

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
March 30, 2008

---

*All it takes is a gentle push...*  
©2008 Ray Bagnuolo

How many doors do you have in your home? If you were to take us into your home, how many would be closed and how many open?

For me, that's an easy question to answer, since other than the front door which is locked, no other door is on its hinges! They are lying on their side throughout the apartment, while the painting, ah yes, the painting continues.

I went to Wikipedia, the online resource center to which readers contribute and found a definition for "door" that I liked:

Doors are nearly universal in buildings of all kinds, allowing passage between the inside and outside, and between internal rooms. When open, they admit ventilation and light.

I have to tell you, I sort of like the idea of not having to open and close doors. There is free passage from one room to the next, without having to hesitate or pause. Something tells me that the circulation in the apartment is better and, yes, there is even more light. Although they have said little to indicate their preference, it seems the cats like it, as well.

For me, for all of us, doors are a common metaphor for access: granted or denied in one form or another. I was born a salesperson, I suspect, since I started selling as early as I could remember – from lemonade to chances for the school and Knights of Columbus. I know it came from watching my father sell and wanting to emulate him, and I think my perseverance came from the fact that he really never really gave up on a prospect or an account. There was always a chance.

More than that, though, there was some natural resonance with the idea that if a door was there, it could be opened. And, even if once opened it was closed in your face, it just meant, "Not now," instead of "Not ever."

While this is a good inclination to have for sales and advocacy work, it is sometimes not the best approach in personal relationships, some of which I have had a difficult time of knowing when the door was closed and flowers, tickets to shows, and long opining letters would no longer work.

Yet, I have always had the hope that somehow things could always work out, even if I never observed it. I still do, just like you!

Well, this week, following the glorious celebration of Easter Sunday, we re-enter the narrative during which the disciples discover what we have known for some time: that Jesus had risen from the dead.

We need to remember that the disciples knew Jesus. They knew him for at least a few years and his presence became familiar to them. Clearly they loved and followed him, but they also didn't get everything he was saying. Who would? Jesus spoke of things that heretofore were relatively unknown or still being argued, such as the resurrection. In fact, the resurrection, the law, the spirit world were all parts of the contentious debates of the time, especially between those in competition for power in the Jewish world, of which Jesus was part. Pharisees, Sadducees, and others argued the righteous path and challenged Jesus and his teachings, as well as other rabbis. "Dead" of the time was part of the debate. It was convincingly defined as not being the end by Jesus and these early writers.

But being around Jesus had to be something. I can remember times, early in my life, when in the presence of a charismatic figure, I would just bask in their company and chalk up what I didn't understand to not being "at that level." In its own way it was a safe place and a wonderful place for all the mystery it exuded.

Generally speaking, I like being in that type of an unknown surrounding, however for different reasons. In the early and middle years of the time I know, being in such a place was first a curiosity and second a challenge to see what I could learn and do. That is still there; however, today I find more truth in such places, because I have learned that ultimately these are the places where I have to rely upon God, release myself from my own tensed body and mind, and enter into the peace that is Jesus or God, however you may know God.

I do this sometimes better than at others, but I have to say that it is at the edge of things, when I rely most on God that I feel most alive, even if sometimes saddened.

I've had the benefit of millennia to learn these lessons, passed on and honed in many ways; so many ways that I could find paths that resonated with me. But the disciples had to be shattered following Jesus' execution. Their theology was not the high Christology of John. What they knew was directly related to the presence, the physical presence of Jesus in their lives, and now, with his death – I'm sure they didn't know what to know.

Here they were in the same Upper Room in which they had celebrated Passover just the week before with Jesus. Here they were, wondering if the killing had stopped or if they were next. The narrative tells us that all the disciples except one were gathered when Jesus first appeared. You know, that one would have been me. I have had a knack, for sometimes being missing at just the wrong times.

Suddenly for the eleven, Jesus was among them. The door had been locked and bolted. Windows, if any, were surely covered. And there Jesus stood, the physical laws of nature suspended or enhanced in ways we don't understand. "Peace be with you," he said. Jesus was then (as he is now) the peace, the presence, the assurance that what he had taught them was indeed true. "Look!" And in this presence, this moment of enlightenment, they were made whole in their spirit through him and their commitment to God confirmed, so to speak.

As for Thomas, were I him, I probably would have come back to the room, heard the story of Jesus' appearance, seen the look on their faces and the feeling they radiated – and mostly dismissed it. Truthfully, it would have been easier for me to attribute their behavior to some mass group hysteria than accept that I had missed what they described.

I've done that kind of stuff, denied the occurrence of certain things just because I wasn't around to see or hear them. Even when I accepted some of the more persuasive arguments for the "believe it or not," I kept a bit of the skeptical around, just in case.

In the narrative, John tells us that Jesus returned a week later, and, this time Thomas was there. To say he must have been humbled would be an understatement.

The second appearance of Jesus with Thomas, creates the schema for the telling of the passage with a powerful reminder: not to expect the same experience as these few: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The doors to believing in God through Jesus were forever unhinged during these days long ago. The idea that death was the end, forever dispelled. The presence of Jesus and God and Holy Spirit with us always, forever assured.

With the doors gone, the light and ventilation of God was boundless and invincible. And, in taking the disciples and this Good News out from the room, in making the twelve whole in their mission – even with one who was at first missing, a movement toward God and the Spirit continued that has since surpassed and includes all others.

Memo to believers and others: There are no doors to this church, even when we put them in place. The response of Jesus to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," was not a "door closed," sorry, last time you're going to see me, so just believe and be blessed. Noooo, this was what we know it to be –

A way that we all have found Jesus in our lives without having had to be in that room. We don't have to be anywhere but in the presence of God to know God, and for we who are Christians – to know God in the presence of Jesus in our lives.

Last week, after I retold the Jesus experience in my life, I had several people come up to me in the Parish House and tell me their's, with almost each person saying, "You know, we all have had experiences of Jesus in our lives." One day we should just sit around and talk about such things. It would be the making of a powerful time of prayer and worship.

It's clear that these appearances, narratives, and our own faith journey confirm what we know deeply: there is more; we don't know exactly what or how, but there is more. For we who are Christians – and I assume like other traditions – at best, all we can do is use language as a pointer to how we know God in our lives, the same thing the folks who wrote the Bible did.

Frederick Buechner gave an interview sometime ago with a magazine, appropriately named: The Door. It has since become known as "The Door Interview."

He was asked about the Bible, and he said the following:

DOOR: Is the Bible truth?

BUECHNER: There is a wonderful piece by Karl Barth in a book called *The Word of God, The Word of Man*. He says that reading the Bible is like looking down from a building onto the street and seeing everyone looking up, pointing at something. Because of the way the window is situated, you can't see what they're seeing but you realize they are seeing something of extraordinary importance. That is what it is like to read the Bible. It's full of people, all pointing up at some extraordinary event. All those different fingers are pointing at truth; all those different voices are babbling about truth in all the Bible's different forms.

DOOR: But what is the truth the fingers are pointing at?

BUECHNER: Well, the truth has to do basically with the presence of God in history, the presence of God in the tangled history of Israel, of all places, and the tangled histories of us all. The truth is very hard to verbalize without making it sound like a platitude framed on a minister's wall. It is a living truth in the sense that it is better experienced than explained. Not even the Bible can contain it finally, but only point to it.

Christianity is like a well oiled hinge. The ways of humans and this world the door. All it takes is a gentle push of faith to swing the door open and to let in the

light and ventilation of the Spirit into our lives, beholding as we do best in our hearts the peace of Jesus.

Once opened, persistence and prayer become the company we share with the presence of God in our lives, making all things possible, opening or removing all the doors that exclude and restrict us on our journeys to God.

In my early days, I had the persistence right and even the determined hope, but I have since learned that it is prayer that holds the key to the other two in ways I yet to understand.

This closing story to paint this a bit with the narrative brush:

In October of last year, Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church preached a sermon called "God's Pest." He began with the story of the persistent woman from Luke 18:

Jesus says that the woman is persistent. The judge she was petitioning would have called her something less complimentary. The judge cares nothing for this woman's plight. No one of importance will take up the widow's case. Yet finally the judge relents. "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out!" "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7)

Edward Bennett Williams was a Washington lawyer of some note. Included among his clients were Frank Sinatra, John Connally, Jimmy Hoffa and Richard Nixon. During the 80's he owned both the Baltimore Orioles baseball team and the Washington Redskins football team. He also held degrees from two Catholic institutions of higher education and was in charge of a charitable foundation. One day Mother Theresa came calling, seeking a donation for an AIDS hospice. Just before the appointment, Williams said to his partner, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." Well, they agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no. Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." All in the room bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"

The powerless are knocking on the doors of the powerful seeking justice. To some they are bothersome. Others dismiss them as unworthy. Jesus sees them as persistent and just.

Let us always be present, prayerful, persistent and just! Let us not turn away others who are relentless in seeking justice. Let us continue to keep open the doors to our faith and our hearts to let the abundant Shekinah of God in, so that we can be filled with the Spirit of the Upper Room and share our blessings with others This is Upper Room and we are blessed, blessed with peace and assurance. May we have exceptionally long and fruitful lives, but never fear what Jesus has conquered by his presence with us this and every day. Death is no longer what it used to be!

And if you go home today and count your doors, just to make sure – remember to count your blessings, as well!

Amen.