

A woman received a phone call at work to say that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work immediately and stopped at the pharmacy on the way to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys inside! She didn't know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter told her that her the fever was getting worse, and suggested that a coat hanger might be used to open the car door.

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who at some time or other had locked their keys in their car, but she realised that she didn't don't know how to use it! So, she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me?" But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful.

The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?"

He said, "Sure". He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank You So Much! You are a very nice man." The man replied, "Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour." The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, "Oh, **Thank you God! You even sent me a Professional!**"

Long gone are the days when you could just leave the key in the front door, and allow neighbours to casually ramble in for a chat and a cup of tea, because we are more fearful about our security than we used to be, and this has led us to take more precautions to protect ourselves. Fear of what others can do to us tends to close us in on ourselves, in the physical sense of getting stronger security, but also in other senses. We tend to be somewhat withdrawn around people we perceive to be critical. We are slow to open-up to someone we think will judge us. We hesitate to share ideas and plans we might have with those who are known not to suffer fools gladly. Fear of others can hold us back and stunt our growth.

In the gospel reading today we find the disciples locking themselves into a room because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. What had been done to Jesus could be done to them, and this led to their hiding in self-imposed confinement.

We don't have to be taught about fear and doubt – not if we have lived a few years and kept our eyes open. Living is bound to cause us to be afraid and doubt. Increasingly now we fear a new terrorist attack. We worry about a persistent flow of people into our countries. We tremble when we think of ever-present violence and the possibility of global warming or natural disasters. We worry about the economic threats to our standard of living. The constant possibility of bad things happening confronts us on almost every news programme, and the culture of fear and doubt that pervades modern life is fed by much of the media trading on the currency of demonising one side or other and whipping up fear about them. Does anyone feel safe anymore in this kind of cultural environment?

Sometimes it makes us want to escape to a safe place, doesn't it? That's exactly what the disciples were doing, even though the once-crucified and now-resurrected Jesus had been there once already, giving them an initial experience of the reality of the Resurrection.

We, too, are frightened disciples. We know about what fear leads to: insecurity, anger, anxiety, physical illness, escapism, emotional paralysis, compulsion, addiction, uncertainty, and doubt. All too often, out of a sense of perceived threat and in self-protection, fear leads us to self-protective and over-reactive behaviour. If our fear comes from being harmed or threatened by others, it can lead to the sins of intolerance and prejudice, to reprisals and retribution, returning evil for evil.

The turning point came for the disciples when the risen Lord himself appeared to them behind their closed doors and helped them over their fear. He did this by breathing on them the Holy Spirit, filling them new energy and hope, freeing them from fear and releasing them to share in his mission. *“As the Father sent me, so am I sending you,”* he said. In the power of the Spirit they came to life and went out from their self-imposed prison and bear witness to the risen Lord. This is very well expressed in the description of the ideal Christian community we find in Acts of The Apostles. *“The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul”*. This is the unity of community and fellowship.

“No one claimed for their own use anything they had, as everything they owned was held in common.” Or in the Marxist version: *“To each according to his need; from each according to his ability.”* None of that individualistic greed and competitiveness that so marks our societies today.

As a result, *“none of their members was ever in want”* because those who had wealth gave it to the community. *“It was then distributed to any members who might be in need.”* There is a big lesson here for modern Christians.

No locked doors, nor even locked hearts, can keep Jesus out. He finds a way to enter the space where we have chosen to retreat and he empowers us to resist what is holding us back. He does require some openness on our part; at the least some desire on our part to become what he is calling us to be. The risen Lord never ceases to recreate us and to renew us in his love. Easter is the season to celebrate the good news.

Then comes our mission: *“For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.”* Is that all he gave them to do? It does not seem much. What about all the other things the Gospel talks about? And yet, it is all there in those words.

Our primary mission is to restore right relationships between God and his people and among people themselves. It involves working to create a whole society based on right relationships with God, between people and with the rest of the creation.

We will struggle with our doubts brought about by life’s unpredictability and tempestuous nature. We have very real struggles in our lives that generate an uncertainty about where God is to be found in all the turmoil.

But doubt and faith are two sides of the same coin. They are the Ying and Yang, if you would, of the Christian life. According to Paul Tillich, doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Rather than suppress our doubts, we should explore them and allow them to set us on a journey of discovery and a deepening of our beliefs and convictions. Doubt can be a wonderful tool that propels us into deeper learning, earnest soul searching,

and spiritual revelation. Faith based on absolute certainty leads to fanaticism, but faith tempered with doubt is mature and stable.

For the last nearly half-century of her life Mother Teresa wrote that she felt no presence of God whatsoever — neither in her heart nor in the Eucharist. That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta and never abated. Although perpetually cheery in public, Mother Teresa lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. She complained about the “*dryness, darkness, loneliness and torture*” she was undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. Nevertheless, she continued to love the least in God’s creation and dedicate her life to Christ to the very end.

Fr Henri Nouwen wrote, “*So I am praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting.*” Despite his own struggle with doubt, he was able to mentor and encourage countless thousands through his writings, lectures, and sermons.

One particular quote from a book of his has been a lifeboat for many who find themselves overcome with the waves of life’s stormy doubts: “*Have the courage to trust that you will not fall into an abyss of nothingness, but into the embrace of a God whose love can heal all your wounds.*”

Faith is a daily, ongoing exercise. It is a risk. Doubts arise. We struggle with God. And hopefully, faith grounded in the goodness of God triumphs — even when we do not have all the answers and life doesn’t make sense. Will we believe in a God of love who wants to be near us and has our best interest at heart? Or will we believe in a God who plays games with us, and is ultimately cruel and uncaring? Will we believe in a God who stands beside us in our troubles, or one who is distant and difficult?

Faith doesn’t take away our doubts, but is strengthened by them. And faith doesn’t deliver us from our problems and heartaches, but gives us the

strength to persevere through them and lead others as well as they navigate around the abyss of nothingness.

You see, when Jesus came to them through their closed doors, and when Jesus loved them, and gave them the gift of the spirit, he did one more thing -- to them and to us. He said, "as the father has sent me, even so I send you." He gave them mission; he called them to service.

And what the disciples discovered was that it was only as they tried to live out that mission and ministry, it was only as they tried to follow the Lord's command to be servants, it was only then that they discovered within themselves that ability and strength that Jesus had given them. It was only then that they discovered that the spirit Jesus had breathed on them was a holy spirit of power, and of fire. They didn't discover that until they stepped out from behind those locked doors. It wasn't there until they really needed it.

Jesus has walked through our locked doors and come to us in love. He has breathed on us the breath of the Spirit, and he has sent us into the world as he was himself sent by the Father. That's who we are. That is who we are. What we do with it is up to us; but that is what is real. We are a people loved, and given power, and sent into the world. Always remember that. The Easter story continues, and we can continue to be a part of it.

We might not change the circumstances of our life and world. Tornados will still form, the hungry still need to be fed, and loved ones will die. The life and peace of Jesus' resurrection enable us to meet and live through those circumstances. His gives us his peace, his breath, his life, and then sends us out. We are free to unlock the doors of our lives and step outside into his life, with all its risks, but his promise is that he will walk with us.