

**Locked Inside for Fear**  
**John 20:19-31**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**

**John 20:19-31**

<sup>19</sup>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.” <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

<sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

<sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

<sup>26</sup>A week later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

<sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>29</sup>But 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.

### The Sermon

For some of us these days, there is the blessed privilege of the possibility of getting out of our home confinement, just for a little bit, for a walk or to take just a little bit of more or less private, more or less individual exercise.

At those times, for those who have that privilege, we may get a passing glimpse of friendly neighbors, might even stop for an elongated moment to greet our acquaintances. And it feels like taking a long drink of cool water in the middle of an arid desert.

We are making the sacrifice—note the word “sacred” at the root of that word—we are making the sacrifice of keeping to our homes to do our part for the health and safety of our loved ones and our communities and our country and the whole world.

One of the losses where we really feel that sacrifice is the absence of all of those daily encounters that those of us with the privilege of mobility once, not very long ago, took for granted:

planned or random encounters between friends, neighbors, co-workers, extended family, people with whom we share sports teams or music preferences or common interests, even strangers.

We humans miss the interactions with all kinds of different people.

Something about it feels crucial, even for the introverts—and I am one—who may really enjoy being around other people, may *thrive* on being gregarious or simply being part of a group, or even just on the fringes of a conversation, but can only recharge their batteries by spending time alone.

It's the deep value of relationships, whether lifelong bonds or a momentary glance in the post office.

These interactions not only tell us we are part of one kind of community or another; they actually *make* us communities: the community of friends; the community of family; the community of a neighborhood; the community of people who have been through things together; the community of people who live around here and need to go get groceries the way the Samaritan woman needed to go to the well to get water.

And if those opportunities to bask in or even just cling to community are not there, specifically in terms of being in the physical presence of others, we miss it.

Asheville's own Thomas Wolfe, the young author of *Look Homeward, Angel* in the early part of the 20th century, had had a devastating falling out with his editor and sometime best friend, Maxwell Perkins.

As Thomas Wolfe, only in his late 30s, lay on what turned out to be his deathbed, he wrote a letter to his old friend who had done so much to help him become not just a successful writer but a national sensation, in which Thomas Wolfe said to Max,

"I shall always think of you and feel about you the way it was that Fourth of July day three years ago when you met me at the boat, and we went out on the cafe on the river and had a drink and later went on top of the tall building, and all the strangeness and the glory and the power of life and of the city was below."<sup>i</sup>

No one knows exactly who the author was of the one-chapter, 15-verse book of the Bible called III John, written around the year 100, about 70 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Unusually for a New Testament epistle, it's not written from an apostle to a church community, but from one individual in the Church to another.

After the first line that essentially says, “Dear beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth,” the elder starts off by saying, “I pray that all may go well with you, and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.”

Just a few verses later, the elder says, “I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face” (III John 13-14).

I had always enjoyed that as a sign-off, but until the last several weeks, I had never really registered the power of that simple wish, that longing for a future time when instead of using some medium of communication, friend can see, and be near, and talk directly, with friend.

I can't help but think of Tennyson's longing poem, “Crossing the Bar,” written in the last year of his long life:

“Twilight, and evening bell,  
and after that, the dark,  
but may there be no sadness of farewell when I embark;  
For tho' from out our bourne of time and place,  
the flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
when I have crossed the bar.”

I hope to see my Pilot face to face.

Maybe part of our longing to be able to interact freely in person again, without protective masks, is an indication that whether we're conscious of it or not, our minds and hearts really do recognize, in each other's faces, the image of God.

A few months ago, I mentioned something about the Kingston Trio in a sermon, and two days later we learned that, coincidentally, that same Sunday, Bob Shane, the last original member of the Trio, had died.<sup>ii</sup>

They had sprung onto the national scene in 1957 and immediately became a cultural phenomenon; many of us who have an acoustic guitar in the house have it because the Trio's success helped to make it a household instrument.

Inevitably, after a few years of megastardom, the pressures of spending all day every day with each other exacerbated tensions between personalities, and a rift that never fully healed opened up between Dave Guard and the other two. They were lifelong friends who didn't want to have much to do with each other, but there was always a unique bond that never faded among those three people, *and belonged only* to those three people.

Thirty years later, Dave Guard was living quietly in New Hampshire and losing a battle to a disease from which he would not recover, and Bob Shane wrote him one last letter. At the very end, after all they had been through, and the much longer time of not seeing and a lot of time not even particularly *liking* each other very much, he signed off with two words over his signature:

“Brothers, OK?”<sup>iii</sup>

What does it take to keep us away from each other?

And how much more do we appreciate each other's presence when we cannot have it?

I had grandparents, my Mom's parents, who for most of my life lived in Louisville. Growing up, I spent a lot of time there with them during summers, and then I went to college not too far from there, so during

those four years I went to stay with them regularly, even just for weekends.

Sometime later, my grandfather died, and I tried to keep in touch with my grandmother, but we were hundreds of miles away and starting a family of our own, and she could barely hear you if you stood two feet in front of her and yelled at the top of your lungs, let alone trying to negotiate a phone call.

I got to the point that I felt so funny shouting at her that her hair looked nice or to please pass the potatoes that sometimes I'd finish barking out a sentence and shout, "Over!"

So, phone calls never worked, and our lives carried on, and I tried to see her as much as possible but it wasn't much, and at one point when she was in her late 90s, our family stopped by where she was living and we had about a half hour visit, looked at some pictures together; I think she was in bed the whole time.

Toward the end of our time together, looking at me as if she knew something that she knew I couldn't possibly have remembered, she said, "You and I used to be close."

I muttered something like, "I think we still are," but I thought to myself, you're going to take your medicine right now. I wanted to correct her, but mainly I just wished we'd had more time together during the times when she was not the one who could have made that happen.

"I have so much to write to you,  
but I'd rather not write with pen and ink;  
instead I hope to see you soon,  
and we will talk together face to face."

What does it take to keep us away from each other?

And how much more do we appreciate each other's presence when we cannot have it?

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the same day Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb and been the first person to see that the stone had been rolled away, according to John's gospel.

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

I'm extremely uncomfortable with the way John throws out a sentence like that. For clarity: Jesus and his disciples were all Jews. Their families were Jews. Their friends, allies, neighbors; the people they had spent the past three years loving, serving, consoling and encouraging; the people they worshiped with at their synagogues, were Jews.

The disciples had every right, and were not without reason, to be afraid of the socio-religious establishment of which they were a part. They had just watched that establishment—with the full-throated encouragement of its supporters—orchestrate and carry out the state-sanctioned murder of the kindest, most generous, most loving human who would ever walk the face of the earth, their friend and their leader whom they called Lord and Teacher.

But that would be like saying that we are hunkered down in our houses, only venturing out quietly, keeping our careful distance and wearing masks and trying not to touch surfaces, for fear of the Americans.

But no matter how you say it, we know what it means to be locked inside for fear of what's out there which has proven itself to be lethal and unconcerned about what's just or what's fair.

What does it take to keep us from being near each other?

The fear that any one of us might be exposed to a microscopic and therefore unseeable but potentially mortal danger because someone has breathed too close to us. And the fear that we may unknowingly carry something back into our homes that could harm someone else by our breathing.

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw that it was their Lord.

And he said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

When he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them:

“Receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;  
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Actually, the known surviving Greek manuscripts of John’s gospel do not include the word “sins” in the second half of that statement—the part about retaining.<sup>iv</sup>

So it may be that it was intended to read:

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain any—as in, any person—if you choose to retain someone, *anyone*, as a member of your community, they are retained.”

Maybe the definition of the evangelistic community-building program of the Church, given by the risen Christ to those frightened, first disciples from the *first day* of his resurrection,

is that when you are Christ's own, when the Spirit has broken the boundaries of your personal space and breathed on you, you have it in your power to forgive people and retain them in Christ's church.

This is a story of people locked inside their house for understandable fear for their safety and well-being, facing tough decisions about the hazards outside, and cabin fever or worse inside.

It's a story of strength and resilience and community in the Spirit, and the longing for connection and presence among human beings.

It's a story of disciples staying behind locked doors because they simply have to, and how even when that is the case, no locked door, no fear, and not even any one community member's disbelieving demand for proof, can prevent Jesus from getting in—from coming to his beloved people wherever they are, even that one, unconvinced disciple—and breathing the Spirit of his peace on them.

What does it take to keep us from being together?

Maybe the even more insistent question is: what circumstances could ever keep Jesus from coming to us and breathing the Spirit of God into our lives?

It's answered by the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Romans (8:35, 37-39):

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

“Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

May Jesus come and stand in your house tonight, and breathe on you the  
peace of the Spirit.

Keith Grogg  
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April 19, 2020

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Wolfe, letter to Maxwell Perkins, in “A Brief Biography of Thomas Wolfe” (North Carolina Office of Archives and History, archived September 17, 2007, at the Wayback Machine:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070917094729/http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/Sections/hs/wolfe/bio.htm>)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/27/arts/music/bob-shane-kingston-trio-dies.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>iii</sup> William J. Bush, *Greenback Dollar: The Incredible Rise of the Kingston Trio* (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 138

<sup>iv</sup> Colleen Conway, John (annotation), in Michael D. Coogan ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1952 (note on John 20:23).