
An Antidote to Lockdown

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
The Second Sunday of Easter – Year C**

True confession: I did not make my own sourdough bread during the early stages of the pandemic (I haven't made any during the latter stages, either, but that's beside the point). The great lockdown of Spring 2020 found me engaged in few, if any, self-improvement projects. The junk room in my basement remained junky. I did not take up macrame, train for a half marathon, become vegan, or learn how to fold a fitted sheet. If anything, I regressed, morphing, at least several times a week, into someone who, smack dab in the middle of the day, might hide in my closet for an hour so that I could check out my friends' Instagram stories while scarfing down Doritos or Fruit Roll-Ups. Because of this—because of all my pandemic induced inertia, anxiety, and sneaky snacking—because of this, I approach today's reading from the Gospel of John with no small amount of relief. For here in today's gospel we have the story of Jesus' disciples in their own agonizing lockdown—a lockdown with which they also don't seem to be coping particularly well.

Picture the scene: The sun has set on the Day of Resurrection. Rumor is, the tomb was empty when the women went to check on it. Mary Magdalene even spoke with the Risen Christ herself. Jesus' followers, however, aren't out in the streets celebrating any of this. Maybe it's because the smell of blood and the sound of the jeering crowd are still too fresh for them to get their hopes up. Or perhaps it's the threat of being hauled off before a tribunal themselves and found guilty by association that has them unnerved. Whatever the case, the disciples are in hiding. They are cowering in that same room where just a few days ago they feasted and spoke of neighbor love. Now they have locked the doors to keep the neighbors out as they swallow their own bitter tears. After several years spent roaming Galilee and ministering to the masses, the disciples have turned inward and are sheltering in place. They have walled themselves off from the outside world and are staying with their own kind.

It's a despondent sort of a night, we can assume—a night of terror and tribalism, a night of rancor and recrimination. An improbable night for resurrection. And yet this is when it happens. This is when it happens. This is where it happens, too. In a dark, despairing place, with people hiding behind thick walls and locked doors. In a place of anxiety and suspicion, of dismay and regret, of hopelessness and heartache.

This is the setting, John's gospel tells us, where most of the disciples catch their first glimpse of the risen Christ. The setting in which Jesus penetrates all the barriers his friends have put up and says, "Peace be with you." Peace be with you. Not, "What the heck are you guys doing crouched underneath that table? Why do your faces look like you've seen a ghost?" Not this, but simply, "Peace be with you." The message here is clear: No doubt, no grief, no failure of nerve can stand between Jesus and his followers. No wall, no matter how thick or how high, can separate them from their resurrected Lord. Which strikes me as incredibly Good News for you and me on this Second Sunday of Easter. Things today, after all, aren't quite like they were last week. The pews aren't as full, the flowers not quite so profuse, and our hearts perhaps not as joyful. Some of us have come here this morning carrying heavy loads due to sickness, grief, or depression. Some of us have arrived feeling anxious or afraid, and we may leave feeling that way, too. But that's all right. That's all right. Because, you see, what this morning's gospel makes absolutely clear is that resurrection does not depend on us. Resurrection does not depend on us. Rather, resurrection is the power of God at work in the most locked up, walled off places of our lives. The places where we have all but abandoned hope. The places where fear, prejudice, and suspicion have hemmed us in. Those places where we are certain we are trapped.

Already Jesus is at work in these places, though we may not yet perceive him. Already he is there working to bring forth from the wreckage of our world things more wonderful than we can ask or imagine. Striving to make

new that which has grown old, breathing life into that which has been left for dead. This is one of the most powerful takeaways from today's gospel lesson, I think: that resurrection happens and without any help from us. That, in the words of Moses to the ancient Hebrews, "The Lord will fight for you and you have only to be still."

This isn't to say, of course, that we can't join the risen Christ in his great mission of redemption and release. Far from it. Just as Jesus presents himself to his fearful, bedraggled disciples and then commissions them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." "As the Father sends me, so I send you"—just as Jesus commissions his first disciples, so he also commissions us. Having been reborn in him, we can now assist in loosening the bonds that separate us from one another and from the whole of God's creation.

About a year ago, I read a story in the New York Times about a Facebook group in Hong Kong. This group's aim was to help airline passengers arriving from other parts of the world cope with being locked down in quarantine. One of their efforts involved a young Irish girl who tested positive for COVID-19 on her 8th birthday and was immediately whisked away from the airport—alone—into isolation at a local hospital. Her parents were frantic to be with her, but they themselves were in quarantine and not allowed to step foot out of the small hotel room where they'd been sequestered. So this FB group went into action, delivering games and toys, hot meals, and daily messages of support to the girl. For two weeks, they managed to help bridge the gap between a lonely child and her anxious family. They found a way to open up that which had appeared firmly closed.^[1]

I can hardly think of a better mission for us as Christians than to do work such as this—the work of unlocking doors and tearing down walls. You know, the Greek word *ecclesia*, which we have come to translate in English as "church," shares its roots with a term from Greek civil society that meant, quite literally, "the not closed space." The not closed space. Isn't that great? The Church—that gathering of Jesus followers across time and throughout the world—the Church is meant to be a place where barriers of fear, prejudice, enmity, and isolation are routinely breached. A place where doors are flung wide open so that strangers can come in. A place that serves as an antidote to all the lockdowns, both literal and figurative, that are so prevalent in our broken and troubled world.

How, I wonder, might our beloved Cathedral might become more of a "not closed space?" Already, there is so much here that is open, so much that bridges and unites. The farmers market that sets up in our parking lot each Saturday is a particularly fine example of this. It helps transcend barriers between city dwellers and whole, fresh foods, between farmers and populations large enough to help support their life's work. It introduces many people to the Episcopal Church for the first time. It has connected me with more than one loaf of sourdough bread! It's a fantastic ministry.

There is always more, though, that we can do and more that we can be. And so, on this Second Sunday of Easter, as we give thanks for the One whose redeeming love breaks through our fear, our prejudice, and our doubt, embracing us with words of peace, we pray to become ever more faithful partners in this ministry of reconciliation:

O God, you have made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.^[2]

^[1] "Easing the Pain of the Pandemic with the Kindness of Strangers," by Jennifer Jett. NYT, June 3, 2021

^[2] Prayer for the Human Family, Book of Common Prayer, page 815.