

“Locked in a Room with Open Doors”
A sermon for Easter Vigil
by The Very Reverend Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Luke 24:1-2 / April 21, 2019

“This is the night,” we prayed earlier in the service, this is the morning, “when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin and restored to grace and holiness of life.”

We get a glimpse, now, of how, amid all our limits and trip-ups, and sometimes failures, more possibilities are at hand.

We know we need *something* to happen, given how stuck we sometimes feel.

Perhaps you heard the story about a family that included two brothers.

The younger brother had a strange fear, a phobia.

He had a dread of open doors.

Something about a door hanging open left him anxious, afraid.

His older brother got impatient,
as older brothers get,
and wanting to break him of his habit,
once threatened him.

“One day,” he said, “I’m going to lock you in a
room with all the doors open.”

Locked in a room with open doors.
What a picture!

That image reminds us that we get held back
not just by obstacles on the outside,
but also by fears on the inside.

Not all that makes us feel stuck is out there.
We can feel locked up, unable to move,
even with doors of opportunity wide open.

Our sense of failure, our anxieties,
our regrets can paralyze us,
make us timid and tentative.

Or maybe it *is* our circumstances that make us feel
stuck: We're young and it seems like we don't
have enough experience ever to get a break in our
career. Or we're on the far side of middle age and
no one wants us. Or we're caring for someone
who doesn't seem to get better.

Or we feel down because of our own health.

Or we have chronic habits
we can't seem to break free of.

But sometimes a new look, at least a glimpse, will
remind us of possibilities above us, around us,
realities that infiltrate daily life with
grace and even freedom.

Today the readings give us the great sweep of
biblical history.

We hear a story of God moving into situations
that seem limiting, locked up, hopeless,
God taking circumstances that have no apparent
room for movement,
no hope for improvement,
and making possibilities.

We certainly see that in the reading from Exodus,
the first scene in our readings this morning.

We see the people of Israel, trapped in slavery,
locked down by the oppressive rule of Egypt.

There was no hope, but then
God led the people out of their captivity,
God miraculously opens up a miracle:
God “drove the sea back by a strong east wind all
night, and turned the sea into dry land.”
God overthrew the oppressor.

Despite all God did in leading the children of
Israel out of bondage and into freedom, though,
again and again they forgot their God.

They wandered after the false gods,
the puny gods of their pagan neighbors.

Ezekiel practically despaired over Israel’s
faithlessness, wondering if the people could ever

follow faithfully. Why could they not keep from grasping at the old idolatries that they thought could rescue them?

But then God acted again.

As we heard tonight, he brought Ezekiel to a valley, filled with dry bones, with the remains of people who had lost all signs of life. All hope dried up with the bones.

But then God says, *Even here, there is more.* Even the people's spiritual deadness could not keep God from acting and awakening. Beyond all odds, God makes them alive.

And God could take not only individual lives, But the life of a whole people and call it back to life and promise and vibrant possibility.

Again and again, God's people would wander, come back, lose sight of the true God,

then come back.

Fast-forward centuries to the time of Jesus.

To our Gospel reading for today.

The backdrop is Jesus' horrific death on the cross.

And his followers, his first disciples,

Saw their hopes crashing down.

Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James,

and Salome were bringing embalming spices to

anoint Jesus' dead body, and commit

Jesus to a grave of buried hopes.

They wonder out loud,

How will we get in? Who will roll away the stone

at the entrance to the tomb?

Tombs in those days had no doors.

But they did have openings,

And in front of the opening was a groove,

and in the groove ran a circular stone big as the

wheel of a donkey-drawn cart.

They knew they could not hope to move it.

But God had something else in mind,
Something else in store for them, and for us.

They find the stone already moved.
That which they could never hope to budge,
Had been taken care of.

And they hear the unbelievable good news that
Jesus had risen from the dead.

One of the Gospels tell us that that evening,
when the women had come back with the news,
The disciples had locked the doors of the house
where they had gathered, alone and afraid.

No one had locked them in,
But they had bolted the doors out of fear.

Their fears kept them from walking out.
But then God acted again.

The resurrection made the difference.

Something beyond them
turned their lives upside down with hope.

Where despair and fear reigned, God brought
news that Jesus could not be bound by death,
so they didn't need to be, either.

We may, like the disciples, wonder how
something so good could be so true.

But it is. Christ appears in our lives,
to open the doors that hold us back.
He gives us courage to walk through doors
already open. And he creates unheard-of
possibilities.

And what happened here promises us something.
We don't need, as Fleming Rutledge puts it, more
principles of human ability, human potential,
human programs.

“Grace means you're in a different universe from
where you had been stuck,”
writes Anne Lamott, “when you had absolutely no
way to get there on your own.”

We need what today gives us:
a picture of a living God.
A God ready to inject new possibilities into the
patterns we can't seem to shake free of.
Lent, the forty days we have journeyed through,
Has been for me, and I suspect also for you,
A time of becoming aware of limitations,
Of facing failings.

Today the mood, the whole feel, shifts.

We think now not of our failings,
But of God's abilities to forgive.
Not only problems,
but God's potential answers.
Not only our poverty and lacks,
but especially God's power.

“This is the night,” we prayed earlier, “when
Christ broke the bonds of death and hell.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great hero and martyr
and theologian said this:

I wonder what area in your life could use
the great ending of this story,
the rewriting of hopelessness.

What assurance this news might bring
to the hard things you face.

That our world faces.

Those earliest followers saw it.

The rich, the poor, sick persons, the ones who
could barely believe it, the ones who were scared:

They heard it. They saw it.

So do we.

God says to us all, I can walk you through doors
that stand open but still leave you hanging back.

Now is the time to ask God,
if you doubt it,
for a conviction that Jesus is truly alive,
alive and able to help.

Still available for the imposing and even
impossible situations of our lives.

Able to bring life and hope.
And open up a chance to walk
into a life that is always new.

END