

**Behind Closed Doors**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Easter 2A - John 20:19-31**  
**The Reverend Dr. Sandy Selby - April 19, 2020**

In the fourth chapter of the Book of Hebrews we find these words: “*the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword*” (Heb 4:12). The 66 books that make up the Bible were written between two and three thousand years ago, describing circumstances and events that occurred in times and cultures very different from our own. And yet, in times of trial we turn to the Bible, the “living and active” Word of God, for guidance and for comfort, because its ancient words come alive for us, especially in times of crisis.

For my sermon on the Sunday after September 11, 2001, I chose from the “living and active Word of God” a passage from the beginning of the Old Testament book of Lamentations:

*How lonely sits the city  
that once was full of people!  
How like a widow she has become,  
she that was great among the nations!* (Lam 1:1a).

How apt those words seemed, with the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center reduced to rubble, leaving 3,000 people dead. *How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!* Does that not resonate with our experience here in Akron, today? The “living and active” Word of God, indeed.

The Word of God remains “living and active” for us, today, in this season of the coronavirus. Today, for the sixth consecutive Sunday, the people of Westminster Presbyterian Church are gathered not as a congregation within these four walls, but as individuals and families within the walls of your homes, behind closed doors, for fear of the coronavirus, uncertain when we will be able to gather in this place, again, for worship and fellowship. Unless we ourselves happen to be suffering from COVID-19, the danger from which we hide is one that is invisible to us, except for the toll we see it taking on others, through local and national media coverage.

In this morning’s lesson from John’s gospel, the disciples are locked in fear behind closed doors, where they will remain for at least another week. The danger from which they hide has been only too visible to them in the violence and oppression under Roman rule in general, and in the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of the ruling authorities, in particular. While we, today, and the disciples, 2000 years ago, hide behind closed doors for different reasons, we have in common the fear of a clear and present danger, and the knowledge that life as we have known it has fundamentally changed. And in this, the “living and active Word of God” in John’s gospel about what happened to the disciples behind those closed doors bears a message of hope for us, today.

In order to appreciate what happened behind those closed doors, it’s important for us to understand the context in which John’s gospel was written, around the end of the first century, some 70 years after the events that John describes. Scholars generally agree that John’s gospel

was directed to Christians who were undergoing a very painful separation from the Jewish society to which they had belonged. In today's passage, as in other parts of his gospel, John speaks disparagingly of "the Jews," references that, tragically, throughout Christian history have been used by some as a justification for anti-Semitism. But it is clear that John is referring not to the Jewish people as a whole—after all, Jesus and his disciples were all Jews—but to the synagogue authorities, in their conflict with the early Christians to whom John's gospel is written. This late first-century conflict with the Jewish authorities is projected by John onto his narrative of the events described in the 20th chapter, when John tells us that "*the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.*" Here, John is reflecting the culture of fear in which his intended late first-century audience lived, a culture of fear that was also characteristic of Roman rule during the life of Jesus, a culture of fear that exacerbated the understandable fear of the disciples, following the violent death of the man they believed was the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

We, too, live in a culture of fear that is exacerbating our current circumstances. In a recent podcast entitled "The Culture of Fear," Yale theologian Miroslav Volf describes this phenomenon with reference to Frank Furedi's 2018 book, *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the 21st Century*. Furedi says that throughout history, people dealt with danger and fear by cultivating behaviors by which to live with those dangers. They had few resources by which to eliminate danger, whether the danger of disease, or of violence. So, they developed the courage to live with it. In contemporary society, however, the primary way we deal with fear is by seeking to eliminate what is causing it. We experience ourselves as vulnerable and fragile, and increasingly lack the ability to live in an atmosphere of danger. We have forgotten how to live well with fear.

Miroslav Volf says that "when a pandemic of virus breaks out, the social pandemic of fear is not far behind." People become afraid and withdraw from others, even in the same homes. Others go into hyperactive mode. Some stock up on guns and munitions because they fear the collapse of social order. Some indulge in addictive behaviors. Neighbors become competitors, if not enemies, competing for scarce resources. "We are exiles in our own homes," Volf says, "some of us sitting on thrones of toilet paper."<sup>1</sup>

We are locked behind closed doors, in fear of an invisible, pernicious virus.

Let's look now, to the disciples, who were locked behind closed doors because of their own fears. John the evangelist writes, "*Jesus came and stood among [the disciples] and said, 'Peace be with you.'*" "Peace be with you." In Greco-Roman times this was a common greeting upon meeting another person, their version of saying, "Hello." Jesus comes through the locked door, says "Hello," and then, John says, "*he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*" Now, John doesn't tell us precisely which disciples were in that room, but presumably they were the ones to whom Mary had run, that very morning, and announced, "*I have seen the Lord, and told them what Jesus had said to her*" (20:18). But they didn't believe her. It was not until they saw his wounds that they believed, and rejoiced. And then, again, Jesus says, "*Peace be with you.*" The disciples would have recalled these words of comfort that Jesus had spoken at the Last Supper, just three days prior, according to John's 14th chapter: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid*" (14:27). The peace of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted and paraphrased from podcasts of Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Miroslav Volf and colleagues, "The Culture of Fear" 4/4/20 and "How to Be Afraid: Easter in the Time of COVID-19"

which Jesus spoke on Thursday as one who was about to be betrayed and crucified, is the peace that he offers them three days later, as he who is Risen from the dead.

Commentator Cameron Murchison writes:

The peace [offered by Jesus] is the peace that comes from the knowledge that, in spite of all the hurt and harm the world can and does inflict, God's compassion and care embodied in Jesus stands again in their midst... While Christians have for millennia made the promise of peace from John 14 a staple of funeral liturgies, its reiteration to the frightened disciples makes plain that it supplies courage at points other than the inevitable end of life... For the one who offers the words of peace is the very one who has endured the brunt of [the world's] chaos and hatred, yet now stands in their midst—risen, indeed!<sup>2</sup>

Christ keeps his promise to his disciples, and to us, that he is among us, behind our closed doors, saying, *“My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*

After having given them his peace, Jesus says to the disciples, *“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.’”* Jesus commissions the disciples for mission out in the world, and then, keeping a promise he had made to them at the Last Supper, he breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit. Whereas in Luke's gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, the Day of Pentecost comes fifty days after the resurrection, in John's gospel, the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit come on the same day.

Jesus “sends” the disciples forth for mission, to do his work in the world. But, John tells us, a week later they are still in the house with the doors shut. They are still afraid. Again, John says, *“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”* Then he shows Thomas the wounds in his hands and his side, as he had the other disciples a week earlier. Maybe it was Thomas's joyous acclamation, *“My Lord and my God!”* that got the other disciples' attention, mobilizing them to finally open the door and go out into the world. Ultimately these followers of Jesus do go out, proclaiming the good news and doing his mission in the world.

As he did for his disciples, Jesus comes among us and gives us his peace, then sends us forth for mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit. But unlike the early disciples, we can't just open the door and go out into the world. Not now. Not yet. The authorities tell us to stay at home behind closed doors, and when we do go out for groceries, or to the workplace, our voices are muffled by the masks we wear against the coronavirus. How are we to do Christ's mission, how are we to proclaim the gospel, from behind closed doors and face-masks? Well, in a sense, we *are* living out Christ's mission by doing just that.

A poem going around on the internet, called “Love in the Time of Pandemic,” says that the empty streets that look like the end of the world are “love in action... They are the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness. It's the reason the world will go on.”

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<sup>2</sup> Cameron Murchison, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 396.

Love in action, indeed. And we are showing that love for one another, right now, by worshipping together today, behind closed doors, on Facebook Live.

Peace be with you.

Amen.