

“God is Out to Get Us!”

Rev. 3:20; John 20:19-31

The Second Sunday of Easter: April 11, 2010

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The disciples of Jesus had just experienced a terrifying series of experiences. They had seen Jesus arrested and led away without resistance. Those who were brave enough to watch on Friday had seen him crucified. On Sunday morning, Mary, Peter and John had found Jesus’ tomb empty ...not a reassuring sight for someone living in the first-century Roman Empire. If anyone had seen them around the tomb, Jesus’ followers would have been suspected of grave robbery – a crime that carried a death sentence in those days.

Small wonder, according to the twentieth chapter of John’s gospel, that Jesus’ followers are gathered secretly ...are behind locked doors ...for fear of the Jewish authorities. Fear is one of the locks imprisoning the uptight disciples. The question on the minds of these eleven disciples is probably not so much, “Will we be next?” but rather, “How long do you think we can last?” But God knows their need ...God knows their fear ...God knows where they are hiding, and God in Christ is out ...out of the grave ...to get them!

The scene is set with realistic detail. It is the evening of the first day of the week, and the doors are locked. The anxious disciples are locked tightly inside. The suspicious world is locked tightly outside. Locked doors and locked minds keep out the overwhelming reality of a complicated life. Escape seems better than exposure. Withdrawal seems easier than weathering the storms of reality. But then, all of a sudden Jesus appears. That which was locked now opens ...that which was rigid now relaxes ...that which was predictable now falls apart.

That’s the picture in today’s gospel lesson: Jesus has been raised from death. Jesus is “at large.” Jesus is free and is out to find the disciples ...to reach them, to breathe God’s spirit on them, and to commission them to serve as agents of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus comes through a locked door behind which they’re all hiding. God in Jesus Christ is out to get them! Risen from the dead, burst out of a tomb, God in Christ is out to get them!

And what was true for those first disciples is also true for us today: God is out to get us, too! As United Methodists, we try to practice *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*, but often our hearts, minds, and doors are shut, or worse still, locked. Today our church doors are

open, but only for a few hours ...then they will be locked again for the rest of this week. With crime on the increase more doors are locked. I have news for people who think that no one can get to them. They may succeed in keeping marketing and sales people out, and even preachers, but God is not deterred by locked doors. I have news for us, too. When we lock the doors of our church building after our services today God will still be able to penetrate the building of “The Big Rock Church.”

How much better it would be to invite God in! You know what I mean: invite into the sacred spaces of our lives the One who says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; those who hear my voice and open the door are doing a wonderful thing ...they are inviting me into the sacred spaces of their lives to have fellowship with them.” God is out to get us, not in the sense that God will coerce us, or violate our free will, but rather in the sense that God is a finding God ...a knocking God ...who will never be deterred.

Earlier on I mentioned that fear was one of the locks imprisoning the disciples. Another lock that kept the disciples behind closed doors was familiarity. The disciples locked themselves up inside familiarity of place, and familiarity of routine, and familiarity of feeling. When their world fell apart the disciples retreated to the familiar – to the place they had met before. There they held on to that which they had known before, in order to fend off the confusion of that which they could not understand. Maybe, just maybe – if they hung onto the familiar, the unfamiliar would go away.

What is so astounding about this story is that Jesus knows and accepts this need for the familiar. He comes to the disciples where they are in the safety of a past place. He comes with his knowing eyes, his gentle smile, and the voice that they recognize and love. He comes with his scars: the record of his past, his wounds, and his pain. Yes, he meets them in their past. He meets them in his own past. But he doesn't allow any of them to stay there. The familiar Jesus becomes the future Jesus. Embodied in that future, Jesus gives them peace in the midst of turmoil. He gives them life in the midst of confusion. But most of all Jesus gives them *power* – power to keep on living and serving and thriving in the midst of enormous change.

How much better it would be to invite God in! Instead of creating a situation in which God has to penetrate all kinds of locked doors – hard hearts, closed minds, quenched spirits –

let's rather invite God in ...invite the risen Christ to be in our midst. Let's sing: "Jesus, stand among us in Thy risen power!" Let's make it easy for God.

If you have never done this before, I urge you to let Christ into your life. If you would do this, then you would begin to know Christ better ...you would hear Jesus' commission as Jesus breathes God's spirit into your life. You would hear words of commission like, "You're being sent out into the world, and specifically, to the world's brokenness. You're being sent to every place in the world to proclaim and participate in the reconciling and healing work of God in a broken world. You are being sent because *you are my Body*, you are my presence at work in the world, you are called and empowered to do what I did, and more."

When God in Christ comes among us, it is not to stay in the sacred spaces of our lives and in this building. It is never to stay ...never to linger too long ...never to create a "holy huddle." When God in Christ comes among us, as God has promised to do when two or three gather in his name, it is always to propel us out of our comfort zones into a world where we feel unsafe and insecure, but where God has promised to be with us *always*.

The lesson Jesus' followers still need to learn today is that we'll need to leave the rooms we lock ourselves in due to fear. We'll need to step out from our locked rooms, our closed churches, our gated communities, into the world. We'll need to recognize that when we try to sequester ourselves and our children away from the world's pain, we are hiding them and ourselves from Christ's wounds.

The world is filled with the broken and the wounded. Hear these disturbing facts about the wounded people all around us: One child dies every thirty seconds, from malaria, a disease that can be prevented with a mosquito bed net costing ten dollars. One in five people in the world survive – or don't survive – on less than one dollar a day. One person in seven tries to stay alive without access to clean water. A child dies in extreme poverty every three seconds.

God in Christ is out to get us! We are Christ's Body, given for the world. The risen Christ is here among us, despite any locked doors and armed security systems. And Christ breathes life, and peace, and *power* upon us to do his work in the world, to carry the good news of his resurrection throughout this broken world.

"But, preacher," you ask, "What can one person do to heal the world's wounds?" If we were talking about a hypothetical person, a stranger, or nobody in particular, my answer would

be, “I don’t know.” But that is not the case ...I know what Jesus can do. I know what we can do. We can read about the signs of Jesus’ power and how Jesus used that power in the Bible. But these signs are not recorded to provide us with something to read as we wait behind locked doors; they are recorded to inspire us to experience the life of the risen Christ by living as Christ’s Body in the world, touching, loving, healing, and forgiving in Christ’s name and to Christ’s glory.

In Christ and through Christ and with Christ, all humankind, indeed, all of creation is being redeemed ...is being awakened to new and abundant life. The church – the risen, living Body of Christ – never remains behind locked doors, but is called to be in the world as a creative, energized organism ...breathing peace and bringing healing ...sent forth to love and to serve in the name of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection of Christ is about continuity and discontinuity ...it is about the power of the past and the promise of the future. Resurrection is about passionate memory and passionate hope. Most of all, resurrection is about trust – trusting that God is in the midst of us as the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, the beginning and the end. The God who was, is now, and ever more shall be. Thanks be to God that in the power of that promise we are both safe and free. God in Christ was out to get us!

Jesus has found us, given us *shalom*, breathed on us, and sent us forth into the world. Thanks be to God for our great privilege and responsibility of being a sign of God’s kingdom in a broken world! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.