Crying shame: John 20:19-31

by M. Craig Barnes in the April 6, 2004 issue

When I was in grad school, my family moved into an apartment in South Chicago. When we saw that the door of the apartment had four locks, we wondered why we needed so many. I soon discovered that the benefit was mostly emotional. When we got inside at night, after being worried about whatever, we could shut the door on the world and turn lots of little levers. “Click, click, click.”

I think of that door when I’m listening to people describe how they cope with their fears. They are keeping their hearts behind a door with lots of locks because something out there makes them afraid. If someone tries to get in before they’re invited, especially if that heart has been hurt before, they will hear the “click” of the lock.

On the night of the first Easter, the disciples were huddled together behind a locked door. What were they afraid of? I don’t think they were just worried that those who killed Jesus would kill them as well. The fear went deeper. Maybe they didn’t want to deal with the scorn of those who knew they had failed. They had even failed at protecting Jesus. In spite of all their earlier bravado, they were afraid of the cross. And ashamed.

Like the disciples, we try to hide when we’re ashamed. We keep our hearts locked up tightly because we know the truth about ourselves, and the truth is that we are not what we want to be, or even what we pretend to be.

Garrison Keillor said, “We always have a backstage view of ourselves.” We let the audience see only the neatly arranged stage. But behind the curtain all kinds of things are lying around: old failures, hurts, guilt and shame. We hear that we are living in a shameless society, and that people are no longer bothered by shame. I don’t believe it. Shame plagues our souls. Psychologists tell us that shame sweeps over us when we overstep our abilities, or when our fantasy about who we would like to be encounters the backstage reality of who we really are.

Nothing is more crippling to our souls than working at hiding shame. We lock up more and more doors, sealing off more and more rooms of the heart to prevent our true selves from being discovered. We think we are keeping the world out, but in fact we are keeping ourselves locked in.

At the center of the gospel is the proclamation that Jesus Christ has come looking for us. According to John’s text, he walks right through the locked door to find us. He shows us his wounds from the cross, which are the marks of our forgiveness. Then he says, “Peace be with you.” You are forgiven, peace is restored to your troubled soul, and you are free.

The word for forgiveness in Greek can even be translated “to free,” or “to let go.” Thus, the gospel story is always a freedom story. To those whose sin was obvious, and who had been cast out of community because of their shame, Jesus kept saying things like, “Your sins are forgiven. Be restored.” But to the Pharisees, who were able to keep a good show going in front of the curtain, Jesus said, “You must repent.” It was as if to say, “Stop covering up the shame.” So to all of us Jesus says, “Just stop hiding.”

After finding the disciples, forgiving them and restoring peace to their souls, Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit and the ministry of grace. He said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Here, Jesus is entrusting us with his own ministry of forgiveness.

There are so many things we can do for ourselves in the spiritual life. We can read the Bible, pray and even worship on our own. But when it comes to hearing that we are forgiven, we need a priest. That's the priest's calling—to declare the absolution of sins.

If we do not forgive those who hurt us, the only alternative is to retain the sins. To retain means to hold, and to hold onto hurt is to lock ourselves into the identity of victim. In the words of Lewis Smedes, "When you forgive you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you."

So you can be either a priest or a victim. Those are your only options. What you cannot do is just forget about the hurt, or deny it or store it up to use later. To be a priest is to free others of shame and yourself of hurt. To be a victim is to hold onto hurt, which is like holding onto a disease. It will eat up your soul. It doesn't matter what you do, or how hard you try—you are never going to have a better past.

When the hurts are great, it is hard to be the priest. We wonder, "How can I ever get to the place of giving up such overwhelming hurt?" But we are not on our own for this. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit before he called us to forgive. The work of the Spirit is to bind us into the work of Jesus Christ.

What this means is that we disciples are not called to produce forgiveness. We're called to be the priest pronouncing that which has been produced on the cross. We're called to open the locks and throw open the door, and walk back into the world as a priest who is unafraid. The only alternative is to live in shrinking prisons of hurt.