

Title: “Escape”

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John 20:19-31

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Lesson: *“Peace be with you.” These were words of comfort for the disciples and they are words of comfort for us, today. Through Christ we find our freedom and we find our peace.*

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

A month ago, the Youth Group held their lock-in and, as part of that tradition, we take them to some event. For a couple of years, it was an entertainment center that offered Whirly Ball, Laser Tag, and Bowling. Last year they went to Round One, an arcade and bowling alley. And this year, we took them to an Escape Room. If you have never been to one, or are unfamiliar with what one is, let me paint a picture for you. About 20 youth, and several adults arrived at a poorly lit converted warehouse around 9pm on a Friday night. We entered through the main door - a door that was situated in the back of the building - and immediately to our left were several open-ended cages; cages that were used for axe throwing, and all of the occupied with young adults. In front of us was the reception desk and on the back wall were about 20 various types of axes - all different sizes and weights, and all with various degrees of intimidation. To our right were several small lockers and we would find out soon that they were used to house all of the cell phones and other electronic gadgets from the youth. The rule was simple: you were not allowed to enter into any escape room with anything that could record an event or reach out to the internet. Now, as a parent and as an adult, there were several details that I mentioned that caused me a bit of concern, but the lockers were not included on that list. But the youth? Those lockers were the *only* thing on their list. You could see the hesitation in their acceptance and consternation that this rule was causing them. Even before being locked in a room together, they were already feeling anxious and distressed.

In today's Gospel reading we find the disciples locked in a room together. Verse 19 states that

¹⁹On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

A week later, they were still huddled together, locked away from the world. Verse 26:

²⁶Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

Their trepidation was far more justified than our youth's because their very lives were at risk. At any moment, they believed that the Jews or even the Romans would gather them up and do to them what had been done to Jesus. And so, in their fear, they assembled in this one room and locked themselves away from the world. They were confused about the events that had just transpired only days before and were uncertain and petrified about what the future might hold for them. They needed direction, answers, *something* that would help them decide their next move.

Back at the escape room, the youth and adults were split into three different groups - and each was locked away in their respective rooms. The goal was simple: escape. In one hour, they had to solve all of the clues necessary to open the exit door. They were also given three lifelines - three times that they could call for a hint. And with that, the clock started counting down and they started working. It was very interesting to watch how quickly they evolved from an independent mindset to one dependent upon each other. In a period of only 5 minutes they went from searching for that first clue by themselves to near constant communication with each other - receiving and sending even the smallest bits of information out through the entire group. The small bit of pressure that they were under, even though it was self-imposed, was enough to modify their behavior and their reliance on each other for support and encouragement.

And as I watched them, I thought about my life and the lives of those around me - the lives of many of you. Every week, at every service, we pray for many of our members by name. And, if you have subscribed to our Prayer Chain you receive emails on a regular basis about the prayer requests of these, and other members of our church. And when I read these emails, and when I have conversations with you, I hear the stress; I hear the concern; I hear the uncertainty. I can feel the pressure that you are under and it makes me want to gather together with you, to lock myself in this room of your life and stand there beside you. And I'm confident that if I were to ask each one of you, the response would be the same: that you, too feel the pressure that they are under and that you too want to provide support and comfort and encouragement. Of course you do! That's what being a Christian is about. That's what it means to be a follower of Christ: to love God and to love and serve others. But if you have ever taken any type of counsel training like Stephen Ministries you know that you can't help someone by jumping into the quicksand with them.

And our disciples were learning that too while being locked in the room together. There was nothing that they could do as a group to change their situation; well, almost nothing. They could pray and although it doesn't state it in the passage, I believe that much of the time they spent together was spent doing exactly that. I imagine that just like our youth, they quickly moved from being independent to being dependent upon each other for support and encouragement. I image that they prayed constantly as a group, as a church. I can almost hear their petitions as they cried out to Christ for the needs of each other and for the needs of the entire group. What they were doing is what we practice every week: we call out to God in a unified voice for strength and healing and wisdom. We call out for direction and answers.

And in the midst of their worry, in the midst of their prayers, Jesus showed up, not as a vision or a spirit but as a real person, with hands and feet still pierced. He showed up and invited them to approach him, to touch his hands and feet and know that he is real and that he was there in their presence. And he did this not just for them but for us, too. So that we, too can have complete confidence that when we gather as a church, and when we cry out to him, he not only hears us, but

he's *with* us: at *this* moment, at *this* time. His appearance says to them and to us, "Look. I know what pain is. I know the fear that you are going through. I hear you today when you call out to me; I hear you because I am right here in your midst. Approach me and know that I stand beside you."

<Pause>

Christ suffered and died on a cross. A death that was unimaginable and undeserved. And he did it *because* of the pain that we are going through. He did it *because* of the sin that exists in all of us. And three days later he rose again, defeating death so that he could stand in the presence of his disciples; so that he can stand in our presence today, and proclaim peace.

"Peace be with you." Jesus says. "Peace be with you." He says again.

In the midst of our anxiety, our suffering, and our worry, Jesus brings comfort with his presence. The apostles, after receiving the Holy Spirit, found strength and peace. They were no longer anxious about what lay outside those locked doors. They no longer worried about what the future held for them. Quite simply, they were free. And filled with confidence from the Holy Spirit they broke through the doors and reentered the world. And they proclaimed the good news of the gospel without fear of any consequence. Their anxiety, their worry, their stress was replaced with Christ's peace.

And this same peace he offers us. He calls you to place your anxiety, your worries, and your stress in his hands. He wants to exchange them for his peace. Will you let him? Will you hand over all that concerns you, all that ails you and receive that which he offers you? That which he died to give you? "Peace be with you," he says to you this morning. How will you respond?

Let us pray

Almighty God and father, we come together as a church today to worship you but we also gather because we hurt, because we suffer, and because we sin. Lord, hear us as we cry out to you all that is on our mind and all that weighs us down. Lord, be here with us and cover us with your peace, a peace that only you can offer.

In your name we pray. Amen