

**When Jesus Speaks**  
**John 14:23-29, Acts 16:9-15**  
**May 22, 2022**  
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As we celebrate Jesus's resurrection throughout the Easter season, one of the reasons that we celebrate is because the resurrection gives us the assurance that Jesus has already won the ultimate victory over the power of evil and the consequences of human sinfulness. He has proven that evil, and hatred, and death will not have the last word, and so, as people of faith, we live with hope, and we anticipate the day when Jesus will come again and set all things right. It's nice to have something to look forward to- especially something as wonderful as the completed Kingdom of God. In the book of Revelation in chapters 21 and 22, we hear descriptions of the new world that is coming, and we're told these wonderful things about it. Tears will be wiped away. Death will be no more. There will be no more pain and nothing accursed will be found there. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and there will be a river of life that flows through the city, and the leaves of the tree will be for the healing of the nations. Having the assurance that this future is being prepared and held for us is something to celebrate, and yet, in the midst of our Easter celebrating, our Scripture readings for today remind us that while we are people who live with great hope because Jesus is risen from the dead, that is not the same thing as being people who now get to cruise through life without ever facing any challenges, or difficulties, or troubles. In fact, it seems like there is an infinite number of things that challenge us and can tempt us to despair as we follow Jesus through life toward the future that God has prepared for us.

One of the things that can be discouraging is when we encounter what we sometimes refer to as "closed doors." You know what I mean, right? You're going along with life, trying to do the things that you think you're supposed to be doing and then you hit a roadblock of some sort. You don't get the job. A relationship ends. A perfect plan fails. Somehow something comes up that prevents you from moving forward in the way that you planned and expected to move forward. You experience some kind of interference that keeps you from achieving something or receiving something that you expected to achieve or receive, and when this happens it can be disorienting and sometimes scary. We may feel angry, or like we've been abandoned by God, and we can't see or imagine how we'll be able to move forward now that that door is closed tight.

In our Scripture reading from Acts, we heard about how Paul and his companions traveled to Macedonia where they ended up meeting a woman named Lydia. Lydia listened to their message and her heart was opened. She put her faith in Jesus, and she and the members of her household were all baptized. This is a story that took place during Paul's second missionary journey, and from what we can see, there aren't any closed doors here. It's actually a success story, isn't it? Paul's objective on these missionary journeys was to tell people about Jesus and to share the good news that salvation- meaning the forgiveness of sins, and spiritual transformation, and peace with God, and everlasting life - all of this was available to anyone in Christ. Paul and his companions were preaching this message everywhere they went with the hopes that people would hear and respond. Now, in Macedonia, they met Lydia and she heard the good news and believed. This was exactly the outcome they were hoping and praying for, but there is an important part of the story that we didn't hear in verses 9-15.

When we go back to verse 6, *before* Paul's vision of the man in Macedonia who was begging Paul to come help the people there, this is what we read. **"<sup>6</sup>They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup>When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; <sup>8</sup>so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas."** There aren't a lot of details within those verses in terms of *how* they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit from preaching in Asia or how or why the Spirit of Jesus didn't

allow them to go to Bithynia. In his commentary on Acts, John Stott suggests that maybe the Holy Spirit gave them a strong united impression. Or it could have been some outward obstacle like illness, or religious opposition or a legal ban. Maybe the Spirit spoke prophetically through one of them, and they all recognized the voice of Jesus. Regardless of *how* the Spirit prevented them, the point is, they were going along on their journey to spread the good news about Jesus and then, slam! The door closed on them, not once, but twice.

Again, we aren't given any details or description about how they felt about it, but you can imagine that it was at least perplexing if not completely discouraging. Here they were, on a mission, on *God's* mission. Everything indicates that they were acting faithfully, and yet they were prevented from moving forward. They were stuck, and we don't know how long they were stuck and left to wonder about these closed doors and if, and how, and when the doors that had been closed, or maybe some new door, would be opened to them. What we *do* know is that Holy Spirit did redirect them and set them on a new path that led them to Lydia and to many others in Macedonia who were ready to hear and respond to the good news they brought with them.

We could hear this story and respond with pessimism and doubt. After all, Acts is full of extraordinary stories about the extraordinary acts of the Holy Spirit, and we could say, "well that was just something that the Holy Spirit did that time for Paul and his companions, but I can't expect the Spirit to move or work in my own life in that way. When a door closes on me, I can't expect to receive a vision, or to hear God's voice, or to be presented with an alternative opportunity." When doors close in our lives, we can become discouraged and give ourselves over to the fear, or the anger, or doubts that tempt us at those times, but we don't have to give ourselves over to those things because Jesus has promised that we *can* expect to hear from him, and we can expect to receive help and guidance.

Our Gospel reading this morning came from John 14 and is part of a longer portion of Jesus's teaching from the night that he and his disciples shared the Last Supper. If you look in your Bible, you may see a heading at the beginning of chapter 14 that says, "Jesus Comforts His Disciples." He was comforting them because he knew that this time was fast approaching when he would go ahead of them to God, and they would be left to wait until he came back for them. He knew that once he departed from them that they would have challenges, and questions, and they would need ongoing guidance and help as they carried on his ministry. In the verses that we heard this morning, Jesus told them that anyone who loves him will obey his teaching and that he would come and make his home with them, and then he promised to send the Holy Spirit who will teach them and remind them of Jesus's teachings.

Jesus was speaking to the disciples about the special relationship that exists between himself and his followers. It is a relationship that is built on love and trust. We know that we are loved, and we respond to that love with trust in Jesus and obedience to his word. It is also a relationship that involves communication – and not just our communication with Jesus. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit who communicates with us and shows us what it is that Jesus is leading, or asking, or calling us to do. This is good news that is meant to give us strength and courage as we move through life and as we encounter setbacks or closed doors or difficulties. We can look for and *expect* to receive the loving guidance that will help us move forward, and we can expect to be directed – sometimes through opportunities and doors that close and redirect our course; sometimes through brand new opportunities that we weren't expecting; sometimes through a combination of both. We can be sure that Jesus will do what he has promised, but what can we do?

There is an important thing that Jesus says about obeying his word, and sometimes we just don't want to do that. When a door closes, instead of accepting it as a "no" from the Lord, sometimes we want to keep pushing and keep trying to make it work. It's a form of disobedience, and when we try to push through the no we have received, it often introduces complications and difficulties into our lives that might otherwise have been avoided. If the Lord closes a door to us, we may not like it, and we may not be able to imagine or see any other potential opportunities, but if the Lord has closed it, we can *trust* that

he has closed the door because he loves us. There may be other factors at play as well- factors that are bigger than we are or factors that involve other people- things that only God in God's infinite wisdom knows and understands- but we can always be sure that when Jesus directs us, even by closing doors, that it is because he loves us, and it is for our good. Paul and his companions listened to Jesus, and they accepted the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even when it meant that they were held up and stuck for some period of time. Even when they may have felt discouraged or frustrated. They accepted the no, and waited for the yes.

As they waited for the yes, one thing they did do is that they tried something else, and as we try to find our way forward, if a door closes, it's ok to try another one. Sometimes, when we meet some resistance or a door closes, there is a temptation to give up completely or a temptation to do nothing but stew in our negative emotions. When the Spirit said no to Paul and the others about going to Asia, they didn't keep pushing to go to Asia. Instead, they tried to go to Bithynia. When a door is closed to us, it isn't always immediately clear what our next step should be, but we can try something else, and one of two things will happen. Either the way will be opened to us, and we can walk right through, or it won't be like the way wasn't opened for Paul to go to Bithynia. The second closed door didn't mean that Jesus had abandoned them. It didn't mean that Jesus loved them any less or that the journey was over for good. It just meant that the door that the Spirit would open hadn't been revealed yet. It meant more waiting. More trusting. More obedience- all things that are hard, but all things that we can do through Christ who strengthens us.

In the Spirit's timing, not Paul's, the way forward was revealed, and while they may not have known or understood all the reasons why the Spirit had prevented them from going to Asia or Bithynia, when Lydia and her whole household were baptized, they could see reasons to give thanks for the guidance they had received. How often this is the testimony of God's people when we obey Jesus's leading and trust his word to us. No one likes to have a door shut, or slammed in their face, and it can be troubling in all kinds of ways when it happens. We may be troubled by all kinds of things as we wait and watch for Jesus to return, but the good news that is proclaimed to us today is that he has given us himself for the meantime. He has given us his word and the Spirit, and he will help us with and through all the things that trouble us – whether it's a door that has been closed or anything else. "Peace I leave with you," Jesus says. "My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Amen.