

“From a narrow place...”¹
Easter 2B, John 20:19-31
Grace Church Newton
April 7, 2024

“From a narrow place I called out to YAH; God answered me within the expanse.” Amen.²

What must it have been like in that house? Who was there? How many were there? How big was the space where they were gathered? Was it crowded? Inside the house was it solemn and subdued? Was it chaotic? We *do* know it was full of fear.

Sometimes when I’m sitting with scripture, I’m struck by how much there must be going on behind the text. I imagine trying to slip between the lines and enter into the much larger world behind what’s printed on the page. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, once described reading the Bible “not as [reading] a document from history, but as a world into which [we] enter so that God may meet [us]” there [[Source](#), p. 87]. That’s how the Archbishop of Canterbury put it...

I have a less – shall we say, a less *reverent* way of envisioning this... You may have heard me use this image before. When I imagine what might be happening between and behind the lines, I often think of a scene from *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, the fourth book of the series. As Harry is arriving at the Quidditch World Cup with the Weasleys, they make their way through a bustling field filled with small, triangular, canvas tents, each one about 5 feet wide, maybe 7 feet deep, with a small slit for a door. But as they enter, the inside is magically transformed into a cavernous space, impossibly bigger than what one can see from the outside, filled with lavish furnishings and detail. This is how gospel readings sometimes feel to me. There must be so much going on behind what’s printed on the page. What would we find if we could slip between the lines and see the world behind the text?

In other words, what must it have been like in that house? Let’s imagine together.

First, we are told that Jesus’ disciples were locked in the house out of fear. And yes, they would have been in fear. But let’s pause our imaginative exploration for a moment and remind ourselves of a conversation we’ve been having these last weeks – how important it is not to casually repeat the problematic translation offered here – the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews.” As we have discussed throughout Lent and Holy Week, translations like this have been used to sanction antisemitism through the centuries, sometimes with violent, lethal consequences. So let’s pause and remind ourselves that, anytime we see the words “the Jews” in the Gospel of John, we should slow down and think, instead, the doors were locked “for fear of the [Judean authorities in Jerusalem at that time].”³

¹ Adapted from a sermon preached on April 16, 2023 at All Saints Parish, Brookline, MA.

² Psalm 118:5, JPS translation.

³ For further discussion see [sermon from 3/19/23](#). See also Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions*, or Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*.

Now, back to our world behind the words. The doors were locked for fear. Unlike the spaciousness of the magical Weasley family tent, their world had closed in around them. This was Sunday, the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath. One week earlier – on the day we now celebrate as Palm Sunday – Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph, but in danger. The temple authorities feared his throngs of followers. They worried that their Roman overseers would violently suppress anything that could be interpreted as popular uprising, especially during the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Their plan was to kill Jesus. That was the *beginning* of their week.

Just four days later, after their last meal with Jesus, his disciples had followed him to the garden where he was betrayed and arrested. The next day, these people who are now locked in this house in fear had watched their friend, their leader, their Hope torturously murdered on a cross. And they had no reason to doubt that they could suffer the same fate. And then, just this same morning (as the Gospel of John relates the story), Mary Magdalene had discovered the stone rolled away from the tomb. Jesus' body was missing. In John's version of that first Easter Sunday morning, Peter and the beloved disciple had seen the empty tomb. Mary had encountered a figure she recognized as Jesus, but he was different. And she couldn't touch him.

And the very next verse in John begins today's gospel selection: "When it was evening on that [same] day...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear..." (John 20:19).

These few hours later here they are. What must it have been like in that house? Small? Crowded? Filled with shocked, traumatized, deeply grieving people who had just watched their friend die. Something unexplained and incomprehensible had occurred, and they, unlike us, hadn't yet had 2,000+ years to try to wrap their heads around it. They were bewildered, disoriented, grief-stricken, exhausted. And so they found each other and went into hiding, locking the doors of the house where they stayed.

As we imagine the details of this world behind the text – this tight space to which Jesus' followers fled, in my imagination – it can remind us of what happens in our own bodies and souls when we are fearful. Our chest tightens, our shoulders draw in, our breath doesn't come as freely. In place of openness to hope and creativity and breath, we may experience hopelessness and confusion.

So here they are in this scene that we can imagine, that we can begin to feel in our bodies. It draws to mind the prayer from the Psalms with which I began this morning: "From a narrow place I called to God..."

And into this narrow place, Jesus entered. Locked doors couldn't keep him out. The walls of the house were no obstacle. He "came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'" (v. 19) And he breathed life and love and Spirit into them. "From a narrow place I called to God. God answered me [from] within the expanse."

Now, the next part of the story happens a week later – it gives us the name by which Thomas has been known through the centuries. For the record, I don't think Thomas was any more doubting than the others. Each of the others had a chance to see Jesus. Mary had seen Jesus – in some form – at the tomb. John describes that – when Jesus entered the locked house the first time, when Thomas wasn't there – he *offered* his hands and his side, and *then* they rejoiced. Thomas said that he would only believe if he saw...but he was merely asking for the same encounter that had convinced the others. He simply had the literary, historical misfortune to come last. So maybe...maybe the author calls out Thomas's experience – expands on it – not to reveal something about Thomas and his doubting nature, but to reveal something about God – that God ever desires to meet us with peace, and life, to bestow God's Spirit on us. In our narrow places, to reach out with spaciousness.

What must it have been like in that room?

If you'll bear with me, I'm going to repurpose my metaphor here. Yes, the image of the magical tents at the Quidditch World Cup can help us imagine and enter into the larger world behind the text. Maybe the image can also help us sense, just a bit, the spaciousness that God invites us into, even in difficult times. Even when we may have closed ourselves into a small, constricted space, unable to see hope. Unable to know that if we could, *would* only see through that narrow slit of a door into that tent, an impossibly transformed space is waiting for us on the other side.

So, this easter season, may we call out to God from our narrow places knowing that God will break through tombstones, and locked doors, and walls, and skepticism, and fear-feeding-on-fear to answer us from the spacious place.

Amen.