**Unopened Doors**

A Meditation on John 20: 19 - 31

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church April 19, 2020

A word about holy humor Sunday. Today we give thanks for the gift of laughter. If you missed the announcements, go back and watch them later for a fuller explanation of Holy Humor Sunday. It is an ancient tradition that claims the power of life and laughter over the power of evil, the ultimate triumph of Easter. We believe that even in the midst of stressful times, we need to laugh, we need to be silly; we need to remember this gift. We believe that we worship a God who welcomes our laughter, and who laughs with us just as much as God weeps with us…

*Loving God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Many of you know my sister, Lib. You have had the pleasure of hearing her preach, and she considers Grace her Alabama church home. Some of you have met my brothers, the eldest, Bill, is a retired history teacher, whose hobbies include guitar, napping, writing, napping, reading, napping, making friends with everyone he meets, napping and walking his dogs along the Maine coastline. The younger of the two, Andy, is just two years older than I. He is an architect and lives outside of D.C. Andy has been inventing things out of random items since before I was born. Bill, or BC as we call him, is on the loud side; he laughs loudly, he sings loudly, he gets very animated when discussing politics or the state of the world. Andy, or AC, is very quiet. So quiet…

Just to review, I am the baby, AC is two years older, then BC who is ten years older and Lib, who is 14 years wiser.

AC was so very quiet, and so very busy. All the time. You can imagine it was, let’s just say, an unusual experience for my sister, growing up as a teenager with two rug rats running around the house. The humiliation of having a date come to the front door, only to have Andy go streaking by, fresh and clean from the bathtub. What is it about kids and dogs that they love to run as soon as they get out of a bath?? You might have hoped it would have been easier for her when she enrolled in college, but unfortunately, she had to live at home, with 14 and 6 year old brothers, and a 4 year old baby sister.

Then there was the magical door experiment. I am guessing AC was around 8 or 9, it was a Saturday. Cartoons were over. It was time to get busy. We lived in a ranch style house, with a long hallway that opened onto the bedrooms and a main bathroom. In the center of the hallway ceiling was the door to the attic, complete with a chain for the pulldown stairs. I have absolutely no idea how AC managed to do this, but I swear to you that he did it. Since you don’t know my brother, imagine Matt Smith, who most of you do know as the creator of the amazing kinetic Pentecost flame installation, and you will have an idea of what my brother is capable of creating.

Somehow, using ropes and pulleys and who knows what he found in our father’s workshop, he connected the doors of the hallway, running the ropes through the chain that hung down from the attic door. It was a masterpiece: if you opened the bathroom door, one of the bedroom doors would shut. If you closed a different bedroom door (there were three on this hallway), another bedroom door would open. It was genius in its design. It was also genius because he didn’t invent it to annoy anyone or cause trouble, he built it for the sheer joy of creating.

Unfortunately, my sister didn’t see it that way. She rushed home at the end of the day and had just enough time to get ready for a date. The state of a typical day in our house was such that multiple ropes hanging from the ceiling didn’t cause her any initial alarm. But then she started trying to get in and out of the bathroom, and in and out of her bedroom, and in and out of our parents’ room to find someone who would do something about her terrible little brother! Which door to close so that the bathroom door would open? How to get out of the bathroom once she was inside? It was… a moment. My mother, beaming with pride over our brother’s design skills, didn’t help my sister’s state of mind…I think I learned some new words that day.

Another story about doors. Fraternity house pranks are legend. BC told stories of the things they would do to someone living on his freshman Vanderbilt dorm to anyone who went home for the weekend. Annoying things, like filling their room with wadded newspapers, floor to ceiling; or lining the room with plastic and somehow turning the room into a fish tank of sorts. But here is a more recent one. This one took place at Mississippi State, and I learned about it from my oldest son. One of their frat house residents went home for the weekend. While the guy was away, his buddies took the door off the hinges, and replaced the opening with drywall. They added a fresh coat of paint, and it was as if the door had never existed. Wanting to catch their friend’s response, they set up a video camera and waited. Returning to the house on Sunday evening, backpack and guitar over his shoulders, he walks down the hall, passing the spot where his door should be. Muscle memory tells him that he should have stopped by now, and so he turns around. He stares at the place where his door should be; he is well aware that there is far too much white space, too much wall between the other doors. His initial reaction is anger; he drops his bags and starts to punch through the wall. As his friends appear, the anger changes to laughter, they help him break through, and the video ends.

A third story about a door. On Easter evening Jesus *appeared* to his disciples. He *appeared* to them, John tells us, even though the door was locked due to their fear. From the sound of things, they had three dead bolts and all the furniture piled up against the door to keep anyone from discovering them. Hidden away, the disciples were on lock down. Though they weren’t staying home to flatten the curve; they *were* staying home because they didn’t want to be next. They did not want to be the next to die like Jesus. While locked down by fear, Jesus came to them. But Thomas wasn’t there.

Where was Thomas? When Lazarus was dying, Thomas was the one who had been bold enough to say that he would follow Jesus to Jerusalem! Knowing death awaited Jesus in Jerusalem, still Thomas said he would go there. Was Thomas the only one who didn’t fear what could happen to his body? Was he out searching for answers? Was he out, hoping to encounter the risen Christ as the women had? I tend to believe that Thomas was out there somewhere, longing to meet Jesus, longing to touch him.

But, maybe it was confusion that kept him away from the others, maybe he was ashamed of his questions. Did he fear being the only one with questions about Jesus’ life, about Jesus’ death, about the possibility of resurrection? Some scholars say that Thomas was one of the first theologians, for he was unafraid to “dance with doubts.” Instead of being ashamed of dancing with our doubts, we can invite them in, and entertain them. Dancing is a beautiful metaphor, isn’t it? So much better than wrestling, which is a competition. When we dance together, we move together, we work out the steps together. We step on each other’s toes a bit, but the hope is that we will achieve something beautiful. The hope is that the dance will go on and on, as we respond to new questions, new wonderings. Where was Thomas? Out dancing with his doubts?

Or perhaps trying to outwalk the grief. We all respond in different ways when grief overwhelms. Some of us need to be alone, others need the company of people with whom they feel safe. Perhaps Thomas just needed to be alone with his grief and confusion.

Into all of those emotions – the fear, the confusion, the doubt, the hope, Jesus appeared. Since Thomas wasn’t there the first time, he would appear again! In both instances, Jesus simply “appears” among them. Not unlike those angel appearances we explored last Sunday. Let’s enjoy this for a moment. Here is Jesus, resurrected, returned from the dead! Jesus, God incarnate, who has reined in his power, his authority for 33ish years. So many times he could have demonstrated the power of God, but he chose when and how to do this. He healed and restored, using the power of God to demonstrate God’s desire for the world to be renewed. He walked on water, he cursed a fig tree, yet more often than not, he left the rules of the physical world alone. But now, now he chooses not to use the door. It’s kind of… funny. It’s kind of fabulous. It’s the kind of thing that makes you say, *“really?”* But maybe Jesus knew they needed “a moment” right then. Maybe he knew they needed him to “appear.” (Would they have even answered a knock on the door? Would Jesus have needed a “secret knock” to be allowed inside??) Some would have gasped in astonishment. Others might have fainted. But I will bet you someone laughed. Laughed with joy. Laughed at the son of God who didn‘t need a stone to be rolled away from a tomb, and didn’t need a key to a locked door so that he could join them around the table.

He did it once, and then, so Thomas wouldn’t be short-changed, he repeated the same miracle. He gave Thomas that sign, and then he gave him more. He took his hand and placed it in his side. He welcomed Thomas’ questions and he welcomed Thomas’ belief. I would guess that Thomas received more joy from Jesus’ appearing among them, than he did from touching his wounds. The wounds were reminders of all the pain the world can inflict, but Jesus’ appearance? That was the reminder that Jesus is God of all the earth, the uncontainable, uncontrollable God of life.

Three stories of doors: an experiment in basic mechanics, a prank on a friend, and a miracle. Each opened, disappearing or unopened door needed a witness. My brother found so much joy in creating, in experimenting, but our family has found so much joy in telling the story, again, and again, and again.

The frat house prank? If the guy who had been pranked had been left alone to punch through his wall, how much fun would that have been? The unifying experience is in the laughter shared. In the repairing together.

The miracle? Jesus could have entered and exited as many rooms as he wanted, just for the sheer fun of it, but he didn’t need to do that. He needed to go where there would be witnesses. He needed to go where someone needed to see something that would make them laugh with uncontrollable joy. He needed to appear in a place, in such a way that tears of grief would be transformed into belly laughs. There must have been laughter in that room that day. You won’t convince me otherwise. The God of life had returned from the dead, the biggest joke of all had been played on death! Let the hills ring with laughter! May our cheeks ache from smiling! God is alive. Alleluia! Amen!

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