

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Text: John 20:19-31

Title: “Unlocked”

Date: 2nd Sunday of Easter, series C; 12 April 2026

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ ²⁰ After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.’ ²² And with that He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.’

²⁶ A week later His disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.’

²⁸ Thomas said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

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A number of years ago, Brenda and I went with our kids to an “escape room.” Basically, an escape room is a place you pay to get yourself locked into, then spend the next hour using all the skills, ingenuity, and teamwork you can muster, to get yourself out of. Some people think that’s fun!—and, to be honest, Brenda and I did enjoy sharing that experience with our kids. But the concept as a whole left me kind of flat. It’s one of those games that’s a little too close to life, to grab me.

What I mean is that getting ourselves locked into this or that difficult situation *in life* isn’t very much fun at all. One of the striking things in today’s Gospel reading is the fact that these disciples find themselves behind locked doors *twice* in the span of 8 days (one Sunday to the next). Maybe you think, “Okay, twice in a week, that’s not so bad.” But John doesn’t tell us about anything *else* that took place in these disciples’ lives *between* these two “lockdowns.” That leaves me kind of wondering whether this might have become their regular practice. In other words: *even after* Jesus came into that locked room the first time, on Easter Sunday, and gave them “**his peace**” and (sort of implicitly) suggested (by the very fact of his presence) that maybe their locks were neither as necessary nor as effective as they thought—well, *even after* all of that happened on Easter Sunday, there these disciples were *again*, the *very next* Sunday, “**once again inside the house,**” *once again* “**with the doors locked.**” (26)

That’s the thing about locks, though—right? Whether or not we really *need* them, we kind of get used to them. Whether or not they really even *work*, we kind of *like* them. Once we’ve got them, it’s hard to give them up.

What are some of the things that keep *you* “locked in,” in life? In spiritual terms, I suppose we could all say “sin”—and that’s true. But more specifically, what *kind* of sin? There are many different

kinds of locks: key locks and combination locks; mechanical locks and digital locks. In a similar way, the *particular* things that keep *me* locked-in, and missing-out on all of the fullness and richness of the new life Jesus brings, are probably different from the things that lock *you* up.

Along with that, locks work in two different ways. Some of them lock us in from the *outside*, *against* our will. I'm thinking here of habits we can't break out of... circumstances we can't escape... limits we can't exceed... injuries or damage from the past that (barring a miracle) probably *are* going to keep on confining and constricting us for the rest of our lives. Jesus healed a woman once, who he said had been "**bound by Satan for 18 years**"—and sometimes that's our struggle too, wrestling with a cunning and wily *Adversary* who throws us into this dark dungeon or that one, and *holds* us there, year after year, against our will. (Luke 13:16) This is part of the heartache of *having* a sinful self that we can't control, and therefore also leaves us *subject* to forces we can't overcome. When Luther wrote a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, he mentioned people who are "**blinded and bound in the devil's kingdom**"—and as hard as it is to admit this, there are ways in which you and I have to say, "That's me!" (*Lutheran Service Book*, p.215) When we hear Jesus announce (in the synagogue at Nazareth) that he came to fulfill Isaiah's words, "**The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives**"—isn't it a *thrill* to anticipate that kind of liberation finally arriving, one day, for us! (Luke 4:18)

And one day, you know, it will. During his earthly ministry, Jesus "set free" a relatively *small* number of people from *very specific* kinds of bondage.

- He released that crippled woman I mentioned a minute ago, after 18 years of illness. (Luke 13:16)
- He released Peter's mother-in-law from a fever. (Luke 4:39)
- He released a paralyzed man from his sins. (Luke 5:20)
- He released three dead people from their graves. (Luke 7:14, 8:54, John 11:43)

For each of those folks (and their families), those releases were totally life-changing events, right then and there, that day! Mobility, health, life itself: wow! For *us*, though, the fulfilment of all of the *freings* Jesus came to bring, still lies ahead, in the future. As Peter reminds us in today's second reading, "**God has given us new birth into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**"—and thank God (yes, alleluia!), we *have* this *hope*! It is *because* of this hope, Peter says, that "**we do greatly rejoice—even though now, for a little while, we still have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.**" (1 Peter 1:4, 6) But that's the *hard reality*, right there. We *do* "**still have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.**" As Peter goes on to say, our "**inheritance**" is "**being kept in heaven, for us.**" (1 Peter 1:4)

That word "**kept**" is an interesting one, when you think about it.

- On the one hand, that's good news, that God is "**keeping**" our inheritance "*safe*"! He's protecting it, preserving it, and (as Peter says) making sure that it never "**perishes, spoils, or fades**" until the right-time comes for him to finally *give* it to us. (1 Peter 1:4)
- But on the other hand, the fact that God is "**keeping**" that inheritance there in heaven, means that he is also "**keeping it away from us**" (for now). It's "locked up," *there*—safe in *his* "care and keeping," in *that* place that *we do not* currently have any access to, at all.

No: What you and I have *instead* is this sometimes very awkward and challenging juxtaposition of "**a living hope**" (on the one hand) and "**grief, in all kinds of trials**" (on the other). There are still *just so many* locks that are closed against us, here on earth. It might be quite a while yet, before "**the Son sets us free**" in *every* respect, from *all* the forces that oppress us. (John 8:36)

As you may have noticed, though, the locking-up that those disciples in today's Gospel reading were dealing with, was different from everything we've been talking about so far, in one significant respect. *Their* doors were locked on the *inside*. They themselves were the people who *closed* those doors; *they* were the ones who turned the keys in those locks; *they* were the active agents of their own confinement. Why on earth did they do that? Well, on the first of those two Sundays, John tells us that it was **“for fear of the Jewish leaders.”** (John 20:19) How *necessary* it really was for those disciples to fear those authorities *anymore*, at *this* point in John's Gospel, is hard to say. Jesus had been the target those leaders had been aiming at, and as far as *they* were concerned, they had already finished dealing with him. His followers were of little (if any) concern. That was basically what we heard the famous Pharisee Gamaliel telling the Sanhedrin in our first reading: **“If this movement is of ordinary human origin, it will fail!”** (Acts 5:38)

But that's the thing about fear. Some of it is rational—but another big part of it is emotional. So, like *any* emotion, you can't really *control* fear. The most that most of us can usually do, is *manage* it.

And here in this reading, it looks like these disciples were not actually managing their fear very well! *Even after* Jesus appeared to them the first time (on Easter Sunday)... *even after* he gave them his peace... *even after* he breathed on them his Spirit... and (notice!) *even after* he told them he was **“sending them *out*”**!—*even so*, here they were again, on this second Sunday of Easter, locking themselves *in*. (John 20:21-22)

I wonder if this is partly why John added another whole chapter to his Gospel, *even after* that very smooth ending that we heard at the end of this reading. Somehow, between these two Sundays here in Jerusalem (at the end of John 20), and the encounter Jesus had with his disciples on a beach in Galilee (in John 21)—*somehow*, between those two events, our Saviour managed to finally *get* these disciples to *open up* these locks that they themselves had latched, and *let themselves out*—*OUT* of *whatever* it was, exactly, they were afraid the Jewish leaders might do.

The question for you and me is: Will *we* let Jesus do the same sort of thing for us? I don't know in particular what those things are, that *you're* afraid of—the things that keep *you* locking yourself in, nice and tight, time after time. I know what some of those fears are for *me*, and some of them are so much a product of my own particular history that they are *highly* specific and personal. Each of you has your own set of individual fears, too. But there are also many standard, widely shared, *universal* sorts of fear that many of us lock ourselves up with. Fear of failure. Fear of making a mistake. Fear of *being seen* to be making a mistake. Fear of looking foolish. Fear of backing down when we ought to be standing up. Fear of zigging when others think we ought to be zagging. (The number and range of our fears is quite something!)

The trick though, to escaping from *that whole room-full* of fears, is having *the courage of faith* so we can *manage* them in such a way that they *do not* lock us in anymore. And this is where the risen Lord Jesus helps *us*, too—right now, *today*, in the *present*! Never mind how many times we've barricaded ourselves into all kinds of cramped little corners, and “kept ourselves hidden away” behind many kinds of locks. Jesus waltzes right on through all of those walls to be with us, too, and say, **“Peace be with you. I am with you! So do not be faithless anymore, but *trusting*! The reason I rose from the dead was to defeat every last one of those Satanic forces that *keep* you locked-away behind closed doors. I am here, with you, to set you *free*.”** (John 20:27) (*paraphrased*)

Freedom, you see, is what Jesus always brings, whenever and wherever he comes to us. Freedom from the Law is part of it, of course—as Paul writes to the Galatians, **“Before faith came, we were *imprisoned* by the Law, *locked up until* the coming faith should be revealed... But now that [Christ] has come, we are no longer under that jailer.”** (Gal 3:23, 25) Even more, though, Jesus

brings freedom from *sin* itself—as Paul again writes (this time in Romans): “**Sin will not lord-it-over-you anymore, since you are not under the law, but under grace.**” (Rom 6:14) Do you and I still keep sinning, even under grace? Absolutely! And yet, those sins truly *do not* “**lord-it-over-us**” anymore. They do not *define* us... they do not constrain us... they do not “lock us down” the way they used to, before Christ came. His forgiveness has broken their power, now and forever!

And *because* Christ has set us free from both of those enemies (sin and the Law), you and I also enjoy this *other* wonderful freedom too: freedom from fear. *Remember*: it was *fear* of the Jewish leaders (more than those leaders themselves) that led those first disciples to voluntarily turn themselves into prisoners. For us too, it’s often our *fear* of sin and death, more than sin and death themselves, that lock us away from God (and from others). As John writes in his first letter, the Lord’s own “**perfect love drives out fear**”—fear of “**the Jewish leaders**” (for those first-century disciples); fear of many other things too (for us). (1 John 4:18a)

Two more quick, closing words, for all of us to *purposely* “lock away” in our hearts—two wonderful Scriptural “keys” to help us “let go” of our fear of sin and death, and enjoy more of the freedom Christ brings.

- The first liberating word comes from Paul, in Galatians chapter 5: “**It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand up, therefore, and do not take upon yourselves again, any yoke of slavery.**” (Gal 5:1)
- The last word is from Jesus himself, in John chapter 8: “**If the Son sets you free—truly, you will be free.**” (John 8:36)

God grant each of us this astonishing freedom-from-fear, as we *trust* in Jesus our risen Lord! Amen.