A pastor once said that the Sunday after Easter can feel much like arriving to a party once it’s already over. I mean, on Easter Sunday the sanctuary was packed with flowers and bright colored hats, and ties and dresses. You all soared with songs of “Hallelujah” and laughter and praise filled the air. So, why come to church today, the week after, when the good news has already been proclaimed, the season finale already aired, the story finished?

...Or maybe we are not too late at all
Maybe Easter is more like the heartbeat of our faith,
the fuel that revs our engines.
It’s what keeps us coming us back week after week -
to hear these familiar sacred stories anew

~

Today, we enter into a particular story that we hear read nearly every year on the Sunday following Easter:
Jesus’ distraught disciples – men and women – are shaking in fear inside a cramped room, while their risen savior, their rabbi, their Lord, is locked out. Sound familiar?
It is one of the most transcendent, yet brutally realistic encounters in our Holy Bible.

~

What does it feel like to be locked out?
What motivates us to lock the door tight?
To put more and more locks on?

I know that we have all felt locked out at various times in our lives.
Maybe it was a partner pushing you away,
a job opportunity lost,
an eviction notice on your doorstep,
a nurse announcing that visiting hours are over
a failed exam sitting on your desk
a vital cause that no one will get behind
a son or daughter asking not to be bothered any more
And sometimes we are locked out for the most unsettling reasons. Locked out because of skin color or the thickness of one’s accent. Locked out because of unpaid debt or a criminal past. Locked out because of disability. Locked out because of gender. Locked out because of sexual orientation. Locked out because of the faith you proclaim. To be locked out can be painful and even dangerous; and it can pierce your heart, when the ones whom you love most are the ones who have now bolted the door shut.

But we know that we have locked the door too. And time and time again, we do this because we are motivated by the very same emotion the disciples felt that evening – fear.

We are frightened by so many things these days: we see it on the news, in our political discussions and decisions, we feel it in our personal lives, and here in our city. But in John’s gospel, fear seemed to be directed at one group in particular: “the Jews.”

“The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.”

What is this all about? Weren’t the disciples Jewish? Wasn’t John Jewish? Wasn’t Jesus himself Jewish?

Our first reaction to a line like this may be to ignore it all together. We read and hear this passage every year. Best not worry about its implications. Let’s just close the door on it, if you will, and keep reading along... hoping no one will notice...

We can also go ahead and replace it with a more “acceptable” translation Or take out a pair of scissors and be rid of it once and for all. It’s easier that way. We don’t have to deal with it.

Besides, we don’t like bothering with lines of text that muddy our good news; texts that have been misused to ostracize or even persecute certain groups of people. But we know deep inside that if we hide from or ignore the tough stuff in our Bible, we are what theologian, Amy Jill Levine calls, “erasing memories of both the victims of those texts and those who have struggled against them.”

~
In the PBS show, “Finding Our Roots” genealogist Henry Louis Gates Jr. invites celebrities to come trace their family lineage. A few years ago, actor, Ben Affleck agreed to come on the show, but he wasn’t ready for what was uncovered. On camera, he learned that his great-great-great grandfather owned, bought and sold slaves. Embarrassed by this finding, Affleck coerced PBS to not air this piece of his history, saying, “The very thought of this leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I don’t want to be that vulnerable and potentially embarrass my family.”

Although PBS finally agreed to not share this part, eventually it came out anyway and Affleck received criticism for hiding the truth about his family’s past. In his public apology he said he deserves neither blame nor credit for his ancestors. Either way, he could no longer ignore the truth about his family – he had to wrestle with the implications of this – head on.

Each of our families have had checkered pasts. The same is true for our family of faith. We too have to fearlessly wrestle- head on - with the stuff in our sacred Bible that doesn’t feel like good news.

~

*Why did John speak of the Jews as a separate group altogether?*

The disciples, the Gospel writer, and Jesus himself took pride in their Judaism. The word Christian didn’t even exist then.

*Even stranger, why did John say that they were afraid of “the Jews”?* The Jewish people were treated as second-class citizens at that time. They had virtually no power at all. Theologian, Mary Boys writes that even if a crowd of Jewish locals were present the day Jesus was sentenced to the cross, they would have never had the authority to demand his crucifixion (or anyone else’s for that matter). It seems more likely that the disciples here – are fearful of the Roman authorities or the High Priests – not the Jewish community as a whole.

*Then why would John, a proud Jew, write this?*

Well, the Gospel of John was not written down until nearly sixty years after Jesus’ death. And although many Jesus followers considered themselves to be Jewish at the time, tensions within the Jewish community were at an all-time high. Christ followers began to feel unwelcome in their local synagogues. It was an agonizing split in their family of faith. There was anger and there was pain. For this reason, it was likely that John wanted to make a distinction between Jews and those who followed Jesus.

But surely John could have never imagined the dangerous impact this choice would have on history. By ‘othering’ “the Jews,” the door was suddenly slammed shut on Jesus’s proud Jewish faith, and it was opened to two millennia of horrific scapegoating and violent persecution of the Jewish people. They would be unfairly marked as conspirators, as inferior, and yes, even as Christ killers.
So should we eliminate the words “the Jews” from public reading of the gospels as some have done? The thing is we can’t ignore our past, and so author, Mary Gordon says that when we read these words, we must do so with a broken heart.

What I do know - is that fear – in any time and place – always finds a host. In John’s lifetime it was “the Jews”, and for each of us it may be something else. It seems that these days for some it’s: Fear of Evangelicals - Fear of Progressives - Fear of big government - Fear of immigrants - Fear of Muslims - Fear of Latinos - Fear of people with light skin - Fear of people with dark skin Fear of Wall Street bankers - Fear of transgender individuals- Fear of authority - Fear of the needy - Fear that nothing will change - Fear that change is coming too fast - Fear, in all its shades and stripes, always finds some cause, some group, somebody

Whatever it is, whoever it is, fear of “it” is what drives us again and again to swing the door closed on our neighbors, on our loved ones, on our sisters and brothers of the world – all made in the sweet image of God.

Fear swallows our trust, paralyzes our faith, erodes our imagination. It hides us away in the corner. It keeps us from creating spaces of love, healing, justice and redemption. And most of all, it leaves Jesus Christ locked out all over again. For how can we truly trust in the good news that the risen Lord brings, if we are too fearful to open the door?

Our country was shaken to its core when the Ebola crisis hit home last year, but this fear can’t even compare to the AIDS crisis of 1980’s.

In 1983, Reverend Valerie Bridgman knocked on the hospital door of a 22 year old man named Jacob who had been battling AIDS for some time. As Valerie prepared to enter the room, a nurse abruptly stopped her, urging her not to go in, but Valerie
insisted on doing so. The nurse then said that for her own safety, Valerie should put on a mask and gloves and not get too close to the patient for fear that she might somehow catch the virus.

But as soon as the nurse turned around, Valerie instinctually (and maybe even foolishly) headed in without the gear. She saw Jacob on the bed – frail and weeping. As she got closer, she asked, “Can I sit down?” He said yes. But instead of sitting on the chair, on the other side of the room, Valerie sat at the foot of his bed.

Jacob buried his face in his hands. Then Valerie asked, “Can I give you a hug?” The young man froze and slowly nodded. As she reached her arms around him, he whispered,

“You are the first person - who’s not a doctor – who has touched me in three years.”

~

The only way we can really face our fear is through radical trust. To trust that no matter what - Jesus will always find a way in.

Scripture says: “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

The text does not tell us that Jesus finds the key to the front door. He doesn't pick at the lock or Double O 7 kick it down. Jesus somehow wondrously finds a way in - as Jesus always does.

And standing before his trembling friends, Jesus says “Peace be with you.” This peace is more than a gentle “Shalom” greeting. This peace is unexpected, transformative and redemptive. It enables discipleship - the chance to live beyond ordinary fears, unhinge every door.

This peace leads us into apostleship, where we are able to trust that the power of the good news overcomes every present fear, and where we can engage in tikkun olam – healing and repairing our broken world.

~

We know this story. We read it nearly every year at the exact same time, and yet every year we need to hear it all over again, and absorb it anew.
We need to be reminded that even if we try our best to lock the door tight, it’s no good. Our God is relentless.
As much we try to hide, Jesus keeps coming: ignoring locked doors, locked minds, locked hearts.
He comes to the Emmaus road, he appears at the sea shore, he offers Thomas whatever he needs to believe.
Jesus shows up again and again bringing the peace and hope of Easter, and calling us to trust and to believe - that we can do the same.

As theologian, Howard Thurman puts it, “We must keep open the door of our hearts.” It matters not how many doors are closed against you. To love is to make of one’s heart a swinging door.”

Friends, Easter promises that despite our most pervasive fears, God changes every single locked door into a swinging door.

To follow Jesus means to open our hearts, our minds, our whole selves wide, and live with doors swinging open.

---

i Jill Levine, Amy. *Holy Week and The Hatred of the Jews: Avoiding Anti-Judaism at Easter.* [http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/04/02/4210266.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/04/02/4210266.htm)


