

Second Sunday of Easter
Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; John 20:19-31
April 11, 2010
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More than once in my life I've felt confined in a box that was suffocating me and essentially draining off my soul. In movies, we find the hero tossed into a room with walls that contract as he struggles with all his strength to keep them from crushing his body. Or the good guys are trapped in a room that has a poison gas billowing in through the air vents. The feeling of being trapped – locked in or locked out – is frightening.

According to John's gospel, the disciples find themselves in just such a fix on the evening of the resurrection. Even though Peter and John have witnessed the empty tomb and Mary Magdalene has told the disciples she had seen the risen Lord, their doubt, disbelief and fear are still too great to breach. We're told they were behind locked doors for fear of the Jews – those are the same authorities who sought and achieved Jesus' death a few days earlier. Crucifixion was intended to strike fear into all who might have similar ideas to defy Roman sovereignty. It's no fun living with fear or dread. It makes one soul sick and physically ill. People who are afraid are often ill-tempered and susceptible to making poor decisions. Jesus was killed out of fear.

You've probably heard that fear is the opposite of faith. Fear produces tension. Staying in the fight-or-flight mode causes bodily harm. Fortunately for the disciples, an unforeseen visitor comes to their rescue.

We might imagine that fear of the Jewish authorities and Roman executioners was not all that kept the disciples bound up. Certainly they could have been flooded with guilt. After all, we know all about their disloyalty when the chips were really down for their master. Throw in a dose of grief and despair as their leader is now dead and their hopes are dashed and their futures uncertain. They may even have been wrestling with anger at Jesus and themselves for being so gullible and investing everything in this seemingly lost cause.

Fear, guilt, grief, despair and anger are a lethal combination of emotions. No wonder the disciples are paralyzed in a room called "no way out." With no way out under their own resources, something or someone must be added to the mix.

When Juanita and I were on one of our silent eight-day retreats in Wernersville, Pa., a few years ago, I was painting with watercolors to pass some time in my room. One day I was painting a seashell I'd found on a library shelf. I did a pencil drawing first, then the diluted black paint to match the shell. No matter how long I worked, I couldn't get the shell on my page to resemble the real one. Finally, I decided to brush bright orange over the whole thing because the shell had a little orange on the lip. Suddenly, the shell came to life before my eyes.

The disciples were in a land of gray when something bright suddenly entered their dark dungeon. “Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Quickly recognizing him by his scars, their doom and gloom turns to joy. The disciples, in the throes of death, come to life as Jesus extends to them the peace that passes understanding and breathes into them the divine-life spirit. Certainly the author of this gospel wants us to recall Genesis Chapter 2 when “the Lord God formed man of dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Here the disciples get their “second wind” from the new, improved Adam.

I received the ultimate compliment from one of our parishioners after Martha Hinton’s funeral last week. She said, “David, you make us feel so uplifted in your funeral homilies, we can decide it’s okay to die.”

Jesus’ presence among the disciples convinced them it was okay to live. They could venture beyond the confining walls with new strength, confidence and a mission.

We’ve all felt stuck, trapped or powerless one time or another by circumstances and emotions beyond our control. Some live with such constraints so regularly it’s the new normal. That’s tragic. That’s death – what St. Paul called “the wages of sin.” If you’re like me, I try to think my way out of such fixes long before I begin to pray and ask for Jesus to enter my predicament. Turning to Jesus, the Lord God or the Spirit and recognizing our own inability to fix ourselves is the beginning of the road to new life. Some fixes take time to complete. Once we begin to pray, we also need patience and trust. Certain things, like new lives, can’t be ordered online and delivered within three business days nor found on the store shelf. Yet we can be buoyed with hope knowing that Jesus knows all about it, cares for us deeply, and wants us to be healthy and whole.

Interestingly, when Jesus enters the room where the disciples are all to pieces, he’s not interested in admonishing them for their infidelities toward him. It’s not “Where were you when I needed you most?” Jesus doesn’t have to assuage or avenge his hurt feelings. He wants only what’s best for them and gives them what they’ll need to move forward – peace, power and purpose.

“As the Father has sent me so I send you.” They have been forgiven. Their room of “no way out” has become a room of grace. “Go spread grace,” says Jesus. Freely forgive as you’ve been forgiven. Tell all the world that they too can live in grace and always be the recipient of divine favor. Fear, guilt, despair, and anger – living death – need no longer have dominion over us, if we call on the resurrected Lord.

I have a cousin who lives in Rhode Island. We’ve been praying for him – Stephen Bernt. He’s been a hopeless alcoholic for years. Recently, he nearly died from his addiction. He spent weeks in an intensive care unit. When he miraculously recovered, he immediately started drinking again. His sisters and his relatives, including me, were disgusted. We thought our prayers and efforts were wasted on him. However, the last email I received indicated he was accepting an offer to enter rehab and trying to kick his

habit. Prayers are never wasted; God never gives up on us. Nothing short of rehabilitation and transformation for all of us is the work and wonder of God.

What happened to those pathetic, closet-bound disciples after Jesus left and ascended to the Father? In the Acts of the Apostles, we find them defying the same authorities they had earlier cowered before. They say to the temple police and council that had Jesus arrested and condemned, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Their reconstitution is nothing short of a metamorphosis. From the constrictions of a chrysalis to the freedom of a graceful butterfly, they are not afraid to be arrested or killed for speaking and doing in the name of Christ.

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms....” Therefore, enter and invite all into God’s spacious house of grace. Amen.