

YOU CAN'T LOCK HIM OUT!

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John 20:19-31

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Let's go back in time to when the Roman Emperor, Hadrian, was in power. While the empire was at its height, things were not always going well. On its most northern outpost so-called barbarians, from what is now modern day Scotland, were attacking Roman interests. These people were threatening the stability of a vast empire. So Hadrian decided to build a wall. Stretching 120 kilometers from the banks of the River Tyne near the North Sea to Solway Firth on the Irish Sea, Hadrian's Wall protected the northern limits of the Roman Empire.

Likewise, the ancient Ming Dynasty in China faced a problem. Marauding tribes from central Asia were causing trouble. So, like the ancient Romans, a wall was built. It extended right across the top of China for thousands of kilometers in what is considered to be one of the greatest construction feats in history.

Walls are an effective way of protecting interests and keeping people out. In 1961 the German Democratic Republic built a wall that was to stand for just 28 years. Known as the Berlin Wall, its purpose, the Communists claimed, was to protect the population from those who were conspiring to prevent the building of a socialist state in East Germany.

Meanwhile, back in 1953 some 250 kilometers of barbed wire was laid across the Korean peninsula separating north and south. Covering an area known as the Demilitarized Zone, this fence prevents Western interests penetrating the north while keeping North Korea's people effectively imprisoned.

Walls still keep people out today. In September 2000, during the Second Intifada, the Israeli government started building a wall to prevent Palestinians entering Israel. On its completion, the wall will extend some 708 kilometers along the region known as the West Bank. Its construction is based on the premise that it will prevent terror attacks. However the wall is known to isolate communities, prevent freedom of movement and effectively establish a system akin to an apartheid state.

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And now there is talk of another wall as US President, Donald Trump, proposes to create a massive barrier designed to stop the flow of so-called illegal migrants across the border with Mexico. Described by the president himself as the “great wall”, this construction will extend nearly 800 kilometers and will be built at a cost of around 18 billion dollars.

Walls protect interests. They keep people out. Yet, as we know from history, walls ultimately come down, they are finally breached or are eventually rendered ineffective. I haven't been to Berlin but I have been to the north of England and seen the fragments of Hadrian's Wall. I have walked a section of the Great Wall of China, I have been behind the wall that encloses North Korea and I have travelled through the wall that separates Israel with the West Bank.

All these walls are a testimony to humankind's need to protect, to subdue and to exclude.

This morning, on the first Sunday after Easter, we encounter another kind of wall. John's Gospel tells us that on the day of Jesus' resurrection the disciples were gathered behind locked doors. We are told by John they were in “fear of the Jews”.

Here the disciples of Jesus, a group of people who had witnessed their Lord betrayed, arrested, tortured and then crucified, seek to isolate themselves from the chaos around them. They take measures to protect themselves from those who threaten to harm them.

And what the disciples are doing, in locking those doors, is perfectly consistent with what people have done, and continue to do nowadays. Wouldn't we do just the same?

But was it simply a fear of the Jews that caused the disciples to lock those doors? Was it simply a means of protecting themselves from hostile forces that made them secure the entry of their safe house?

Or was it - that the news Jesus had been raised from the dead – was just too contentious, too astonishing, too bizarre for them?

I suggest what we witness here is not just a case of simply wanting protect one's life by keeping others out. Sure, the crowds out there were hostile. They had called for blood and had easily convinced the authorities that crucifying Jesus was the right thing to do. It was, after-all, Passover, and Jesus was seen as a pretender, an imposter whose claims effectively confronted and undermined the legitimacy of those in power.

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But for those frightened, terrified disciples there was more. Mary Magdalene had been to the tomb earlier in the morning. Here she was confronted with an open grave, not the kind of thing one expects when visiting the burial site of recently deceased friend!

And then Mary bumps into who she thinks is the gardener only to discover, to her absolute amazement, that it is Jesus, risen from the dead!

Now, Mary shares her stunning encounter with the disciples. John tells us this in chapter 20, verse 18. But what is the disciple's response? It's one of fear. They isolate themselves. They run and hide behind closed doors!

Friends, it appears as though the truth Mary shares is too pungent, too confronting, too real for the disciples to both comprehend and share. It's the kind of truth that unsettles, it's the kind of truth that throws one off balance and places one in a most awkward situation.

Indeed, for the disciples, it may have been far better if the whole thing had just simply gone away. Jesus was dead and that was the end of it.

But Mary's testimony opens up a new horizon. Mary's witness to the risen Christ declares new possibilities. The fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead puts a whole new perspective on things. And the disciples are not impressed. They retreat. They hide. They try to shut the very truth of the situation out of their lives.

And what happens? Jesus stands among them. The locked doors, all the efforts by the disciples to retreat and hide, do not prevent Jesus from being present with them.

The locked doors may have kept the Jews out. But they couldn't lock Jesus out. Nothing could stop Jesus being present to his disciples. And here Jesus' risen presence actually stuns and excites the disciples. John's Gospel tells us that they, upon seeing their risen Lord, rejoice!



Friends, walls are built to protect one's interests and to keep people out. But they are also created to hide oneself from the truth. And here it may be the case of denying the facts of one's situation. It may be a refusal to face up to the realities of life. Or may be a retreat from the very things that need to be addressed and dealt with.

Moreover, the walls we build may be a convenient way of actually shutting Christ out by subduing our faith, domesticating God and trivializing commitments to Christian community. Locking doors around us may be a means rationalizing issues of faith by forcing them into the agendas of our day

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On this second Sunday of Easter we are challenged to meet face-to-face with the risen Christ and to understand that things are not over. Death does not have the last word.

For you see, Jesus, risen from the dead, opens a whole new chapter, a chapter that calls on each and every one of us to face the realities of life with a new purpose, a new honesty and a new vision.

Christian life is not about retreating. Christian life is not about hiding or looking the other way. Rather, the risen Christ calls on us to declare and to live out what God has done in raising him from the dead.

This is a call on each one of us to openly bear witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ and to confidently share that Good News with others.

We humans are very good at building walls. But, friends, the business of wall building is not part of our Lord's agenda. We humans want to protect ourselves, retreat and exclude all those things that make life uncomfortable. But this is not what God call us to do.

What's vitally significant here is that all the attempts by the disciples to isolate themselves, build barriers or retreat couldn't keep Jesus at bay. He came to them and was present to them behind locked doors despite all their feeble efforts!

And you see, this is true for us today. Every effort we make to look the other way, every effort we make to retreat, minimize, tame or subdue our proclamation of the Good News will be challenged by the awesome presence of the One who cannot be contained by death. Every effort we make to build walls or to walk away from our faith will be confronted by the One who overcame evil and who offers new life to all.

So, my friends, in these days following Easter - come out of hiding, acknowledge the awesomeness and joy of what has happened and wear your identity as a follower of Jesus with openness, courage and with enthusiasm.

What are the walls you need to demolish? Which doors do you need to unlock? When, where and how will you proclaim Jesus is Lord?

Jesus is our hope. Jesus is our future. Jesus is the hope and the future for all humankind.

Such a wonderful, generous, life-enhancing truth must never be hidden, it must never be subdued or locked away!

Amen.

