



Behind Locked Doors

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 20:19-23

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What is striking about today's story is that Jesus' disciples huddle behind locked doors. It is so descriptive of their mood. They are afraid for their lives.



I thought of a story from three years ago of a man who jumped the fence at the White House. He sprinted seventy yards across the front lawn and

entered the White House through an unlocked door. He made it through the ceremonial East Room until his apprehension by Secret Service agents in the Green Room. He was only a stairwell away from the president's residence. Despite elaborate high tech security, someone left the front door of the White House unlocked.

Congress called the Director of the Secret Service on the carpet for this oversight. She reassured Congress that her agency would lock the White House in the future.

John employs irony to good effect in his gospel. The irony of Jesus' disciples meeting behind closed doors is a striking contrast to Jesus passing through these same fortifications. Locked doors pose no obstacle for the risen Jesus. There are no walls thick enough or locks strong enough to keep out the resurrected One.

Last week, Easter Sunday, we rehearsed the empty tomb story in John 20. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, only to find the stone from its entrance rolled away. She runs to tell Peter and John who hustle to the tomb to verify Mary's report. Peter and John leave but Mary lingers at the tomb.

There, Mary has the most remarkable encounter with the risen Jesus.

It is now the evening of the same day. We read, “The disciples were together with doors locked for fear of the Jews” (20:19). Circle this word fear. Fear causes them to barricade the door. Sometimes, like these disciples, we have more faith in our fears than faith to overcome fear.

They fear “the Jews.” Every time you see the term “Jew” in John’s gospel, it’s a code word for religious leaders. They fear reprisal from these same religious leaders who conspired to arrange for Jesus’ death.

The resurrected Jesus passes right through these locked doors. He offers them three gifts— his *peace*, his *purpose* and his *power*. My

3-point sermon of Jesus’ gifts:

1. **P**ace
2. **P**urpose
3. **P**ower

preaching professor from seminary would have loved this sermon. He was a stickler for his students preaching 3-point sermons. Not only that, but he loved alliteration. He would grade us higher if each point in our sermon began with the same letter. Today, I’ve got it all going on—a 3-point sermon with each section beginning the with the letter “P.”

First word, *peace*. Jesus suddenly materializes to announce, “*Peace* be with you” (20:19). He repeats this same “*peace* with you” greeting twice in subsequent verses (20:23, 26). The Hebrew word for peace, *Shalom* expresses well-being and harmony.

Notice, Jesus does not say anything about what he has just endured. He does not reference his arrest and trial leading to his crucifixion. He does not breathe a word about his disciples' defections. He could have called them on it. Where were you in my time of need? None of that. He speaks peace to disciples locked up in fear.



Jesus' Gift of Purpose

Second word, *purpose*. When Jesus says a second time, “Peace be with you,” he follows it with this summons, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21).

Jesus often characterizes himself as the “sent one of God” in the gospels. In Jesus’ prayer following his farewell discourse, he identifies himself in prayer as the sent one of God no fewer than five times (17:3, 8, 18, 21 and 23). One verse in his John 17 prayer is nearly verbatim to his John 20 sending, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (17:18).

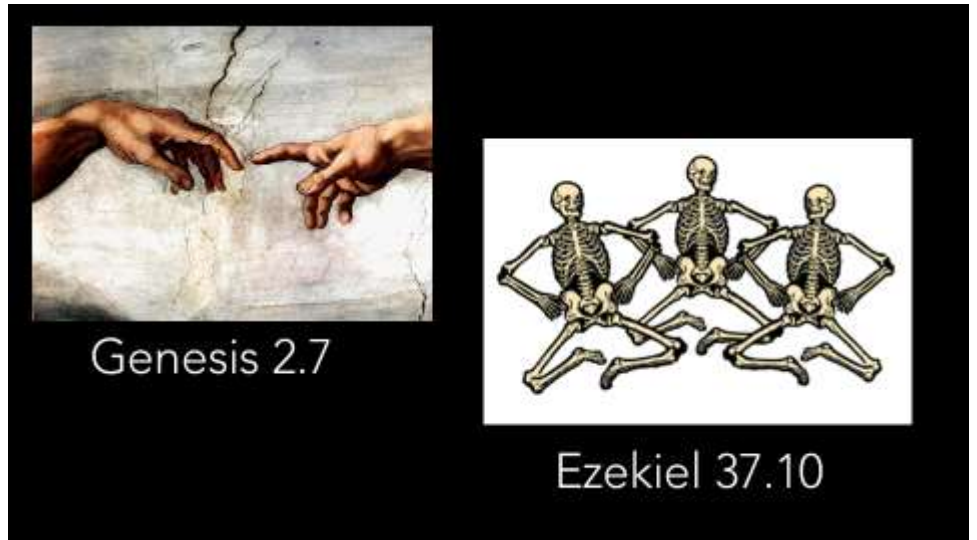
Jesus commissions his disciples to carry out his mission. We exist as a church to carry out Jesus’ ministry. We do not subsist as a religious club or social service center. We exist to do Jesus’ work in the world. Period!

Third word, *power*. Jesus accompanies his gift of purpose with the gift of his *power*. We do not do Jesus’ work any way we want. We do Jesus’ mission with his *power* and Spirit. John reports, in verse 22, “Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

There are two other places in Scripture where God breathes and people come to life. The first instance occurs in Genesis when “The Lord God formed Adam from the dust

of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and he became a living being” (2:7).

The second instance of breathing occurs in the book of Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel comes upon a valley of dry bones. God



instructs Ezekiel to preach to this congregation of dry bones. We pick up the action in Ezekiel 37: “So, I preached as God commanded me and breath entered them. They came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army” (37:10).

There you have it! Jesus’ gifts of *peace*, *purpose* and *power*. How gracious of Jesus to bestow these three gifts on his unsuspecting disciples.

I can think of no better way to segue into Ignite Sunday. We are embarking on a major capital campaign to further Christ’s mission here. Our gifts of time and money are tangible ways for us to express our gratitude for Jesus’ *peace*, *purpose* and *power*.

Why Ignite? Let me walk you back to our renewal emphasis last year. God wants to renew us. Lord knows we need it! Jesus wants his church to catch fire to love and serve the world that he came to save.

I spoke primarily to guests and newcomers on Easter Sunday. I directed my Easter message to anyone who was not quite sure what to make of Easter. Today, I want to flip it

and speak primarily to our regulars. Those guests among us can sit back and listen to what we consider important.

We have identified three mission priorities through this Ignite Initiative as mentioned in the video. First, debt. Building debt has been weighing us down for the past dozen years. Maybe, we should have knocked this debt out when we finished construction in 2005. Frankly, we were tired after four successive capital campaigns. Given that we have two bank loans due for refinancing later this year, it is time for us to eliminate this debt and redirect this money to other ministry priorities.

Second, this building. We call this space “our new sanctuary,” when, in fact it is nearly 20 years old. Church buildings are simply tools for ministry. We do not build pretty buildings for ourselves. We build them to reach more people for Jesus Christ. It is time for us to retool these buildings for future ministry.



Third, an outreach project. We have been talking and praying about a major outreach project for years now. We have been an official

business partner with Cunningham Park Elementary School for the past seven years, a rarity for a church. We have identified 50 families within the school that have inadequate resources to feed their children. Hungry children in our community is unacceptable to us. We have taken up this mission with other churches to meet this material need. Thirty of you are already serving as mentors and tutors to

students in the same school. Recent evangelistic efforts in the Vienna Park community have already identified people who want to follow Christ and worship in their first language. God is calling us to take this ministry to the next level. The way forward is not entirely clear to us. Initially, we imagined a brick-and-mortar presence in the community, but now we are thinking that we should deploy a paid director and hundreds of volunteers to build relationships with people in the community to determine a way forward. This much is clear: we take Jesus' mandate seriously to preach the gospel, feed the poor and extend hospitality to strangers.

Five million dollars is an ambitious goal. We went first to our leaders for help. Thus far, we have heard from 97 individuals and families who have pledged 2,633,749 million dollars toward this 5 million dollar goal. All 18 elders on Session have pledged to this effort. If everyone answers the call, we can hit our target, maybe even exceed it.

Chris and I are investing in this Ignite Initiative. Apart from the money we invested in raising children, giving to this church is the best money we have ever spent.



Right now, I am obsessed with a home project of converting old VHS tapes to DVD. I love watching these home videos. They make Chris and me laugh and bring old memories to life again. It's also sobering, since many family members in these videos are now deceased. We want to

invest in something that will outlast our lives, just as people did for us.

Some of you are in a position to pledge a major gift to this effort. Others of you can manage a more modest gift. Give what you can. We talk about “Unequal gifts, equal sacrifice” here. We do not give the same gift but we exercise similar levels of sacrifice.

You may be clear about a pledge you want to make to this campaign. If you need more time, take it. If you have questions, ask them. You have until June 4 to determine your participation in this Ignite Initiative. You can communicate with us by going to our website at viennapres.org/ignite or complete a pledge card. Join us in praying, “Lord, what level of giving is appropriate to express my gratitude?”

I do not believe in the hard-sell when asking for money. The only pressure appropriate for a church is from a vertical direction—from God to us. Our goal is simply to lay out the need and trust the results to God and God’s people.

With 2.6+ million pledged to this effort, we are right where we want to be. This is not a pipedream. We will do this. God is calling us to meet this challenge.

Jesus gives us gifts of his *peace*, *purpose* and *power*. *Peace* to combat fear, *Purpose* to counteract apathy. *Power* to defeat weakness. We cannot pay it back but we can pay it forward.

Peace, Power, and Purpose

Pace to overcome fear

Purpose to counteract apathy

Power to defeat weakness