

Empty Tomb, Locked Room
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/27/25

Following his death on Monday morning, my social media feeds filled up with remembrances of Pope Francis. One post recalled the 2013 conclave that resulted in the future Francis's selection as the next leader of the global Catholic Church. Apparently, during the conclave, the man who could become Pope Francis offered a reflection on the enduring image of Jesus knocking at the door, as in Revelation 3 – "behold! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you."

He noted that the traditional interpretation of this image is that Jesus is knocking at the door of our hearts, waiting to be admitted inside, to be welcomed into our lives. But what if instead, Jesus is knocking at the door of our lives, inviting us to step outside? Maybe instead of calling us to open up to him, Jesus is inviting us to open up to the world. The story goes that it was at this moment that the conclave recognized Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as the right man to lead the church forward.

In today's lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't even bother to knock. He just miraculously appears inside the locked room where the disciples have huddled together out of fear. But just as Pope Francis suggested, Jesus does call them to leave the room. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," Jesus says. He breathes the Holy Spirit on his followers, gives them peace, and commissions them to spread forgiveness. But a week later they are still in that room, stuck inside with the doors shut.

When we read this passage, which we do every year, since it is assigned for the Sunday after Easter in all three years of our cycle of readings, the lectionary – when we read this passage we usually focus on Thomas and his doubt. And that makes sense. Thomas serves as an audience proxy, a character who lets us see ourselves in the story. Thomas isn't there when Jesus makes his first resurrection appearance to the gathered disciples, so he demands proof of this seemingly crazy claim his friends have made, to have seen their Lord returned in the flesh. He demands proof, just as we might, at a remove of 2000 years from the events described. We're all looking for reasons to believe.

And this passage offers us an opportunity to talk about doubt. Somewhere along the line, Thomas got labeled as "doubting" and was generally condemned for it. After all, Jesus says, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The church has tended to interpret that as a judgment of Thomas: the truly blessed ones are the ones who don't need any physical evidence to believe in the resurrection. Get it together, Thomas, you doubter.

And yet, the way John tells it, Jesus comes to the still-huddled disciples a second time expressly for the purpose of letting Thomas see him. And not only that, he offers to let Thomas *touch* him, something he has not offered to anyone else. Jesus seems not only to know that Thomas has questions but to honor those questions by appearing again to provide an answer to them. Jesus wants Thomas in so that Thomas can be sent out with the rest of the disciples to spread the good news of the resurrection.

One commentary on this passage I read suggested that if Thomas is at fault here, that fault lies not in doubting the resurrection, but rather in disbelieving the word of his friends. The commentator argued that "love and trust within the faithful community are the significant expression of the work of Christ in their midst." Followers of Jesus are supposed to trust one another's word about Christ's work in their lives. Followers of Jesus are supposed to love one another in tight-knit, Spirit-filled community. But that reading also misses the importance of questioning what we have received, to both the individual life of faith and to the institution of the church. If we never questioned what the community had passed on to us, where would we be?

I think of the women throughout church history, but especially in the 20th century, who doubted the traditions that had been passed on to them, that only men could be ordained leaders in the church. They started asking questions about what they had received: does the Bible really say that women cannot or should not lead? What about the scores of women who felt called to ordained ministry? What about the scores of women already doing the work of pastoral leadership without being recognized for it?

And when these women asked questions and looked for evidence, what they found were faithful new ways of interpreting the Bible's conversations about leadership, along with mounting historical evidence that women were in fact leaders in the earliest church. With a breath of Holy Spirit fresh air, eventually their questioning led to a change in the rules about who could lead. I wouldn't be in this pulpit today if those brave souls hadn't been willing to question the status quo, hadn't be courageous enough to doubt what they'd received. Questions are healthy. Doubt is productive. In fact we need them if we are going to keep moving forward.

Which brings us back to the other disciples, shut up in their room. John tells us that they had locked the door for fear of the Jews. We're not exactly sure what the disciples were afraid of in that moment. Perhaps they had heard that people were out looking for them. Perhaps they worried they would be punished for their association with the crucified Jesus. Scholars remind us that when the Gospel of John was written, in the late first century CE, there was great hostility between Christ-followers and the rest of the Jewish community, as they tried to work out what their relationship to each other and to the wider world should be. Perhaps the gospel's statement of fear reflects the anxiety of the writer more than it does the anxiety of the actual disciples.

But whatever the reason for their fear, the disciples are inside with the doors locked, rather than outside spreading the good news of Jesus's resurrection. Especially after Jesus' first appearance to them, they should be out sharing God's love – they have a commission, they have the Holy Spirit, they have Christ's peace! But they can't manage to get out the door. Fear is a powerful force. Fear keeps us stuck inside when Jesus is knocking at the door, calling us outside.

In his Easter Day piece, New York Times columnist David French wrote about what it means to live a faith that proclaims resurrection. He writes, "When I talk to Christians who are struggling with their faith, one of the first things I ask them is, 'Were you raised in a fear-the-world church or a love-your-neighbor church?' Most people instantly know what I'm talking about. The culture of the church of fear is unmistakable. You're taught to view the secular world as fundamentally a threat. Secular friends are dangerous. Secular education is perilous. Secular ideas are bankrupt. And you're always taught to prepare for the coming persecution, when 'they' are going to try to destroy the church."

In contrast, French says, "The love-your-neighbor church is fundamentally different. It's so different that it can sometimes feel like a different faith entirely. The distinction begins with the initial posture toward the world – not as a threat to be engaged, but as a community that we should love and serve." Put a different way, French says, "a love-your-neighbor church... embraces a resurrection faith. Its aim is to follow Christ's consistent pattern of moving to the suffering, the alienated and the sick, all to bring life from death." A love-your-neighbor church doesn't just preach resurrection; a love-your-neighbor church brings resurrection to its community, offering life-transforming love, peace, healing and justice to those who need it most.

As far as I can tell, this church has always been a love-your-neighbor church. Our relationship with Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry is a great example of that. In the late 1990's, we connected with a group of other local churches as clergy noticed an increased need for emergency services in Northwest Philadelphia. We collaborated with these partner churches in the creation of the Crisis Ministry, and today we are still pooling our resources to make sure not only that the basic needs of our neighbors are being met, but that folks receive the support they need to plan and realize stable, sustainable futures. We give food, volunteer hours, and about 1% of our church's budget to the Crisis Ministry to realize resurrection in our community.

And. Fear remains as powerful a force as ever. And as long as the Church exists, we will be tempted to retreat to our holy huddles and lock the doors behind us. I don't think we are in any danger of becoming the kind of fear-the-world church that French talks about, a church that labels anything secular as a threat. But I do think it's worth noticing where fear shows up in our lives and in our life together as Christ's church in this place.

Are there certain conversations about how to care for the vulnerable that we're afraid to have because they feel too political? Certain people we're afraid to talk to because we aren't sure how to disagree with grace? Certain truths we're afraid to confront because we would have to acknowledge our own complicity in systems that bring death instead of resurrection life? As the current administration wields fear as a weapon, are we tempted into self-preservation mode, keeping our heads down and our mouths closed?

The good news is that Jesus didn't stay in the tomb. Nor does Jesus leave us in our locked rooms. He is always showing up, breathing the Holy Spirit on us, and calling us to be people of courage – people who are willing to ask the hard questions, people who are willing to confront our fears to find new life, people who are willing to risk our own sense of safety to love our neighbors. People who realize resurrection in the world God so loves. People who hear Jesus knocking, and open up the door to go outside.