

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Lenten Letters*, No. 8

Open Doors

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 (video)

Mark 16:1-8; and Revelation 3:7-13 (NIV)

I'll read two passages this morning. The first is Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection: Mark, Chapter 16, the first eight verses.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ² Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³ and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

⁴ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

⁶ "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

⁸ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

And then the letter of Jesus to the church at Philadelphia: Revelation, Chapter 3, verses 7 through 13.

Jesus says, "These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. ¹³ Whoever has an ear to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Well, one good thing about Easter worship like this: those of you who are allergic to flowers – even lilies – you can get this close to them and still be just fine, right?

Who would have ever thought we'd be doing what we're doing – and not doing what we're not doing – these days?

We are not singing the *Hallelujah Chorus* this Easter – I know some will be disappointed – others will be glad. We will plan to sing that on our first Sunday back together.

Ah, isn't it funny how fast life can change?

A day, or a week, or – as we've noticed – a month can start out just great – perfectly normally, and yet with just one event – one happening – it can turn and end so differently.

How fast life can change!

On Good Friday, Jesus' disciples experienced this sort of life change and the emotional whiplash that comes with it, in spite of Jesus' best efforts to warn them about what all would come.

Jesus had finally managed to convince them that He was the messiah. And of course, in their minds, messiahs don't die.

And yet Jesus did die.

Good Friday, the day, began for those disciples up here [gesture], but it ended clear down here [gesture] in shock and misery.

Isn't it funny how fast life can change?

In the same way though, those first disciples, all those years ago, began this day, Sunday, way down here [gesture]. Their king, their savior, was dead, and even after many hours and long sleepless nights they still did not know, really, how to respond to that.

So, Sunday started, for them, down here [gesture].

But then – Jesus appeared!

Out of the blue.

Totally unexpected.

He appeared to them – alive!

He appeared in the garden.

He appeared on the road.

He appeared in the homes – in the rooms where they were hiding;

And suddenly a day that began for them down here [gesture] ended up way up here [gesture], you see?

Isn't it funny how fast life can change?

Now, of course, this is not news to us. We all know – at least we know up here – how fast life can change.

And yet few, if any of us, really live our lives according to that reality. Instead, we tend to live according to this fantasy we have that tomorrow is going to be just like today was, and that next week will be essentially the same as this week was.

We live by the premise, not that life can change fast, but that life is really very predictable.

Even though we know better up here [gesture], we tend to live as if change will never come – and then we're somehow shocked when it does.

Of all the hundreds of people who will watch or listen to this, probably not five of us, only a month ago, had ever used the words "Social" and "Distancing" in the same sentence – let alone put them together in a phrase.

Most of you watching this would have laughed in disbelief a month ago if I'd have told you that within a week, and for the foreseeable future, you'd be worshipping God through YouTube. Some of you didn't even know what YouTube was a month ago!

You'd have thought I was crazy to say that, within a week, you'd have to stand in line to get into Lowes, or that the store where you work would suddenly be closed, or that there'd be rations on food and paper products, or that the only sports on TV would be re-runs of old golf tournaments.

And yet now, with the turn of a day, look at what's happened! Look how things have changed.

A month ago, most of us were living up here [gesture].

And yet, suddenly, now we're living down here [gesture].

All of a sudden, we've lost our footing. All of a sudden, a rug has been pulled out from under us – something like what had happened to those original disciples on that first Good Friday.

And yet, this day – this Sunday, this Resurrection Day – reminds us that just as quickly as life and circumstances can change for the worse, life and circumstances can just as quickly change for the best when God is a part of the equation – when God is a part of our world.

On that first Resurrection Day, a group of disciples traveled to the tomb to complete Jesus' burial preparations, where they fully expected to find His dead body. They had no hope at all that their day would end well. They were living down here [gesture], stricken with grief and sadness over Jesus' death.

And yet, just before they arrived at the garden, another thought came to them that pushed them even lower. Maybe it was the sight of the tombs made them suddenly realize that they had no way to move the great stone door that sealed the tomb!

How could they do what they came for if they couldn't get into the tomb? Their trip was wasted. Their efforts were wasted, and their grief was only compounded.

But, isn't it funny how fast life can change?!

When they looked toward Jesus' tomb, they saw the last thing in the world they expected to see: the great stone was rolled back, and the door was open wide.

So, I'm sure in that moment they thought, "Ah, at least our access problem is solved!"

And with their arms loaded with spices, they slipped through the open door. And of course, as they did, they soon realized a far, far greater thing lay on the other side. A tremendous surprise! A reality so different than they ever expected, they hardly knew what to do.

But one thing was for sure: their day went, just like that, from here to here [gestures], all because Jesus opened a door that let them see the kind of thing God can do – the magnitude of change God can make in their lives and their world.

It's not as though Jesus ever tried to hide all that would happen from His disciples.

Quite the contrary, in fact. Over and over again He tried to explain to them how it would work.

But you know, we humans – change is so hard for us. We can hardly imagine things could ever be different than the way we expect them to be.

That's why we're almost never able to see God's open door until we absolutely have to – until we're pushed nearly into a corner such that we have almost no other choice.

About seventy years or so after that first Resurrection Day, a different group of disciples in the city of Philadelphia found themselves struggling – wondering how they were going to go on in light of their circumstances.

They had been faithful to Jesus – they'd been loyal. Their deeds were good. Their demeanor patient. They'd been steadfast in both doctrine and mission, but they were suffering attacks from without – and they'd grown weak – and they struggled to see a way forward.

They were living down here [gesture].

And yet it was at that lowest point that Jesus comes to them and assures them that there is an open door; in fact, that He Himself has opened a door for them. A door to salvation. A door to all the power of God to overcome that which threatened them in the moment.

And much like that great stone door to His own tomb, the door He promised to the church at Philadelphia is a door that He alone controls – a door that no one will ever be able to close.

It's a door of eternal opportunity – a door that allows fallen humanity to once again connect with God, our maker.

A door that leads to peace and security and comfort and safety and strength – a door to salvation.

Jesus tells those Philadelphian Christians, "Oh, I know how hard you have it now – believe me, I do. I see your circumstance. I know the uncertainty of your world. And I really do hear your prayers for relief. And so, I set before you a door to life. Not a door of escape, necessarily, but a door to a different perspective, a different reality, a different world. Step through, and watch how fast life will change for you."

A different perspective, a different reality, a different world.

That's what Jesus offered to His first disciples.

That's what He offered to the Christians at Philadelphia.

And that's what He offers to all who will follow Him today.

You know, the days are strange, and they're getting stranger!

Contrary to the best of human wisdom, there is more and more uncertainty in our world. More and more unknown.

Maybe more than ever before, our world is wondering what tomorrow will bring.

In ways we've not experienced for generations, we as a people are living down here [gesture] – which seems to be precisely where Jesus is most likely to show us an open door.

And isn't it funny how dramatically life can change when He does that?

Are you ready, today, for a change in perspective?

Are you ready to rise above the circumstances and heartaches and disappointments of this world?

Jesus, through His resurrection, has opened that door to us – the door to peace – to eternal companionship with God. It's the only way from life here to life here [gestures] – and then, to life there, with Jesus.

If you know Jesus today, there is a door that He has for you to walk through – a door that leads to a way – a path that will make your life the best and most it will ever be. Walk through that door, and find the peace and purpose you're looking for.

And – if you don't know Jesus today, His resurrection from the dead on that first Easter Sunday makes Him for you the door to forgiveness, to peace with God, and to a tomorrow filled with hope.

If you will take Jesus as your Savior – if you will listen to Him and His word, and if you will keep saying "yes" to His leadership day by day, your future, like that of those

first disciples – and like that of those Philadelphian Christians – will be a future of open doors to the truly good and perfect way and will of God.

You see, the open door of the tomb is just the first of many, many open doors that Jesus wants His own to step through in these days.

Would you trust Him, and step through whatever door He's setting before you?

And as you do, just watch how fast life can change – for your good – and for God's glory.

Let us pray:

God, how we praise you on this Resurrection Day! Thank you for opening the door of salvation for us on that first Easter Sunday, and thank you for continuing to open doors that lead to every good thing for all who will follow You.

Help us to follow you through every open door you set before us – for our good and for your glory. Amen.