

Unlocking the Heart
 Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 16:5-11
 Reading from the New Testament: John 20:19-31

That. It is a rather overused and innocuous word, often stricken by editors and abused by students looking to meet minimum word counts for term papers. Yet, as a determiner, **that** can carry significant weight. Without it, Boomers might never have heard of Marlo Thomas and St. Jude Hospital would have lost its most public face. She wasn't just another girl; she was **That Girl**. How many criminals would have escaped police lineups unscathed without the unsung determiner flowing from the lips of the witness? "That's the one, Detective!" How many consumers would be left unsatisfied if they left the lot with a car, any car, but not **that** car, the specific car they had pointed out to the salesman? Or how about at the bakery when laboring over the choice of a donut. This one? No, no, no! **That** one.

Sometimes, the words we pass over or ignore in scripture may constitute an essential piece of the author's message. After Mary Magdalene offered the disciples eyewitness testimony of her encounter with the risen Christ, John's Gospel reports, "When it was evening on that day..." It wasn't just *any* day or *another* day, but was that day,

referring to the day of Christ's resurrection and more. You see, the phrase ***that day*** in the Hebrew Bible and in Jesus' earthly witness had eschatological significance. What'd he say? Yes, eschatological, i.e. bearing witness to the *day of the Lord*, the promise of God's consummation of all things; the confession so eloquently articulated by the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, "But all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

To the exiled, the prophet Isaiah proclaims, "Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in **that day** they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" Jesus updates this theme in John's 14th chapter when he promises the disciples, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On **that day** you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

On **that day**, or what the legendary vocalist Mahalia Jackson called *That great gettin' up mornin'*, when "all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well," we all shall see and know that our God

reigns. Well, John wants us to understand that the day the tomb was found empty, the day a risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, the day Jesus shows up in a fear-locked room, **is that day**. Jesus is risen. God does reign.

"When it was evening on **that** day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them." Now, the disciples had heard Mary's report of her encounter with the risen Jesus, and while John doesn't reveal their reaction to Mary's news, he does indicate that they remained behind locked doors, fearful of what yet may befall them.

You can't blame them, just as you cannot blame Thomas for his reticence later. It had been one whiplash of a week for the disciples, flung from a coronation parade to a hostile arrest to a mockery of a trial to the propagandized animus of an angry mob shouting *Crucify him*; to a hill called Golgotha and its torturous cross. Whether he had confessed it to his fellow disciples or not, we know that Peter had already been harassed and frightened right into denial. And don't forget, in John's Gospel when Jesus was arrested, Peter had gone after the high priest's

slave with a sword. I'd be hiding too. Even Clemenza would have been going to the mattresses.

Like Mary Magdalene, Peter had seen the empty tomb, but rather than joy and hope, the experience had left him confused and afraid; and Mary's report of her encounter with the risen Jesus had not alleviated Peter's dis-ease. Lock those doors! We can appreciate that, can't we?

So, let's all come together for a big ol' group hug! Not happenin'. Truth be told, I wouldn't be the one asking you to do that had Covid 19 never even shown up. Social distancing? I've been doing that my whole life!

All kidding aside, Donna asked me this week what I miss most from our pre-pandemic days? That's easy. I miss this. I miss you, the community of Christ gathered for worship. I miss the informal conversations, the spontaneous catching up. I miss the sound of children in the halls. I miss the utter joy of a full sanctuary. I miss the profound grace of recognition, to know and to be known. I miss holding an infant in the sacred space of baptism. I miss little angels with tinsel halos and shepherds in bathrobes. I miss full choir lofts rich

with the sound of glorious anthems. I miss you. But common sense and medical knowledge and reasonable fear mean those moments will have to wait.

"And the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear..." It's been such a paradox this week. The glorious beauty of green lawns and bright flowers and budding trees under the spotlight of a shining sun in a crystal clear, Carolina blue sky crashes into the reality of people suffering and dying, health care professionals overstressed and at great risk, Depression era levels of unemployment, small business and restaurant owners facing impossible circumstances and the quashing of dreams, the immuno-compromised trapped in quarantine, the breaking of which could have lethal consequences.

"The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear." We can relate. Grief over lost normalcy. Trepidation over when there will be a new normal and what that will look like. And as with the disciples in that locked room, it is in this environment that the risen Christ appears. And check this out. One could expect that this would be a literal "come to Jesus meeting," where a risen and resentful Jesus gives the disciples a Bobby Knightesque tongue-lashing for scattering

after his arrest. However, what they get is a risen Lord, whose first words to the frightened are this, "Peace be with you." In fact, in the brief distance our text travels, he says it three times, "Peace be with you."

Those words do not negate the legitimate fear the disciples are experiencing or the real threat they are facing or the doubt Thomas is experiencing, but when taken together, the words and the source of those words can make the difference between a life defined by death and a life driven by hope; the difference between a mind shackled by fear and a spirit lifted by faith. Writ large, it's the difference between the separatist/survivalist out there buying guns, building bunkers, hoarding the Charmin versus the mother/daughter, following safe practices, keeping social distance, wearing appropriate masks, but finding creative ways to insure that the isolated, the immuno-compromised have something to eat. It's the difference between person on the verge of a hissy fit at the cable office because they were only allowing two to enter at a time versus the three generations of one family forming an in-house assembly line, producing masks for the safety of others. It's the difference between the conspiracy-obsessing,

rumor mongering, blame assigning FaceBook friend versus the 91-year old California twins who can't go out for their daily mile walk but can go out on their balcony and be the life of a community's daily pep rally. "We come back into the apartment with a big smile on our faces every day," said Joyce, who said she loves to "make a big racket" at the rallies by banging a metal colander with a spoon. "Joyce and I find it so uplifting," Jackie said. "Maybe just being able to scream and sing and holler is good for the soul."

"Peace be with you." That's no prosaic promise, it's real, as evidenced by what happens next inside the locked room. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." For John, Easter evening is Pentecost. No need to wait. Let's get on with it. Even when life is constrained and threats are real, the Spirit of God has the power to open your hearts in a way that transforms your experience of whatever limitations or threats you face.

Among Paul's most quotable quotes is found in his encouragement to Christians in Philippi. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say,

Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Do you know where Paul was when he wrote this? In prison. The dude's being featured in an episode of *Locked Up Abroad* and he's rhapsodizing on joy! That's what the life-giving breath of God can do. In this same letter, Paul says, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me." That, my friends, is the work of God's Spirit that cannot be restrained even when we are.

I miss you. But I rejoice in and am amazed by the ways I see the Spirit, undaunted by the pandemic, at work in our family of faith here at South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church. Who found their heart was lifted by Easter's virtual choir, a witness literally broadcast across the country? Who felt the weight of the cross and the selfless love of Christ

as members and staff read the passion narrative and a lone voice sang in lament? Who has been encouraged and nurtured through Zoom meet-ups, bedtime stories, family worship opportunities, the peace of Evensong, the call from a deacon?

I miss you ... and yet, I feel the rejoicing of a community bound in love, connected and enlivened through the Spirit. So, peace be with you, and I know, through God's Spirit it will. "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." For our God reigns. Amen.