

SERMON for Sunday, April 23, 2006
John 20:19-31

Rev. Shirley R. Funk
Lake Edge Lutheran Church
Madison, Wisconsin

No Hiding Place

The Easter story ends in the gospel of Mark with the disciples rushing from the garden of the tomb, paralyzed by fear from the sight of the stone and the empty gravesite, and made mute by fear from telling anyone the ridiculous and incredible news. The Easter story ends in the gospel of Matthew with the women named Mary leaving the site in fear but also in joy after they heard from the angel that Jesus wasn't there. The Easter story ends in the gospel of Luke with the same discovery of the empty tomb, the same perplexity and fear and disbelief. And in the gospel of John Easter morning ends when Mary Magdalene tells the news to the disciples. Of course, the Easter story does not end. It is still being told, being lived wherever and whenever believers tell one another the good news of Christ's resurrection, the good news of life eternal, the good news of God's love's triumph. The story is told in many styles and languages, through sermons and books and acts of mercy and justice, in art and music and the touch of human hands and hearts. The post-Easter lesson we read today in the gospel of John is not about telling, it is about hearing.

Thomas heard the news several times, but was yet a reluctant believer. He was one who wanted proof, who wanted to see and touch the evidence that Jesus was alive. And many of us have at some point, in some way large or small, identified with Thomas and his skeptical nature. We ask God for proof all the time, when we think our life's course has been dealt a low blow of unfairness, when a nasty disease or tragic end intrudes on our family or circle of friends or within our congregation's fellowship, when the world seems to be headed toward yet one more disaster of our own human making. "Dear God," we pray, "show us your love, your power, your presence – preferably now and definitely in a manner that we can see." And we earn the label of being a "doubting Thomas". Perhaps doubt wasn't the only thing going on in this after-Easter story.

Behind locked doors, in fear. That's where the disciples were. And that is where we, too, spend much of our lives. They feared the religious authorities were going to come and get them, and punish them – guilt by association with this Jesus who had lost the trial and his life. In many parts of the world yet today, those who claim the name of Christ have much to fear - reprisal for their stand with the oppressed, with the poor, with the ones enslaved may lead to governmental discrimination and physical persecution. By now we know well the difficult ministry of our brothers and sisters of our sister congregation Cristo Rey in Santa Ana, El Salvador. Twenty-five years ago Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was murdered in the cathedral while preparing the Sacrament because of his advocacy for the downtrodden and the despised of society, because of his courageous unmasking of lies and his speaking of the truth, messages the wealthy and the powerful did not want to hear. He understood how the Christian participates in the life and death of the resurrection, and spoke, "I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise in the Salvadoran people. I am not boasting; I say it with the greatest humility. As a pastor I am bound by divine command to give my life for those whom I love, and that includes all Salvadorans, even those who are going to kill me. If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador." We are inspired by lives such as his, lives not lived

behind closed doors, lives able to overcome fear. We are inspired by the Romeros and the Resistance movements of the Dutch and French during the Holocaust of the second World War, who made safe passages and waystations for Jews on the move. We need to ask the question: since we do not live in mortal danger, what is our fear? What about the appearance and presence of the resurrected Jesus pushes us into rooms where we shut everyone out? Where we hide from the world? And maybe, just maybe, where we even shut out Jesus. Where do we hide? Why do we hide? What keeps us hidden from the very source, the very center, the very life that gives us life?

We live in fear of being discovered, of our self-centered, selfishness being uncovered. Who will see that we don't give very much? Who will see that we are distracted and disconnected, that in reality we aren't very spiritual at all? Who will see that we talk a lot about walking alongside those who are taken advantage of in receiving fair treatment in jails, in migrant fields, at the borders, but we only talk? Who will see through our shallow sentimentality and simplistic expressions of faith?

We live in fear of being discovered, of our darkest secrets being uncovered. Who will see that we have perhaps broken almost all of the Ten Commandments, have not honored parents, have lashed out at our children, have been motivated to be better than our neighbors, who have sought material goods, more stuff to make us happy? Who will see that we are cowardly and trembling? Who will see that we have used others, destroyed them to satisfy ourselves?

We live in fear of being discovered, of our hurt being uncovered. Who will see that we are hollow and empty inside, that daily life has lost any purpose, that we are lonely and without hope? Who might see us as we really are?

Occasionally you will read on the church calendar that the youth of our congregation are having a 'lock in', and you might wonder just what it is. Another word for an overnight gathering, a time of staying up late, playing games, watching movies, eating favorite snacks, a service project, walking down to Michael's for a hot fudge sundae. Lots of talk and little sleep under the watchful eye and compassionate and brave hearts of caring teachers. There is one other essential activity: a game of sardines. Now for those of you uninitiated, the game of sardines is kind of like a reverse hide-and seek. You begin with turning all the lights off in the church, made a little harder with our remodeling when certain lights in certain rooms go on automatically. Everyone gathers in the youth room, and the two persons designated IT have a few minutes to go off and find a place to hide. And this church has many. The object of the game is to find them, of course, but when you find them you don't shout out loud, don't point out their hiding place. You just nonchalantly and unobtrusively, without letting anyone else see you, crawl in. The game is over when the last person finally finds a whole lot of bodies crammed into one small space, just like a can of sardines. At the last lock-in a couple of weeks ago, it took over an hour for the secret place to be discovered. (I know where it is.)

There used to be an Easter sunrise service held on the edge of the Grand Canyon. As the Scripture was read, "And an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone" a giant boulder was heaved over the rim. As it went crashing down the side of the Grand Canyon into the Colorado River far below, a 2,000-voice choir burst into the Hallelujah chorus. Too dramatic. And so are all the Easter lilies, the banners, the trumpets, the choirs, the fuss and bother of Easter, all the crowded churches. Too much, too much for a world that seems to quickly return to fear and

to doubt. Preacher and theologian William Sloane Coffin, who died last week at the age of 81, wrote, "By all appearances, it is indeed a Good Friday world. But by the light of Easter, through the thick darkness covering the nations, we can dimly discern a 'Yes, but' kind of message. Yes, fear and sentimentality kill; but love never dies, not with God and not even with us. The Easter message says that all the tenderness and strength, which on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, stretched out on a cross – all that beauty and goodness are again alive and with us now, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of us, if only we would recognize it." And nothing is more dramatic than a life changed by the living and loving presence of Christ.

And that is the proclamation of Easter. Not that we find Jesus, but that Jesus finds us. It is not a story of doubt, but a story of discovery. Jesus bursts out of death's grasp and claims eternal life once and for all. Jesus bursts through the doors we close and finds us. Jesus finds us. Doubt is no more, secrets lose their power, hurts no longer destroy us, hope blossoms, we are not dead but alive.

Jesus finds us, and opens the doors of our hearts to compassion, to compassion for the world's children, of Darfour and Madison, to the children who have been abused and abandoned.

Jesus finds us, and opens the doors of our hearts. When you have been hurt by someone's betrayal, when someone has criticized you over and over again and you see yourself as not very worthy of love or much of anything, when you seem to fail at school or get fired at work, when in spite of your very best efforts your children seem to not be turning out the way you envisioned, when you have been caught in the sick trap of physical, verbal, or substance abuse – your heart shrivels and your capacity to love is small. You protect yourself by not letting anyone in. Not any more. Not after Easter, when the God of great and overwhelming forgiveness and love crashes through the closed doors.

If you are at home and the door is closed and locked, and if someone comes and rings the bell, or knocks, you have to get up, unlock the door and open it up. Of course, you usually try to peer out the window to see who it might be. The good news of Easter is that even if you are too afraid to do that, too ashamed or paralyzed, the locked door won't stop Jesus. He will appear right in the middle of your heart, and before you even have the chance to say or do a blessed thing, he will say, "Peace be with you!" The peace of Christ which makes us whole, which makes us capable, which feeds our compassion, which heals our wounds, finds us wherever we are. We cannot hide from Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.