

Locked Doors & Empty Chairs

John 20:19-31

April 19, 2009

(THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT)

The Lord be with you. **(And also with you!)** It makes a difference, you know, when you remember he's there -- that the Lord is with you. Everything begins to look different, I think. As if a candle's been lit in a dark corner somewhere. And one of the things that helps me remember that the Lord is with us (and for us) is music. So let's do that. Let's sing number 328 and remember again that Jesus is here...in this very place.

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;

I can feel his mighty power and his grace.

I can hear the brush of angels' wings,

I see glory on each face;

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Since the first time my mother heard that (back in the seventies) it's been one of her favorites. Because there

was a time in her life when she felt all alone. As if she was stranded somewhere and no one even knew she was missing. It was the year she turned forty. I was fourteen and my mother was forty. Over the hill. One foot on a banana peel and the other on ... a slippery slope.

And the sad thing is ... this was supposed to be a good day. A day full of hope and rejoicing with family and friends. January the 1st it was. New Year's day, in the year of our Lord, nineteen-hundred and seventy-three. And my dad and my brother were both watching the Rose Bowl, I think (or some other kind of bowl). And I was being bored, I suppose, and trying to understand how anyone *anywhere* could watch football and eat turkey all on the same day! (We'd have been better off watching a turkey and eating the football, I thought. But I was the youngest and those decisions were not left up to me.) So there we sat full of turkey watching a bunch of grown men fight over a ball!

And my mother, who was over the hill, mind you, was almost asleep in her chair ... but not quite. For you see,

every three minutes or so my dad and my brother would jump up and shout and applaud the TV. Or else they would scold it and call it names like “coach” and “ref” and “Mr. R. U. Blind” whoever that was. And my mom couldn’t take it. I mean, she just had to get up and do something. So this forty-year-old, football-and-turkey-weary, over-the-hill woman said, “It’s a pretty day. I’m going for a walk.”

And she was right, I think. It was pretty outside. Because there was about eight inches of snow on the ground. And it was still coming down. And my mother, who is afraid of snow and starts worrying about driving in snow as soon as the first leaf turns brown, put on my brother’s old four-buckle artics (and a hat and coat) and out the door she went ... in eight inches of snow!

And she was out there for a long time. A lot longer, I think, than she really *wanted* to be. For you see, right behind our house was a bank -- a hill. And from top to bottom, I think, it’s about thirty feet. And it’s kind of steep, too, I guess. About as steep as you can get without being straight up and down.

And that was the slippery slope my mother was on. For some unknown reason she walked right up to the edge of the yard. And she saw a piece of paper or something that was stuck in the branch of an old pawpaw tree right there at the top of the bank. So she reached out to get it. And it was almost -- not quite -- but almost at arm’s length. So she stepped a little closer. And when she stepped ... her foot did not stop. It just kind of slid. And so did she. She slid down the hill. Flat on her back. Like something you’d see in the Winter Olympics. All the way down she went. All the way to the bottom.

It’s a shame we didn’t get any pictures. It would’ve made the front page of the Wayne County News. “Local Woman over the hill at forty ...”

Well, there she was at the bottom of the hill, covered in snow. And she tried to climb back up to the top. But she couldn’t She kept sliding down. So she called out for help. But between the sound of the Rose Bowl and the sounds of my brother and father cheering for the TV, we

couldn't hear a thing. So there was my mom -- stranded and alone and not very happy.

But my mom is a fighter. She is. And she was going to climb that hill or die, she thought. So she sat down in the snow and kind of scooted herself up the hill. Backwards. An inch at a time. And when she finally got to the top, she was soaking wet and cold and ... not very happy.

And he walked up to the back door, grabbed the door knob. And it was locked. The back storm door did that sometimes. If you didn't shut it just right it would lock behind you.

It happened to my dad once, though not in cold weather. In fact, he was mowing the bank with a little lawn mower he would pull up and down the hill with a couple of ropes. And he was almost finished when he ran into a bunch of bumble bees right there by the old pawpaw tree. And they weren't happy either. So they came after him. Kind of like my mom, come to think of it, back in 1973. And one of them went right up his pants leg. And he danced a jig that would have taken first place at

the Wayne County Fair. Danced all the way to the back door. And he grabbed the door knob. And ... it was locked. And the bee was stinging him left and right. Six times it stung him. And the door still wouldn't open!

So ... he yanked off his trousers right there in the yard. And he ran all the way around the house and right up the front steps in his boxer shorts! And I don't know how it is in your family, but in my family these things always seem to happen just when your friends and co-workers and fellow church members drive by. And six months later, when you've almost purged it from your memory forever, they'll remind you. You can count it. They will...

But anyway ... there stood my mom at the back door (which was locked). And she didn't bother with the door bell. She just started pounding on it. And we all ran to the door. (Except for the dog. *She* ran under the table.) And my dad said, "What happened to you?" And she **told** him, believe me. She told all of us. She used some of the same words that my dad and my brother had used when they were scolding the TV during the football game, I think.

She said, “I was yelling and screaming as loud as I could. Didn’t you hear me?”

“No,” we said. “We didn’t hear anything.” And she said, “Well, didn’t you notice I was gone?” My father said, “No.” It was not the right answer, he found out. And she said, “Didn’t you even care that I wasn’t here?” And my dad was catching on, he thought. So he didn’t say anything. But that wasn’t the right answer, either. I don’t think anything was for quite some time after that.

But it just goes to show you that when your mom turns forty or she’s over the hill (whichever comes first), it might be a good idea to let her know that she’s not alone and that *somebody still cares ...*

Which is kind of what the Gospel reading’s about this Sunday. It’s about being stranded and alone and afraid. Wondering if anyone knows where you are, or if anyone cares. And it’s about doors, I think. Doors that are locked. Doors that just can’t be opened.

Passover had ended, but the Festival of Unleavened Bread was still going on. And Jerusalem was popping at the seams with all the tourists and travelers and out-of-town people. And somehow, the chief priests and leaders -- the Who’s Who of the Temple -- were able to get hold of the people and turn them against Jesus. Even had people shouting in the courtyard to “nail him to a tree.” “*Crucify him!*” they said.

And that’s what they did. They crucified Jesus on the eve of the Passover, when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered for the feast. And if that’s what they’d do to Jesus -- the Son of God, mind you -- then what would they do to his followers and friends?

It wasn’t a pleasant thought, I’m sure. Truth is it scared them. Because they were on their own now. Jesus had risen. The tomb couldn’t hold him. They knew *that*, of course. But I don’t think they knew yet just what it meant that Jesus had risen. He was alive ... But he wasn’t there. They were on their own. Without him ... And you know what the old gospel hymn says about that. It says ...

Without him I could do nothing.

Without him I'd surely fail.

Without him I would be drifting

like a ship without a sail ...

And that's scary....

So they went in that evening and locked the door. No one could get in, and no one could get out. They were stranded, I think. Kind of like my mother when she slid over the hill.

But someone did get in, you know -- even though the doors were locked. Somebody heard them. Somebody noticed. Somebody cared ... and cared so *much* that he came to them. There. When they needed him most. And that somebody, of course, was Jesus their Lord.

There they were all hunkered down and trembling with fear ... and all of a sudden Jesus was with them. Even though the doors were locked, there he stood. And he looked at them all and said, "Peace be with you." ✠

One day they were all in a boat. And all the disciples were scared to death. Because they had run into a storm, a terrible thing right there in the middle of the lake -- the Sea of Galilee. And they just knew this was it. They were dead men every one. But Jesus stood up and said to the wind and the water, "Peace. Be still." And everything was calm.

And that's what he said in the upper room, when the doors were locked and Peter and the others were so afraid. "Peace. Peace be with you." And their fears settled down and their hearts grew calm. "I will not leave you comfortless... but I will come to you." And so he did.

And then he told them to unlock the door. "Just as the Father sent me," he said, "I'm sending you." ✠ Not a pleasant thought, mind you. And yet, it would be different this time. Because this time they wouldn't really be on their own. He would be *with* them. He would be as close to them as the air that they breathed, through that unseen presence we call the Spirit.

And they were so excited that they just couldn't wait to tell somebody what had happened. And they did. They did. That very night. And it was one of their own, mind you. Thomas, their brother. He had been somewhere else when Jesus came to them that night. Not so afraid was Thomas. Because he wasn't there. He was "out there" somewhere. But the very moment he got back that evening, they told him. "We've seen him," they said. "We've been with Jesus!"

But Thomas was a thinker, you know. The rational sort. And he *wanted* to believe, I'm sure. Who wouldn't? But he couldn't. He just couldn't bring himself to step through that door. "If I don't see for myself," he said, "how can I believe it? When I see the wounds in his hands and side, when I can reach out and touch them," he said, "then I'll believe." So it wasn't fear that had Thomas locked up, it was doubt.

But Jesus came again, the very next Sunday. (Isn't it funny how Jesus always comes to his disciples on Sunday?) And he reaches out to Thomas and says, "Look,

Thomas ... it's me. See the wounds. Touch them, Thomas. Believe." And he did. He did. He didn't *have* touch them. He believed with all his heart that Jesus was with him right then and there. He came to him when the door was shut in more ways than one -- when he was locked up inside with all of his doubts. And Thomas looked at Jesus and said, "You are my Lord and my God!" (No doubt about it!)

Surely the presence of the Lord is in THIS place;

I can feel his mighty power and his grace.

I can hear the brush of angels' wings,

I see glory on each face;

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Have you ever felt stranded? Locked up inside with fear and doubt? Have you ever felt that you're all alone? That no one sees? No one hears? No one knows how hard it is for you? ✕ I think we all feel that way ... *sometimes*, I mean. You feel like you're stranded somewhere -- locked out of life -- and nobody even seems to care.

Oh, but hear the Good News: Jesus is risen. Not just brought back to life, mind you. He's risen. The conqueror of sin and death. And you know what that means. It means nothing can lock him out of our lives. Nothing can keep him away from you. "Neither death nor life." Not the past or the present or anything that will come. Not even your fears can lock Jesus out. Not even your doubts. Nothing can shut him out of your life. Because he loves you that much. And if he loves you that much, he'll hear when you call. And he'll know when you're hurting. And even when you're worried and frightened and filled with doubt, he will find you. Wherever you are. And wherever you are, he will be with you ...

There was an old man who learned this not so long ago, really. He was a Christian, mind you, and faithful to his church. But he wanted to feel closer ... he wanted to be closer to God. He just wanted to know in his heart that he wasn't alone, that Jesus was with him. So he bought every book on prayer he could find. And he read them all. But he didn't understand them, he said. So he just decided to pray the way he thought a child might pray. And he

did it like this: Every day, for an hour or so, he would go to his room and shut the door. And he'd sit facing an empty chair. And he would simply picture Jesus sitting there in his bedroom -- in that old chair. And he'd just have a talk with him. A little conversation, he said. Every day he would do this sometimes for an hour. Sometimes more. And after a while, I think, he did feel closer. And he knew, I think, more than ever before that Jesus cared (about him) and that he was *with* him and *for* him.

It went on for years, I guess. And then the old fellow got sick. And his pastor came to see him. And they had a long talk that day about lots of things. And he told his pastor about the chair and the "conversations" he had with Jesus there in his room. "But I'm very careful," he said. "I don't let anyone see me, because if my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd swear it was Alzheimer's and take me to every doctor in town!"

And the pastor was delighted to hear about his talks with Jesus and promised not to breathe a word about it to anyone.

Two days later, the pastor got a call from the old man's daughter. She was calling, she said, to let him know that her father had passed away early that morning. And she told him that it was a very peaceful thing. And that her father didn't seem to be in any pain, at all, during the night. "But," she said, "there was something strange -- something quite peculiar," she thought. "Just before he died," she said, "he leaned over and rested his head on the chair by his bed." And the daughter couldn't see it, of course, but the pastor was smiling ... and his eyes were filled with tears. Not because he was hurting, really. But because he knew that Jesus was there. The risen Lord came to be with one of his little ones, one of his beloved ones, when he needed him most.

That's the Good News of this holy season, the Great Fifty Days of Easter. **Jesus is with you.** And Jesus is **for** you. And he loves you with a love that is stronger than death. A love so strong that nothing at all -- not even your fears, not even your doubts, can shut him out of your life. And if he loves you that much, then you can be sure that

you're not alone. And you won't be forgotten. Because he will be with you no matter what.

Let's sing it again, just so we'll remember that Jesus is *here*.

**Surely the presence of the Lord is in THIS place;
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.
I can hear the brush of angels' wings,
I see glory on each face;
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObISB