

Imagine with me, if you will: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Nathaniel, Simon, and a bunch of other disciples huddled together, hiding – in fear of both the Roman guards and their own religious leaders. Fearful of their discovery. Afraid of what may happen if they are found.

Behind a locked door they gather to sit together, to be together, to grieve together and to plan together. What will they do now? What CAN they do now? Peter and the beloved disciple have just returned from visiting the surprisingly empty tomb, and both are at a loss for words – everyone else has no idea what to think.

There's a knock, a secret knock. Who could it be?¹ Andrew runs upstairs to peep out the window furtively. ...its Mary, the disciple from Magdala. She had been at the tomb early that morning and had come to tell them earlier that it was empty.

Philip lets her in - looking to the left and the right as he locks the door again. Mary rushes into the courtyard, sees the other disciples, and collapses onto a bench.

Salome brings her a cup of water. Mary drinks and, after a few moments to compose herself, she says, with a sparkle in her eyes and awe in her voice, "I have seen the LORD!" She continues,

"After you two left, I was crying at the tomb when two men approached me and asked me why I was crying. I thought to myself – are they kidding? But I tell them, my friend Jesus had died and I don't know where his body is... and before I could finish, another man walks up to me. I thought, of course, he was the groundskeeper. He too asked me why I was crying ... and now, truthfully I'm thinking to myself, fellas, it's a graveyard... people cry here.

I start to answer him with the same tale, but he interrupts me, and says my name, "Mary." I think to myself...how does this guy know me, and then I look and it's not the groundskeeper at all! It's Jesus.

Well, before I could even jump up and hug him, he says, with laughter, "Wait, Mary, wait. Don't hang on to me! Go quickly to my beloved friends and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father – and your father...to my God – and YOUR God." And here I am!"

Well now what do they do? Do they believe Mary? The story doesn't say. We could only imagine.

Later that evening, they might be gathered at table – eating together, bread, wine, fruit...doesn't matter because they're not really hungry. The doors are locked, cloth is over the windows to block the light leaving. Andrew is in charge of periodically peeking out the windows.

They talk, they wonder together, "Don't you remember how he... Could he really be alive? And then Jesus himself is right there reclining at table with them.

"Peace be with you!"

I could imagine there would be some shock. Maybe a scream or two – definitely a shriek. Peter rubs his eyes, Mary and the other women come closer, Nathaniel starts to laugh... "What kind of trick is this?"

¹ "Open the Door ." Beth Scibienski. Accessed April 23, 2022. <http://www.bethscib.com/lectionary-reflections/open-the-door>.

But Jesus shows them his hands and feet...and they start to figure out that maybe it IS Jesus.

"Peace be with you" Says Jesus, again! "Just as the Father has sent me out into the world, so I send you! Go!" And then he breathes on them the Holy Spirit and tells them that they have the power to forgive...and then he's gone again.

The disciples look at each other in awe. John runs downstairs to check to see whether the doors are locked. As he begins to walk upstairs again there's another knock on the door...a secret knock. Philip opens the door a crack...It's Thomas – back with the wine he was sent out to fetch.

You can imagine the scene that Thomas walks into. They tell him what had just happened, and Thomas snorts, "Let's just say, I doubt it. You're all NUTS."

The story jumps... a week later. They're still there in that building - behind locked doors. Disbelieving, feeling shamed for abandoning their teacher, fearful of both the Roman guards and their own religious leaders...but now they're planning and scheming together. They know they have to get out...but what to do next?

...And Jesus shows up, again – No need to let him in, he'll find his own way.

He smiles. "Peace be with you!" Thomas sputters. Jesus walks to Thomas and lets Thomas have a good look at him...Jesus doesn't make fun of him, but gently chastises him for believing only when seeing... but this is a message for all the disciples – and us too – and the message sticks.

Pause

So, when I read this story today, it isn't Thomas' doubt that is getting me. Sure, he's had a bad rap, poor guy – but sometimes I think we like to blame him because his "mistake" is easily visible and easy to point out.

I could go on and on about doubt – and likely I will some time – but not today. Here's the thing, when we only use this passage to talk about "Doubting Thomas" then we miss the even bigger issues that are at hand.

And it is these hidden issues in the text today that I want to bring forward – in hopes that they will help us to understand the difficulty of the life of a disciple, as well as to learn from these examples the immeasurable grace and love of our God.

First. I'm pulling out the Greek again. Peter Woods², a pastoral counsellor and mediator writes:

"I have always been amazed by this resurrected Jesus who, when he comes to the disciples, isn't thwarted by the fearfully locked doors." When Woods examines the Greek for "locked door" he discovers

² Woods, Peter. "'Come out, Come out, Whoever You Are' – Easter 2b." The Listening Hermit, April 11, 2012. <https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/04/11/come-out-come-out-whoever-you-are-easter-2b/>.

something wonderful.

First, is that the disciples aren't really behind "locked doors" but closed doors – it's probably the same thing. The Greek word used here to refer to the state of the doors is "*kleiso*".

To me, that word sounds familiar... "*Kleiso*"

There they were. Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Nathaniel, Simon, Matthew and a bunch of other disciples locked behind closed doors – sneaking peeks out whenever they could to see if the coast was clear. Mourning, broken, grieving together...but mostly being afraid together.

Their fear of the religious leaders kept them hidden. Their fear of facing the world alone kept them hidden together. Their fear of what would happen because of the missing Christ...and what that could possibly mean kept them hidden together in that closed room.

But here's the thing.

Even after Christ appeared to them in the closed room, breathed on them and empowered them, they still stayed in that closed room.

We read in verse 26: A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Shalom Aleichem" which means, Peace be with you.

Even when they knew about the risen Christ, they were still closed by their fear.

So here the gospel of John presents us with a closed room containing a closed community. "*Kleiso*", shut in by their fear.

And this reminds me of us – well, kind of us – it reminds me of our modern Western Church...whatever denomination. We are fearful of everything. Only now it's not the Jewish religious leaders. We close ourselves in because we're afraid of people that threaten our faith...

We're even good at closing the doors amongst ourselves. We're quick to judge who's in and who's out. And we hurt each other with the words we say and the words we don't say...the looks we give and the way we avoid. Ultimately, we close doors – we lock our doors to keep out those that threaten us. Closed rooms, closeted disciples, closed doors within the closed doors closing people off from each other and from the world... and from others that are knocking at the doors looking for aid.

We become *Kleiso* – shut in.

But here's the interesting thing. *Kleiso* is linked to another Greek word, maybe familiar to some of you... *Ecclesia*, the Greek word used to describe the church.

Ecclesia literally translates as *not closed*, and *called out*, unsealed. It is so wonderful that the Early Church mothers and fathers chose the word *Ecclesia* - not closed - to describe the community of Jesus' early followers.

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Behind Closed Doors
John 20:19-29

Emily Toews

In our reading today it is obvious that the one who could not be confined by the tomb was not daunted by a couple of locked doors. Did the closed doors stop the LORD from appearing to the disciples? Ha! NOPE. Not even the 2nd time. “Peace be with you!” the Christ proclaims both times. Essentially, “Don’t be afraid!” “Be at Peace!”

And he comes back for doubting Thomas!

And he comes back for the fearful disciples. He sneaks in past the slammed doors of fear and misunderstanding and differing opinions and scorn and anger and gossip and brings the disciples together all in one room again and breathes on all of them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” It is as if he was saying to them “You are not to remain ‘kleiso’. You are ‘ecclesia’. Come out! As the father has sent me, so I send you. Go out! Be free!

Amen. May it be so.