

March 30, 2008 “Ceiling Unlimited” Easter 2/John 20:19-31

Sometimes I watch the Weather Channel. As part of the weather for the day they include information like wind-chill, dew point, ceiling, visibility.

I like the image when it says – “ceiling unlimited” – no clouds – “above us only sky”....as far as you can see, unlimited.

The ceiling is unlimited. This is the good news that God declares to the world in raising Jesus. Not even death can defeat God’s purposes. Christ is risen. Jesus lives. Hallelujah. The ceiling is unlimited.

This is certainly not how the disciples felt on that first Easter evening.

They were locked in a room out of fear. No hope. Things had closed in on them. Bound by their fears they couldn’t see anything ahead of them.

Thick fog had rolled in.

Fear enveloped them.

Locked in their own tomb out of fear.

Their Saviour had been crucified, they had betrayed him, and now the body of their Lord was missing. Some of the political and religious establishment may have wanted to find the disciples and eliminate them so that this irritating group of blasphemers might disappear once and for all.

Kill the leader and a few of the key disciples and surely this movement would quickly disappear. “Living in a hostile environment they had withdrawn from public life in order to keep themselves safe.” And they were afraid.

Like a cat that goes away to hide when it is sick and dying, we understand those first disciples running and hiding, pulling the blinds down, not answering the door, hoping that miraculously all of this will just go away.

The fear factor can easily get the upper hand in our lives. Bound by our fears – possibilities, options, disappear; hope evaporates; joy is a stranger; regrets, betrayals, mistakes, shrink our view; danger is all around.

Our path is strewn with land mines so we lock ourselves in and throw away the key.

Have you ever decided to go into hiding? Close the door, lock the door, put the bolt on the door, put the chain on the door, nail a few 2 X 4’s across the door just in case, and then move some furniture against the door. Good!

Nobody will be able to get in and find me now! I may be locked in but at least this way I can keep everyone else out!

“It is quite natural when we have suffered some trauma in life, when we have been violated by some injustice in life, to lock ourself away.”
Gloom, doom, tombs, cast their long shadows. Our losses squeeze out our faith, hope and love.

We can understand why the disciples are locked away.
Saviour dead. Future bleak. Possibilities few. Ceiling – Very Limited.
View – Negligiable.

As a church community the fear factor can do a number on us.
I ministered with the people at Picton United Church for 10 years.
Beautiful sanctuary, seats 1200 people, lots of history, memories of a large congregation, Sunday School, choirs, band. The good old days.
Gone forever. Losses were large.
Many of the rooms where we met were known by names like “the old Board room”, “the old Sunday School Room”, “The old church office”. Our past defined our present. It was hard to see beyond our fears and losses to a hope-filled future.

The Easter story is a message of “salvation – which literally means ‘to provide open space for the oppressed.’”
Hans Reudi Weber uses the example of black spirituals from the 19th century to help us recognize the Easter power. He quotes from the song “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus. Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down, sometimes I’m almost to the ground” This hymn ends with a jubilant “glory hallelujah”. Weber says – “Isn’t it strange that a song which speaks about the troubles here below ends with the shout – “glory hallelujah”. Those who first sang the song did indeed know trouble all around. They were slaves in the Southern United States. To be beaten up, even to hang on a tree, was nothing extraordinary for them. Why then shouts of joy and thanks in the midst of suffering?
Can joy come out of pain?
Can life arise from death?
Yes it can!
This is the strange truth of resurrection which we celebrate today.”

Back to those first disciples locked away in fear. Ain't nobody gonna find us here! Ain't nobody gonna be able to break in here!
Thankfully it is not true. Thankfully the risen Christ is able to find the disciples in their fear; break through their barricades and offer them "peace".
To fear, Jesus offers peace.
"Jesus brings peace to a frightened community which thinks it has been abandoned."
"Peace is the first gift the risen Christ offers to his disciples."

Can we hear Jesus saying "peace" to us?

Can we hear Jesus saying –
"Come, open the door of your day outward.
Come outside with God.
Enjoy the world God is making.
Come, open the door of your true selves to God.
Be at home with God just as you are.
Come, open the door of your senses to God's world.
Know God's welcoming embrace.
Come, open the door of your hearts.
Be moved by the Spirit to share with God and others." Bev Williams

Thank God that it's not up to us; that the risen Christ breaks into our lives where we are shut up in fear and offers us peace.

To frightened disciples locked away Jesus enters with peace, embodying God's power even over death and declaring that they have been redeemed, saved, called, chosen. Their ceiling is unlimited. Jesus is alive, come out of your tomb and live in Christ's peace, Christ's blessing, Christ's spirit.

The story now turns from the wonder of the living Lord to the mission of the church. "As the Father has sent me so I send you, and he breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit."

Literally brought back to life by the risen Lord the disciples are called to leave the tomb and live the good news, witnessing in their words and deeds to Jesus' power to bring abundant life.

The church is sent as Jesus is sent.

Called, chosen, empowered, blessed, gifted, sent. Go with the power of the Holy Spirit to be my hands and feet. Live the life that I have embodied, Jesus says to his followers.

“The church is not permitted to wallow in its fear or resourcelessness, nor to luxuriate in its risen Christ. It is promptly dispatched in mission.”

“Come out of your upper room of fear and live where the nails are, where the pain is, don’t nurse your suffering behind closed doors, bring your pain into the streets and bring whatever pain you can muster to one another. Strange in a way that the greeting of peace is followed by showing the disciples his hands and feet. The peace we bring and receive comes through suffering and death, it enters the dark painful places of life believing that the dark painful places don’t have the final word, life does.”

The good news for the first disciples and for us is that we who are sent are not only under the rule of Christ who is risen, we are visited by the Holy Spirit who guides, guards and instructs.

The church, we who follow Christ, do not possess a constantly visible Jesus, but we are given a gift of power, the Holy Spirit, that breathes life into us and into the world.

We are God’s people. We have Christ’s words of peace to sustain us, the Holy Spirit breathed into us.

Fear be gone! Ceiling unlimited!

Chris is risen!

Thanks be to God!