



**First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC**  
Second Sunday in Easter  
April 23, 2006

***Behind Closed Doors***

Rev. Daniel Smith

**The Lesson: John 20: 19-31**

Last Saturday morning, I did a really dumb thing. I tried lifting my soon-to-be stepson Julian up with one arm. This was not the usual scoop maneuver where you throw your hip and legs into the action. No. I held *out* my left hand to him, let him clasp his hands around mine and I just sort of pushed him up in the air until his head touched the ceiling. Dumb, right? Fortunately, he's only six and not that heavy. Besides, Julian and his little sister Nellie who was standing by us thought this was too cool for school. Of course, Nellie who is four wanted me to lift her up too. So, here comes the really dumb part! With Julian dangling from one arm, I held out my hand to Nellie, and started pushing her up too. Then I heard my back start to snap, crackle, and pop in about fifteen different places.

I have never before experienced whiplash, but my guess is this was pretty close to it. I was laid out for a good part of the day, literally, flat on the floor. I could barely get up. But somehow by the next morning, I was feeling better. After all, it was Easter. With Christ, I rose and hardly gave it another thought. That is, until Monday morning, when pain returned. It's been getting better, slowly, but it occurred to me that if there is one week in the Christian year to have an experience like whiplash, this has got to be it – the week after Easter!

Think about it. Less than a week a half ago, many of us were sitting here on Thursday night, as candles that lined this table were extinguished one by one. When the last candle was put out, the sanctuary fell completely dark. We sat with one another for a long, somber silence and departed quietly into the night. Then, on Good Friday, we gathered in the Chapel where we wept as we heard Kate Layzer chant out words excerpted from letters written by fallen soldiers in Iraq. We sang and worshipped and prayed together out of the depths of our anger and sadness and grief. Our hearts for that moment were bearing the weight of the world – with all its sin and all its suffering. We lifted it up to God as our souls strained and buckled. Then, just 36 hours later, we're back here on Sunday morning, marching into church, light on our feet, belting out songs of victory and endless joy.

The whole Lenten season, and especially Holy Week, reminds of that video footage we've all seen of test dummies. We get into the vehicle on Ash Wednesday and by Palm Sunday we start really picking up speed. Then, on Good Friday, we come crashing into this wall of silence, our own and that of God. The lights go out for a moment. Come Easter, we've stepped out of the wreckage, already having brushing off our orange jumpsuits. We congratulate each other on surviving another Lent and Holy Week. We give God thanks. And someone inevitably says, "Time for brunch!"

In the midst of all my pain relieving Ibuprofen popping this week for my strained back, I kept thinking about the emotional whiplash we endure from Holy Week to Easter and beyond. I wonder if any of you can relate. From suffering, persecution, and death by execution less than two weeks ago to resurrection, victory and new life this past week. I don't know about you but my moods and feelings sometimes just can't keep up with the absurdly fast Good Friday to Easter turn around. Even after an amazing celebration last Sunday morning, my soul still feels at least little bent out of shape by all that heavy lifting of Lent.

I suppose all this is why I'm grateful for our passage today about the disciples hiding out behind their closed doors on Easter evening. Sure, we all know this is a set up for Thomas to come and steal the show, but let's set aside Thomas this once and stay with the rest of the disciples, shall we?

It's Easter evening, and in my mind, the disciples are right where they should be, huddled together in a room, behind closed doors. Can we blame them for needing some time to regroup after what they had just been through? Truth to tell, I find there's something too simple about John's description of why they were huddled together in that room. He says they were afraid of the Jews - the religious authorities. I'm sure they were afraid of the Romans too. I also wonder if part of their need to be together in private had

more to do with the fact that they had just been through a harrowing experience and that they needed to recover. They had just witnessed the bitter tragedy of their leader and friend being arrested and beaten and brutally executed. If the disciples were our friends telling us about this experience, we'd greet them with compassion, no? Maybe give them a number of a good therapist? They were probably traumatized. Were they there when he was crucified? Maybe not. But were they with him the night before? Yes. Most importantly, did they love Jesus and did they give up everything to follow him as far as they could? Yes.

I'm grateful that we can read this on the Sunday after Easter because for a moment at least, it acknowledges, that the grief and the fear and the weight we were feeling as we sat in utter darkness last week didn't go right away for the disciples either. Sure, when Jesus appears to them, they rejoice eventually, and he sends them out to carry on his work. But, amazingly, his first line is not one of judgment or anger or even instruction. He doesn't say: "You cowards! Look at you here wallowing." He doesn't say to them, "Where were you in my time of need?" He certainly doesn't say "Time for brunch!" Instead, he greets them where they are and says a simple, "Peace be with you!" He offers a tender, gentle and soothing word of understanding, one to ease their grief and their fear, to say nothing of their surprise about it was that he could be standing before them. If that's not enough, he blows on their foreheads, breathing on them and asking them to receive the Holy Spirit. It's a gorgeous pastoral moment, really, and one that I'm afraid we too quickly lose sight of when Thomas enters the story with all his doubtful but ultimately faith filled ways.

This past week, I had a conversation with a widower who lost his wife recently to cancer. When I ask him how he had been holding up, he said, "You know, I'm doing okay!" Then he said, "but not really." He told me he felt scared sometimes. Of what, he didn't really know, but in part he was afraid that he was not going to remember her. "I feel like I'm losing my memory of her – the way she looked and sounded," he said. Perhaps some of you have been there. I told him that his mind and heart are understandably in a fog right now and that those memories would surely come back. I told him that in my experience, grief and memory worked together. I told him after awhile, once the fog had cleared, the grief and the memories won't go away for good, but they'll come back together and they'll knock on his door, perhaps at times when he is least expecting them. I told him that those knocks might eventually become familiar to the point where he might almost welcome them. These knocks would be reminders that it was time to stop whatever else he is doing, and to sit down somewhere quiet, by himself or perhaps with close friends. The knocking would not stop until he gave a good hard look at how much he was

missing her, at how deep was his ongoing love for her, and at some of the particular memories he had of her. Of course, what I should have said instead of all that was simple: “Peace be with you.” Fortunately though, he got what I was talking about. I could have added that the first knock by grief and memory is sometimes the hardest, but he was already finding that out for himself.

I’ve shared with some of you in small group settings a poem by Rumi entitled “The Guest House.” I think it captures this dynamic of what happens when we find ourselves having to make room for our grief or our fears or perhaps even for a tender word of peace. Rumi writes:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

For those disciples sitting quietly behind a closed door, when the Risen Christ first appeared to them, it was more than a knock of some unexpected feelings. His visit was that of a living presence. He showed them his wounds. He uttered those gentle words of peace.

Perhaps they wouldn't need to worry about losing their memory of him after all– the way he looked and sounded. For us though, we may never know what Jesus looked like or sounded like. But having survived another Holy Week, we can we can learn to welcome him, nonetheless, and to hear a gentle word spoken to even our most whiplashed of hearts. And, for us too, that first knock of the Risen Christ may well be the hardest, that Easter knock that has the power to barrel us over and leave us scratching our heads wondering what happened. With what have we collided? In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard writes:

*Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely evoke (in church)? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*

Before the waking God draws us out to where we can never return, our Living Christ meets us where we are, behind closed doors, heart-broken, and afraid. On this first Sunday after Easter, Christ greets us in the way he knows we need most – with compassion, mercy and peace. He gives us more than crash helmets, more than signal flares, more even than a good back braces for all the heavy lifting we have still to do. He gives to his followers the only gifts we will need – God's Holy Spirit and the peace of the Risen Christ. If you, like me, are still feeling that whiplash, if you're still cleaning house after that crowd of sorrows trashed the place during Holy Week, my suggestion is to give yourself some time behind a closed door to recover. Receive the Holy Spirit. And hear Christ's words: Peace be with you! Amen.