

About the Story

Behind Locked Doors (John 20:19-23)

Locked Doors

The doors function as an important detail in the story because their being locked provides an inside view of the disciples' emotional state. The reason given to explain their being locked is that the disciples are afraid of the Judeans, those who had instigated their leader's death. It is a safe assumption that they are afraid they will be arrested and perhaps executed, as was their teacher. Locked doors also function to highlight the supernatural aspect of Jesus. His presence with them is not inhibited by worldly factors. He can suddenly appear in their midst despite locked doors. The image is somewhat like the teleportation phenomenon of "Star Trek" fame.

Judeans

In the opening sentence the Greek word *Ioudaioi* is translated "Judeans" rather than "Jews" for the sake of greater historical accuracy and to avoid anti-Semitic interpretations. The twenty-first century understanding of the meaning of the word "Jews" is significantly different than that of the first century. Of the seventy instances in John where the term appears, "There is nothing of the modern connotations of 'Jew.' . . . Rather, Judean meant a person belonging to a group called Judeans, situated geographically and forming a territory taking its name from its inhabitants, Judea . . . The correlatives of Judean in John are 'Galilean' and 'Perean,' and together they make up Israel." [Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*]

"Peace be with you"

A significant verbal thread in this story is the phrase "Peace be with you" which ties together the first two episodes. Its use in the first episode could be simply as a standard ancient near eastern salutation. It does, however, carry overtones of the gift of peace Jesus offered his disciples at the last supper (Jn 14:27). It also points back to the concluding exhortation of that discourse: "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace" (Jn 16:33). The exact repetition of the phrase "Peace be with you" in the second episode indicates that Jesus is saying something much weightier than a simple greeting. He is, in fact, reminding his disciples of all he said to them before. He is both offering and exhorting peace—that they not be anxious, afraid, or vengeful.

Hands and side

The mention of Jesus' hands and side connects this story with that of his death by crucifixion. Crucifixion was a punishment inflicted by Romans on commoners or slaves for incitement to rebellion and acts of treason. Its intent was control by terror, much as lynching served to control African Americans in recent history. Crucifixion involved spreading the victim's arms and attaching him to a crossbeam either with roped or nails, and leaving them

there until the person could no longer breathe. Jesus had been nailed through the hands. The Judean authorities asked Pilate to have the legs of the three crucified men broken so that they would die and their bodies could be removed before the Sabbath. The soldiers followed Pilate's orders and broke the legs of the men crucified on either side of Jesus, but when they came to Jesus they found he was already dead. So instead of breaking his legs, they pierced his side with a spear (Jn 19:31-37). There was no question about him being dead.

He breathed on them

Jesus breathing on his disciples and telling them to receive the Holy Spirit is a direct fulfillment of the promise he made to them in his last supper discourse (Jn 14:15-31). The Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma*, have the same range of meanings: wind, breath and spirit. Ezekiel plays on this multivalency in the story of Dry Bones (Ezek 37:1-14). John takes advantage of it as well, both in the story of Nicodemus at the beginning of his gospel, and in this story near its end. For those steeped in the scriptures, as many of John's audiences would have been, this image of a divine figure breathing on despairing people to instill them with the spirit for the sake of new life would also have been a verbal thread connecting John's story with Ezekiel's prophecy.

If you forgive...

Those who heard this story were commissioned to go out into the world as Jesus had: with words of reconciliation and acts of mercy. In order to do this they needed the power of forgiveness, both for sins—wrong-doings—they committed and for sins done to them. Jesus is presenting an important choice the disciples will make. He describes the dynamics of response to wrong-doing. Those who forgive wrong-doing will be freed from the bondage of fear, shame, and anger. Those who hold on to the effects of wrong-doing will remain in bondage to them and will inflict them on others. Horizon Prison Initiative puts it this way: "Trauma not treated is trauma transferred." The first disciples all experienced trauma under Roman domination. Jesus breathed on them and told them to receive the Holy Spirit who gives them the ability to forgive, should they so choose.