

Scarred for Life: on leaving the upper room

No prison is as unescapable as the Prison of Fear

And . . . “On the evening of that first day of the week. . . the disciples were together, with the doors locked for *fear* of the Jewish leaders . . .”

Only those who have actually lived under an oppressive regime where one must fear one’s own leaders can describe the sheer terror of those disciples who’ve locked themselves into that upper room. We can, however, imagine how trapped and helpless and hopeless they must have felt. We’ve all been there. In the prison of fear.

And yes, they had been told by told by an ecstatic Mary Magdalene that Jesus had risen from the dead. But that would be hard to believe. *And true*, they had seen it with their own eyes: his power over death in raising Lazarus. But on the cross he’d been unable save himself. No, this upper room was where the dream must end. Up until a few days ago, they had been totally convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who Jews believed would bring in the new age with all its victory and glory and all it’s freedom from oppression and fear. But obviously, the game had been rigged. And now, they have no idea what happened to his body.

The bodies of crucified criminals were generally thrown into a ditch to be devoured by scavengers. (This was the greatest horror for a Jew in crucifixion – indignity to the body.) They have no idea he had been lovingly, even *regally* embalmed and buried in a rich man’s tomb. No. From *their* perspective in the upper room, that was more than they could have even hoped for. The dream was gone. The courage was gone. And they knew their enemies lurked just outside the door and should they be found tonight, they would surely be next. Of thier own free will they had locked the doors behind them, but nevertheless, this room was a prison. But in their *weakest most traumatized moment* they experience . . .

Christ transforming presence

“Jesus came and stood among them.”

This was not a ghost or an apparition like that one might see of loved one just passed on. A final good-bye on the way to Heaven; for if that were the case, it would never have had the effect it had on these people. If it was merely a vision they would have simply said, “Well, that’s good. He’s gone to heaven; but *we* are still trapped in this terrible world, imprisoned in this upper room”.

He stood among them. This was a resurrected body able to appear through solid walls and then return again to the heavenly realms. And this was a moment when the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection was redefined.

The Jews had always expected a resurrection of *all* Israel at the end of *all* time – *everybody* all at once. Ezekiel 37 - dry bones coming to life. But nobody expected the Messiah to rise from the dead, because nobody expected the Messiah to *die*. This was uncharted territory. Unpredicted. New. But in one moment as he stood among them with the undeniable recognition of *who* he was, everything changed. The Resurrection, once a vague future event was suddenly standing before them. Jesus was raised and therefore the new creation had already begun. If you were one of these terrorized Jews and you encountered the Risen Messiah:

You would know that your God was just.

You would know that the kingdom of God had truly come in and through Jesus.

You would know that the evil powers that held you captive with such paralyzing fear were about

to be dealt with.

You would know that the resurrection was not about the end of the world after all, but about the transformation of this hostile violent world today. For the first time in your life, you wouldn't know. . .

Peace

and Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"

It is the first word he utters upon return from the grave. Peace. What did it mean to them? To us? It would take disciples a few years to clearly define the peace that the resurrected Jesus brought into the upper room; but Paul finally declares to us, to all "who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. . . ." [that]

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . ."

(Rom 4:24 - 5:1)

The bodily resurrection of Jesus demonstrated God's willingness to bring the power of his kingdom to bear on the hostile world in which we live and bring about peace. The upper room is still open for business. Jesus still stands among us to offer us *peace*. For he has dealt evil a decisive blow, and

He's got the scars to prove it.

" . . . he showed them his hands and side."

Ever wonder why God left the resurrected body of Christ still bearing the gruesome scars? "He showed them his hands and his side. And **then** and only then did the disciples rejoice. It wasn't until they saw the wounds that they saw the *Lord*. It was in *that* moment that they recognized that Jesus had gone to the cross, died, and come back from the grave *to bring them peace with God*.

Do you think they immediately understood the meaning of the Cross? I doubt it. Theologians for 2000 years have struggled to explain exactly what happened on the cross. But when they saw the wounds, the scars, they saw hope, forgiveness, love, healing and eternal life. And it was out of those *scars* that came . . .

The Mission

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

The scars on the body of Jesus define the Christian mission to the world. The Father had sent the Son to make peace through a cross. The Father sent the Son to reconcile and restore the broken relationship with humanity. So in turn, the Son would now send his own people to bear the cross in the world. In the end, they too would have the scars to prove it. There were real implications for the disciples of Jesus in that room that night. Some of them would be sent to the crosses for the name of Jesus. Peter, for example, after growing old preaching the Gospel would be bound and led to the cross. John 21:18,19.

But not all. Not all face *physical* brutality. But all would be *sent*. Each one would pay the price of being a Christian in the world. What doesn't that mean for you and me?

To be sent into the world with the truth and love of God in our hearts is no easy road. In our world we will encounter the powers of darkness that control those who do not believe. There

are always those who oppose and reject the kingdom of God. And in the process of bringing the truth and love of God into the world encountering the world with the Gospel, we will be . . .

Scarred.

Amy Carmichael left England to minister to the children of India from 1895 until her death in 1951. In many ways she was an unlikely candidate for the rigors of missionary life. To begin with, she suffered from neuralgia, a disease of the nerves that made her whole body constantly ache and often put her in bed for weeks. But Amy reached out to the Temple children -- young girls dedicated to the gods and forced into prostitution to earn money for the priests. It was her calling to rescue these girls from sexual slavery.

In 1931, Amy was badly injured in a fall, which left her bedridden much of the time until her death in at the age of 83. She asked that no stone be put over her grave; instead, the children she had cared for put a bird bath over where she was buried it with the single inscription "Amma", which means *mother*. Amy also wrote poetry. She sensed Jesus speaking to her and wrote these famous lines:

No wound? no scar?
Yet as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow me;
But thine are whole: can he have followed far
Who has no wound or scar?

We live in a wounded world. Sin has left its mark. People may not show it on the outside but inside they live desperate lives each day. But Jesus still is showing us *his* wounds. He shows us his hands and feet and side in the wounds we see in others. Physical wounds, psychological wounds, wounds of the human spirit that leave people wasting and wanting an longing to be made whole. Jesus calls us to wash away the dirt. Pour in healing ointment. Bind the wounds with clean bandages. Jesus Christ call us to be the wounded healers of a lost world. But before we can do this we must first have the courage to leave the prison of our fears. Like those disciples in the upper room so long ago, we must be. . .

Empowered

“And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

The risen Lord doesn't hand over his mission to broken, traumatize people and then tell them to get up and get on with it. He gives to them exactly the power they need. Anyone who experiences the resurrection life of Jesus automatically becomes an agent of God's forgiveness in the world. Up until this moment there was no driving force that could move them out of the prison that was that upper room.

But now they could leave the room to declare with absolute authority the forgiveness of sin through the cross of Jesus Christ. Up until now, there was room for forgiveness in their lives. How could they forgive those they only feared? Those that had hurt them so deeply? The only way was by through the working of the Holy Spirit. Because until they could forgive, they remained prisoners of their fears.

If we retain the sins of others we become enslaved. Unforgiveness surrounds us like

barbed wire, day after day, locking us up. We pound our heads against a brick wall. I can't forgive what *she* did to me, what *he* said to me. Unforgiveness is a ball and chain. The more we dwell on what others have done to *us* the harder it becomes to move on in our own spiritual journey. Unforgiven deeds are the prison bars of the human spirit

Remember the doors were *locked* that evening out of *fear*. But the resurrection gave them the *courage* to leave that room to boldly bear witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. The disciples would overcome the fear the same way Jesus did. As He hung on the cross, he said, Father *forgive* them. In the upper room, by the Spirit, the disciples received divine power to forgive people who were still fully capable of, and even *likely* to do them harm. Yet they could walk out of the upper room *free* from fear because by the Holy Spirit's power they could look their enemies in the eye and say, "I forgive you. "

But still a formidable prison guard still stood in the doorway, muscular. Heavily armed It is . . .

Faith's alter-ego

Thomas . . . was not with the others when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "*Unless I see* the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Doubt is not the *enemy* of faith, but its alter-ego – another aspect of itself. Thomas was not disloyal to Jesus, but merely slow. It was not that Thomas was without the ability have resurrection faith, but had to see. I highly doubt Thomas even took Christ up on his offer to touch the wounds. He only had to *see*.

And it's a characteristic of the modern mind to believe only on the basis of a first-hand evidence. And that's fair. If there's another explanation other than the resurrection for the birth of the Christian church and its continuation until this day, I say BRING IT ON.

But believing in the reality of the resurrected Jesus in our lives required no extraordinary event. In fact this is a story that tells us that to have resurrection faith called forth purely by the Word of God is perfectly normal. Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Ultimately, the proof of the resurrection of Jesus is not an empty tomb somewhere in Jerusalem nor personal accounts of seeing Jesus alive from the dead. The resurrection faith is based on . . .

Living Proofs

John concludes his book by saying, "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

The Bible is still a very powerful witness to non-believers. Here at the end of his Gospel, John reminds us of how it began in chapter one: "The Word was with God and the Word was God. . .and the Word became flesh." The resurrection proved God's primal act of salvation which frees us from the shackles of sin. And so the resurrection became central to the message of the church. But we can become so accustomed to this message, year after year, century after century, that it becomes nothing more than an abstract theological idea and ceases to have an impact on our lives. Or, increasing in our day, the message is confused by those who can't take the resurrection seriously.

But in that upper room the Lord revealed himself in a mode beyond our comprehension.

And the only real proof we have that it *really took place* is the changed lives of those who have experienced the presence of Jesus. There is no other credible explanation for the changed lives of these traumatized broken disciples of Jesus except Jesus rose from the dead. It changed you. You do things differently. You leave a place of fear and lostness. You find a place where God wants you to go and you go there no matter what the cost.

And you have the scars to prove it.

And that is why after Paul explains the resurrection body to the Corinthians he writes at the end of 1 Cor 15 . . .

1 Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the *work* of the Lord, because you *know* that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Paul knows that unless these Corinthians really have the resurrection faith they will ultimately lack the confidence to go forward and do anything of real significance or eternal value. The word of God has eternal life-giving power because it is a *sure* word declaring Christ's triumph over death which *guarantees* that we too will conquer. Victory in this present day begins when we can taunt death itself as Paul does:

“Death, where is your sting?”

Because, as the old hymn says, “death could not hold its prey, Jesus our Saviour” neither will it be able to hold its prey at the final trumpet when the dead in Christ shall rise. And we will bring to Christ and offering of lived life in compassion and freedom in a world hostile to our faith. We will have lived HIS life, and we will have the scars to prove it.