### “The Doors Were Locked” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 24, 2022

**Acts 5:19–32**

19During the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought the [apostles] out, and said, 20 “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” 21When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and resumed teaching.

When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they reported, 23“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” 24Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed, wondering what might be going on. 25Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” 26Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” 29But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. 30The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

**John 20:19–23, 30–31**

19When 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.” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

30 . . . Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Welcome, Easter people! Welcome to those who hear the Good News that Christ is risen indeed. We learn of Jesus’ continued lessons to his apostles and others during this time in Jerusalem. Before the pouring out of the Spirit on Pentecost, he had many interactions with his apostles and other disciples. This passage in John where Jesus breathes on them and says “receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22) does not occur in the other gospels. The story of Pentecost found in Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, gives what we usually accept as the story of the pouring out of the Spirit. Maybe the event in John is meant to be a foretelling, and not the actual moment of the bestowing the Spirit, for John does not mention any effect upon the disciples, whereas Luke goes to great lengths describing the effect of the Spirit being poured out on them. Further, Luke’s version conforms with what Jesus had said earlier in John, that it was good for him to leave since he *had* to leave before the Spirit could be given (John 16:7). So this incident of Jesus breathing on the apostles seems to be a kind of foretelling of what was to come on Pentecost, when the Spirit like a mighty wind swept through the community of believers. Jesus’ entrance into a locked chamber also foretells what will happen a few times in Acts.

The reception of the Spirit is an essential part of the story. The Apostles learn about Jesus’ will through the Spirit. Their preaching is empowered by the Spirit. From the Spirit they receive messages that guide them in their ministry. They are profoundly conscious of the need to obey these messages. Even at great potential cost to themselves, they tell Caiaphas and the Council that they have to obey God rather than any human authority (5:29).

God is smoothing their way. An angel had released them from prison without breaking open the locked door. When the temple guards unlock it to haul the prisoners out, they find the cell empty. They go and find the apostles, probably meaning Peter and John, preaching in the Temple courts, and they conduct them before the Sanhedrin council room beside the Temple.

In their comments to the apostles, the Sanhedrists show that they are bothered by the fact that the guilt of Jesus’ death is rebounding upon their heads. Peter says they are doing God’s will, and affirms that it was the Sadducees who arranged to get Jesus killed upon a tree. But God has vindicated and exalted Jesus in order that Jesus might offer repentance and forgiveness to Israel.

It is a strong message, and it moves a Pharisee, Gamaliel, to advise the Sanhedrin to not persecute the movement, for if it is of human origin, it will fail, while if it is of divine origin, it cannot be stopped (Acts 5:38–39). This is a voice of wisdom to which the Sadducees will not listen. They choose to continue persecuting the movement. Before long, they will persecute and kill the saintly deacon named Stephen. After that, they will arrange the killing of James the Apostle. But they cannot stop the movement from spreading, especially to the Gentiles.

The spread of the gospel is an underlying theme throughout both readings. In Acts, we read of the inevitability of the God-protected movement, and of the divine mandate that compels apostles to preach the gospel. In the gospel passage, the apostles are sent by Jesus, and they have the power to forgive or retain the sins of any in the community. Further, the purpose of the written gospel is to promote belief in Jesus, and the purpose of *that* is to spread the gift of eternal life. The overwhelming goal of the message is to bring about the salvation of persons.

God protects the apostles not because they are something special or so that they may be rewarded, but because they have a great purpose to serve. They are spreading the message of forgiveness and life, which is just as true today as it was then.

We, too, can sometimes serve God’s purposes. The angels might even smooth our way to aid in the completion of our task. Locked doors may be opened for us. Jesus himself might say to you “Peace be upon you. The Spirit has been given to you; now *live* as though it has been.”

If we stay connected to him, we can communicate his message of open invitation, the message of forgiveness, peace, and life in the Spirit. You may have doubts that God could act through you. You may say, “I am not a powerful apostle or even a good speaker,” but know that the Spirit can burn in you just as warmly as in any apostle. Maybe your virtue is not public speaking but something else, *private* speaking, perhaps: one-on-one conversation. Maybe your gift is a word of comfort. Maybe your gift is being a good listener. God can act through you the same as through a Peter or a John. Small human acts allow great divine acts to happen.

Maybe you can communicate peace and quiet confidence. “Peace be with you.” Has that empowered you to be a beacon of peace? If, through believing, you have life in his name (20:31), you can be a light on a bushel for others to see. You have received life through his graciousness, and you can be an apostle of life through your own example. Go forth today, confident that the life that is within you matters to those around you. “You are the light of the world,” he said, “a city built on a hill” (Matt 5:14). You influence others through the light that is within you, a light that can pass through locked doors, that can reach other hearts. Share the love of Jesus and God through your daily actions, even the smallest. Don’t underestimate the importance of living in your faith. Go forth and shine!