

**First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham**  
**The Rev. Amy Morgan**  
**“Strong Faith on Shaky Ground”**  
**Confirmation Sunday, May 16, 2010**  
**Revelation 3:7-13**

**Revelation 3:7-13**

*‘And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

*These are the words of the holy one, the true one,*

*who has the key of David,*

*who opens and no one will shut,*

*who shuts and no one opens:*

*I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

How many of you have ever locked yourself out of your house? When I graduated from college, my whole family made the trip out to New York, and we were coming back to my apartment in Queens late at night after all the graduation celebrations. We were all wearing our best duds, and we were exhausted from the excitement of the day and the mile-long hike from the subway station to my apartment. When we walked up to my apartment building, I suddenly realized with dismay that I wasn't carrying my purse. I had left it in my grandparents' hotel room. The building was locked, and we had no key. My roommate was in Texas, and my landlords were in Greece. We had arrived home, but we had no way to get in. In the end, we sent my brother up the fire escape to the balcony and discovered with much relief that the sliding glass door on the second floor was open. After the exhausting possibility of having to get all the way back into the city to the hotel and all the way back home in order to get in, that open door was a tremendous relief. Understand that this incident, while illustrative, has not be unique throughout my lifetime. I have gained a small reputation around the church for losing my keys or locking them in my office.

The relief I felt that night when we were able to get into my apartment, or that I feel every time someone discovers which odd located I abandoned my church keys in, can't possibly compare however, with the relief felt by Christians around the world who have encountered the work of Brother Andrew. Brother Andrew is a bible smuggler. During the height of the Cold War, Communist countries were keeping a tight control on their borders, but Brother Andrew felt called to support and encourage Christians behind the Iron Curtain. In a time and place where Christianity was outlawed, Christians had no power, and every door was closed to them. Churches in the Soviet Union were small and weak, worshiping behind closed doors, in people's homes or secret hideouts.

Once, when Brother Andrew attempted to cross the border into Romania with a Volkswagen full of bibles, he at first thought he was in luck. There were only half a dozen cars in front of him, and he felt the crossing should go quickly and smoothly.

But when it took forty minutes to inspect the first car, he began to worry...literally everything that family in the first car was carrying had to be taken out and spread on the ground.

Every car in line was put through the same routine. The fourth inspection lasted well over an hour. The guards took the driver inside and kept him there while they removed hub caps, took his engine apart, removed seats.

Brother Andrew started praying when there was just one car ahead of him in the line. Any serious inspection will show up the Romanian Bibles right away.

He prayed, "Lord, I know that no amount of cleverness on my part can get me through this border search. Dare I ask for a miracle? Let me take some of the Bibles out and leave them in the open where they will be seen. Then, Lord I cannot possibly be depending on my own stratagems, can I? I will be depending utterly upon You."

So while the last car was going through its chilling inspection, Brother Andrew managed to take several Bibles from their hiding places and pile them on the seat beside him.

When it was his turn, he put the little VW in low gear, inched up to the officer standing at the left side of the road, handed the officer his papers, and started to get out. But the officer's knee was against the door, holding it closed. He looked at Brother Andrew's photograph in the passport, scribbled something down, shoved the papers back at him, and abruptly waved him on.

Brother Andrew inched forward, waiting to be stopped and searched, disbelieving that the door to the border could have been opened to him so easily. When it was finally clear that he had indeed passed and the search of the next car behind him began, his heart raced with the excitement of "having caught such a spectacular glimpse of God at work."

Brother Andrew's work of supporting and encouraging persecuted Christians around the world continues today in a ministry called Open Doors.

<http://www.opendoorsusa.org/content/view/361/12/>

Like the Christians Open Doors ministries supports, the Christians in Philadelphia had doors closed on them and they had to worship behind closed doors.

The image of Jesus as the one "who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens," and the promise of "an open door, which no one is able to shut" were significant for the Philadelphian Christians. As we hear in this letter, there had been some animosity between these Christians and the local synagogue. What scholars believe likely happened is that, like many first-century churches, the Christian community originated in the local synagogue. However, because of persecution or disbelief or inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian faith, the Christians were eventually driven out of the synagogue. The door to their religious and cultural home was closed on them.

So the Philadelphian Christians were shut out of the synagogue, but the one who holds the key of David, the symbol of the Messianic line, opened a door no one, not even the leaders of the local synagogue, could shut. You see, exclusion from the synagogue meant not only exclusion from worship and possibly friends

and family. It meant, at least in the eyes of the Jews, that they would be excluded from relationship with God. This new door that Jesus opens for them, this door that no one is able to shut, is a gateway to God, a constant and present connection to God. Earthly doors were shut on the Philadelphian Christians, but a heavenly door was permanently opened.

This letter tells us that the church in Philadelphia has little power. This powerlessness might have had a number of contributing factors. First, the city was rather close to a fault line and had been rocked by a number of powerful earthquakes. The power of the earth's movements no doubt contributed to the challenges of this church in becoming strong and established. The one thing that did flourish in Philadelphia despite the disruption of earthquakes was the grape harvest. Philadelphia became known for its wine production, which made it a center for worship of the god Dionysus. Now, the Dionysian cult was one focused on fertility, agriculture, wine and nature. But there was also a more mysterious cult associated with Dionysus featuring secret rites and wild, intoxicated rituals. The church in Philadelphia had to stand firm in the face of both rejection by the local Jewish powers and the allure of worshipping this powerful and popular god.

Even in their powerlessness, the Christians in Philadelphia kept God's "word of patient endurance." Throughout all the letters to the churches, this "endurance" is a supreme value. One scholar argues that this kind of endurance translates more closely as non-violent resistance. The churches were to actively resist the temptations and oppression of the surrounding culture. For each church this meant something different depending upon their particular context. In one church the temptation may have been to worship Caesar while in another the resistance had to be against false teachers. In Philadelphia, the Christians had to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord in the face of rejection from their own religious kindred and the allure of a powerful cult. This weak church shows its strength in being the only one of the seven churches to receive no reproach. It is simply warned to "hold fast," hang in there, knowing that there is a door open to them.

We are blessed enough to live in a time and place where we don't have to worship behind closed doors. And yet, American Christianity is in decline like in no other point in history. We have laws that protect us from discrimination based on our faith, and yet very few of us feel permitted or empowered to speak about our faith publicly.

Our Confirmands have done something extremely counter-cultural this year. They have studied and applied themselves. They have gone out into the community to serve and live out their faith. And today they will all publicly profess their faith in front of family, friends, and this church community.

This church is full of people, young and old, who keep God's word of patient endurance, who non-violently resist the surrounding culture. One Confirmand missed an important basketball tournament to attend the Confirmation retreat. One young boy in our congregation asked for donations to Fort Street's Open Door ministry instead of birthday gifts. In times of need, our community devises creative ways to support and show Christ's love to each other. I love what I do here so much because I get to watch and empower what you all do here.

The church in Philadelphia is rewarded for its patient endurance, its non-violent resistance, by becoming a pillar in God's temple. Now, in the New Jerusalem that is described in Revelation, there is no temple, because God will reside with the people. God will be the temple. This means that the promise to the Philadelphian Christians is that they will get to be an intimate part of God.

Now on this pillar will be written three new names. Understand that it was common in the first century for wealthy donors to a building or temple to have their names inscribed on the pillar. Some things never change, I guess. Of all of the new stadiums and buildings and arenas being sponsored by and named after corporations, the one that has cheesed me the most was Mile High Stadium in Denver. I happen to be a Broncos fan, and the new Mile High is a beautiful stadium. And for something like \$11 a year per family for 10 years, the stadium could have been called Mile High Stadium. Instead, the powers that be decided they wanted it paid in full and there was a corporation offering to do so. So now we have Invesco Field at Mile High. I don't even think Invesco is still in business anymore, but the stadium is now stuck with that awful monicer.

The church in Philadelphia did much better. On this pillar (that is the church), the three new names that will be inscribed on it are: the name of God, the name of the city of God, (the new Jerusalem), and Christ's own new name. The church will not only be an intimate part of God. It will be clear for all to see that these people belong to God – signed, sealed, and delivered. No Invesco church at Philadelphia.

So I have two questions for us today. The first is specifically for the Confirmands, but it's something for us all to consider. *To Confirmands* As I mentioned earlier, you all have done something extremely counter-cultural this year. You have held fast to your faith, through questions and doubts, through worries and stress, through confusion and possibly even a little boredom. In your baptism, you were given an open door. You were given new life in Jesus Christ. You were given the name of Child of the Covenant. Now the question is, will you claim that new name? What name will you wear out in the world? Will it be Nike or Polo or Microsoft or Cadillac? Or will it be the name of God, the one who brought you into life and gives you new life each day?

My question to the church is this: how will we be the church of the open door? How will we proclaim Christ not just within the confines of this building but everywhere we go in our daily lives? The Christians in Philadelphia didn't get in trouble for worshiping together in each others' homes. They got in trouble because they made sure people knew about it. How will we, like Brother Andrew, ensure that those churches, or those people, who are powerless know that there is a door open to them? A door opened by Christ himself, which no one can shut. I want to challenge us to be the church of the open door. I want people in the community to know and see what we're doing here. And I want us to invite everyone in. It will require us to be counter-cultural, to do things that make us uncomfortable. But what I think we already know is, every time we lose our keys, every time we lose our ability to open new doors, God makes a way. And God's way, God's open door, always comes as a great relief and a great blessing.

Let's pray:

God of our future,  
we thank you for the open door you have set before us in Jesus Christ.  
Help us to keep your word,  
to live out your kingdom in spite of how the world around us might encourage us to live.  
Bless this church and all your churches with the gift of an open door.  
In Christ's name. Amen.