like he said he would, he's either the biggest fraud and liar and deceiver in human history, or he's a lunatic, or both. Sure, his teachings are obviously important and we should live by them. But what he said is not what changes your life.

It's what he did. It's his death in your place, and his resurrection as proof that everything is done, and you are forgiven.

The other reason why this account is so vastly important for you is this: Christian faith is not blind faith. When you are in pain and everything happening to you seems to tell you that God doesn't care. When you are in doubt and you aren't sure what's true and what's not. God does not tell you, "just believe!" (So don't go telling people that!) God never tells you, "you just gotta have faith." No. He says, "Look at my hands." The resurrection of Christ has more historical evidence than almost any other historical event in ancient history. It has 4 eye-witness accounts that all line up with each close enough, yet different enough, that legal experts look at them and agree that their testimonies would hold up in a court of law. Paul states in 1 Corinthians that over 500 people saw him with their own eyes: alive after he died. The apostles saw it, and were willing to be tortured for it- most people don't do that for a made up myth.

Your faith is not blind. Read the apostles' account in the Gospels and Acts and the epistles. It's all there. Evidence is not the issue. There's plenty of it. Don't shut your eyes and "just believe" when you are in pain, when you doubt, when you're weak, when you're tempted, when you're lonely, when you don't know if God truly loves you. Don't just believe. Look at his hands, his sacrifice for you and his resurrection and his promise- you are his forever, and his greeting: "Peace be with you." Amen.