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“The Door to Easter Living”

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Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; Psalm 103; 1 Peter 1: 3-9; John 20: 19-31

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There's a place downtown in Durham, on Foster Street below the YMCA,
called Peter's Design Works.

Outside the aging red brick building are stacks of old doors,
stripped from their hinges,
stacked askew, leaning against one another for support.

Some have inset panels, some panes, some are extremely solid,
some are warped and crooked, some even have peepholes.

They look worn out and tired; tired of being pushed around,
tired of being slammed and jammed, swollen and planed,
tired of being dried, cracked, sanded and repainted.

But I bet none of these doors have ever been walked straight through,
like the locked ones Jesus walks through following his resurrection.

What is it about Jesus and doors?

I find myself fascinated by these doors, because in John's Gospel, you know,
reality always seems to exist on two levels.

For example, sometimes being born again
means entering a second time into a mother's womb;

and sometimes being born again

means being born from above by the Holy Spirit.

And sometimes drinking water

means lowering your bucket into a well;

and sometimes it means drinking of spiritual water that wells up to eternal life.

So what might it mean on the evening of Easter;

the evening of the day of resurrection;

the evening of the triumph of our Lord over death;

the evening of a truly unbelievable day,

when the disciples are huddled together in fear

behind locked doors,

and Jesus passes right through those locked door and stands among them

with salutations of "Peace be with you"?

And what might it mean again a week later,

when the disciples are huddled in that same house,

behind those same doors, locked in by that same fear,

and Jesus passes through yet again and stands among them

with that paradoxical salutation of, "Peace"?

Doors, as we normally think of them, are instruments of accessing,

or of preventing access to a room, literally.

Doors in John's Gospel, perhaps, stand as

instruments of accessing or preventing access to Easter living,

new life, abundant life here on earth, now.

And the key to Easter living here on earth seems to be this: forgiveness.

As he passes easily through those impervious portals,

Jesus says casually,

"If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven;

if you do forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Forgiveness grants access to a new way of Easter living;

not forgiving seems to bar the door to Easter life.

On Monday evening, some of us attended the prayer vigil for
Ahibjit Mahato, the Duke graduate student who was brutally murdered
at his apartment in January.

The service was conducted by Cherrie Henry, the Westminster
Fellowship Campus Minister at Duke, and among those attending
was Catherine Snyder, the Presbyterian campus minister
from Virginia Tech, where another campus tragedy
occurred in April of last year.

The candle-light vigil was extremely moving, and Cherrie noted that
we are all connected to both victim and perpetrator in these
crimes.

For her this was an alarmingly personal connection, as the victim
was a member of her Duke community, and one of the alleged
perpetrators was a kindergarten classmate of her daughter, Abi.

I felt connected to this crime through our church member, Michael Mburu,
another immigrant, who had come expecting to live the American dream,
but who, instead, died here far away from his family.

And I wonder, can we follow Jesus' example
and pass right through the doors of fear, hurt, and anger,
and possibly forgive the perpetrators of such heinous deeds?

Are those the doors that impede our Easter living?

"Forgiveness is a door to peace and happiness," says Johann Arnold,
the author of a powerful little book called, *Why Forgive?*

"It is a small, narrow door, and cannot be entered without stooping.
It is also hard to find....Clearly it has little to do with human fairness,
which demands an eyes for an eye, or with excusing,
which means brushing something aside," Arnold says.

(Johann Arnold. *Why Forgive?* p. 1)

Can we brush aside the urge to seek the death penalty for those who are eligible
in the case of this Duke murder and the similar one in Chapel Hill?

Can we muster the strength that it takes to stoop and walk through
those thick, heavy doors of retribution, revenge, hatred, and
get-even and enter through that small, narrow door called forgiveness.

The Amish families and community of Bart Township, Pennsylvania
did it once in 2006, in the aftermath of the killing of five girls
in a one-room school there.

Is this the way we experience the miracle of Easter living on this side of death?

"To err is human, to forgive, divine," said Alexander Pope.

Perhaps forgiveness is our connection to the fully human, fully divine Christ,
who from the cross mumbled the words,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

(Luke 23: 34)

Perhaps forgiveness is our connection to the fully human, fully divine Christ,
who empowered Stephen, the first Christian martyr,

to murmur almost identical words as he was being stoned to death:

"Father, do not hold this against them." (Acts 7:60)

On a more personal level, I received a letter from an acquaintance a while back,
asking if I could forgive her for the hurt she had inflicted upon my friend,
in walking out of their marriage.

A strange request, I thought, since it wasn't me that she had hurt the most.

Who was I to offer forgiveness? Wasn't that someone else's prerogative?

And I didn't answer her letter for quite some time,

while I pondered how to respond to it.

And even now, I'm not certain that I answered it appropriately;

that I did the right thing by her, which is why I'm so intrigued
about this whole notion of forgiveness

as being KEY to Easter living.

Do I get it? Did I do it correctly?

Did I pass through the doors of hurt, anger, and fear?

You see, I didn't really want to forgive her.

Actually, I'm still quite angry with her.

And people are still suffering as a result of her actions,

especially her ex-spouse, and their children;

not to mention their mutual friends.

And try as I might, I could not offer her blanket forgiveness,

which is what I think

Jesus and Stephen and the Amish community were modeling.

Try as I might, I could only offer her conditional forgiveness,

or the future opportunity for forgiveness.

I told her that I would be able to forgive her

WHEN her ex-husband was once again a happy man,

and WHEN I was convinced

that their children were going to be okay;

and that I would appreciate anything that she could do to insure

the securing of their healing and shalom,

physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually.

THEN, when the most vulnerable in this case were secure;

THEN would I extend my forgiveness,

which I wanted to be able to do whole-heartedly.

Right or wrong, or a little bit of both, this was a painful exercise for me

in practicing forgiveness.

It is almost easier for me to respond to the Abhijit Mahato murder

with merciful pleas for life in prison rather than the death penalty,

than it is for me to forgive someone who violates

the happiness and welfare of a close friend.

The closer the relationships are;

the more narrow that door of forgiveness become, it seems.

And I haven't even broached the even-closer relationships of abusive parents,

dead-beat dads, difficult siblings, spousal contempt,

marital spats, or broken bonds with children; forgiving ourselves.

In the gospel according to the Dixie Chicks,

there is a beautiful song called "More Love" from their CD, *Home*.

One of the verses of that song goes like this:

*We're afraid to be idle, so we fill up our days,
We run on the treadmill, keep slavin' away,
'til there's no time for talking, about trouble in mind.
And the doors are all closed between your heart and mine.
More love. I can hear our hearts cryin',
More love, I know that's all we need.
More love, to flow in between us,
To take us and hold us and lift us above.
If there's ever an answer, it's more love.*

There is something about Jesus and those doors.

Once through those locked doors where the disciples huddle in fear,

Jesus passes the peace with his closest friends,

who, by the way,

slept through his time of agony,

hid at the point of his arrest,

denied knowing him,

fled at his hour of greatest need,

and abandoned him to the grave.

But he doesn't let THOSE doors of hurt, or anger, or resentment, or vengeance

bar his access to them.

Maybe he shrugged off these human impediments to love,

when he shuffled off his mortal coil.
Instead, he breathes on them the Holy Spirit,
the giver and renewer of Easter living,
and imparts upon them the strength and the courage to forgive,
even in the face of deep hurt, anger and fear.
Just as God breathed on those scorched bones in Ezekiel and brings them to life,
when they are dried up and their hope is gone
in that bone-dry valley (Eze. 37: 9-11),
Jesus breathes on the dying, lifeless relationship of friendships breached,
dried up and without hope, and gives them new life, Easter life,
and the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning.

I may be going out on a limb here in my interpretation,
but I think I perceive two initial Easter miracles
taking place in John's Gospel.

The first miracle takes place on Easter morning
as Jesus bursts out of the tightly-locked tomb,
with his resurrection bringing boundary-breaking triumph of life over death
to all who call themselves his followers.

A yet second miracle takes place in a stifling little room on Easter evening,
and in stifling little hearts locked down by fear, anger, and hurt,
as Jesus bursts through those tightly-locked doors,
with talk of forgiveness
and its ability to bring boundary-breaking triumph over human sin.

One miracle has heavenly consequences of eternal life;
the other miracle, earthly consequences of Easter living - now.
"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. "

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said:

"We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. "

Whoever is devoid of the power to forgive

is devoid of the power to love.

It is impossible even to begin the act of loving one's enemies

without the prior acceptance of the necessity,

over and over again, of forgiving those who inflict evil

and injury upon us...

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done

or putting a false label on an evil act.

It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains

a barrier (a door) to the relationship.

Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary

for a fresh start and a new beginning."

(Martin Luther King, Jr. "Strength to Love". *Why Forgive?* p. 29-30)

What is it about Jesus and doors?

Is it that they are no longer impermeable?

Is it that they are no longer impediments to Easter living?

Jesus says, "I am the door. Those who enter through me will be saved...

I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:9-10)

Amen.