

## UNLOCKING THE DOORS

Several years ago, former talk show host Johnny Carson visited Harvard University to receive an award. After the ceremony he agreed to answer some questions from members of the press. One reporter asked, "What would you like to have inscribed on your tombstone?" Carson thought for just a second, and then answered with the words he used before every commercial break on his television show. He wanted his tombstone to say, "I'll be right back."

Jesus told the disciples that he would be put to death and that he would be right back in three days. The disciples tried to understand, but for some reason they just didn't. They were still trying to make sense out of what had happened. They were meeting behind locked doors. They were afraid. They talked in muffled tones. What had happened to Jesus could very well happen to them. Every time they heard a noise they thought that someone was coming to haul them away to prison.

They were very frightened. But suddenly, out of nowhere, Jesus appeared in their midst. He showed them his hands and his feet and greeted them with familiar words, "Peace be with you." Their response was probably not peaceful at all. No one was supposed to know where they were hiding. How did Jesus find them? How did he enter without using the door? The disciples were anxious, afraid, and uncertain of what would happen next. Yet here was the Master right in their midst. And alive! Slowly they began to calm down. And then to rejoice.

The first thing that happens when people meet the risen Christ is this. Jesus' presence unlocks the doors of fear. He takes away fear. Just as when the disciples begin to relax and then to rejoice. He is alive! That's what happens when folks come to know the risen Lord. He unlocks the doors of fear. The disciples were in hiding, frightened, listening for footsteps. But he came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

And what happened next? Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This was Jesus' way of commissioning the disciples for the work he needed them to do. The Holy Spirit would not come on them with power until the day of Pentecost, but Jesus was preparing them, getting them ready. They would no longer be disciples, or pupils, but apostles "those sent in His behalf. They would now be putting their lives on the line as his representatives.

Jesus knew what awaited his disciples in the days ahead. He had unlocked the doors of fear in their lives. Now he was sending them into the world to unlock those doors for others. But first of all, he wanted them to have a sure foundation. He wanted them to have an assurance, an inner witness to the faith that they

proclaimed. Thus he breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Which brings us to the second thing that happens when we meet Christ.

He gives a foundation that will not crumble. Over 90 years ago, Japan asked the famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a hotel for Tokyo that would be capable of surviving an earthquake. When Wright visited Japan to inspect the site where the Imperial Hotel was to be built, he was appalled to find that the soil there was only about eight feet deep. Beneath that was 60 feet of soft mud that slipped and shook like jelly. Every test hole he dug filled up immediately with water. Now a lesser individual probably would have given up right there. But not Wright.

Since the hotel was going to rest on fluid ground, Wright decided to build it like a ship. So instead of trying to keep the structure from moving during a quake, he incorporated features that would allow the hotel to ride out the shock without damage. Wright knew that the major cause of destruction after an earthquake was fire, because water lines would break and there would be no way to put out the fire. So he insisted on a large outdoor pool in the courtyard of his hotel, "just in case."

On September 1, 1923, Tokyo had one of the greatest earthquakes in its history. There were fires all over the city, and 140,000 people died. News reports were slow in getting to the U.S. One newspaper wanted to print the story that the Imperial Hotel had been destroyed, as rumor had it. But when a reporter phoned Frank Lloyd Wright about it, he said that they could print the story if they liked, but they would only have to retract it later. He knew the hotel would not collapse. Shortly afterward, Wright got a telegram from Japan. The Imperial Hotel was completely undamaged. And when the fires that raged all around the hotel threatened to spread, bucket brigades kept the structure wetted down with water from the hotel's pool.

Frank Lloyd Wright knew about foundations. So does Jesus. He does not want his followers out in the world witnessing to something that they have not really experienced for themselves. So he gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit as an internal witness. We do not have to simply depend on a story that we heard long ago. God is forever fresh in our hearts. Christ takes away our fears; he gives us a foundation; and one thing more.

He accepts us as we are. As the disciples were having this extraordinary experience with the risen Christ, one of them, Thomas, was off by himself. Some people simply deal best with stress or uncertainty when they are alone. For whatever reason Thomas wasn't with the rest of the group when Jesus appeared that first Easter evening. And when the other disciples caught up with Thomas, they told him that they had seen the risen Jesus. They were filled with excitement and hope. Thomas wasn't quite sure he understood. He was trying hard to make sense out of their story, but what they told him was just too good to be true.

It wasn't quite that Thomas didn't believe his friends, but he was a realist. He wasn't someone who believed in fairy tales. Thomas shook his head and said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A whole week went by with Thomas struggling; doubting if what his friends told him was actually true. But he continued to meet with the other disciples. Just because he didn't believe exactly as they did, didn't exclude him from their fellowship. Rather, he was allowed to voice his doubts within the faith community.

Mrs. Billy Graham tells of a young man who was a lot like Thomas. He was part of a demonstration at one of her husband's crusades a number of years ago. The young man told everyone he talked to how much he disliked Billy Graham. When he was a young boy his parents forced him to watch him on television. This young man had heard Dr. Graham's invitation many times before. But the young man thought it was nothing but a gimmick. Yet something unexpected happened to him when he heard Graham's message in person. He felt as though Dr. Graham was speaking directly to him. Then came the invitation. The young man watched as people came from every corner of the stadium. He quickly turned and left. But the next night he was back, and when the invitation was made again, he was among those who went forward and gave his life to Christ. This young man ended up going to college and majoring in theology and today works for the Billy Graham Crusade/

It's all right to have doubts and questions. Christ accepts us just as we are doubts and all. Thomas was not excluded because of his unbelief. A week later, though, while the disciples were meeting, the risen Christ once again appeared in their midst. This time Thomas was with the others, and he saw with his own eyes the Lord standing in front of him. And Jesus said to him, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." That was all it took. Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" and Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

John concludes this chapter telling us that these stories of Jesus are meant to lead persons to faith. Their aim is not to give information, but new life. John says, "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the messiah.

Do you believe that he is the messiah? What's holding you back, fear of looking foolish? He wants to free you from your fear. He wants to give you a foundation that will never crumble, the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. He wants to meet you where you are right now, doubts and all. And he wants to open doors for you. The doors that lead to new life in Him.