

SERMON – 27/4/25

'The Locked Room'

John 20:19-31

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" (John 20:19,21,26)

Last Sunday we spoke about the puzzlement and the fear that were the first responses to the news of Christ's resurrection and the accusation that the Easter message was nonsense. I invited you last week to tease out the strands of the puzzling story at the heart of the Christian faith and face your questions head on; to ask God to draw near to you in whatever makes you fearful; & to take a good look for yourself at the evidence for Christ's resurrection.

How has that gone for you this week? I wouldn't be at all surprised if it has been squeezed out by other things – there has certainly been plenty going on in the world stage and closer to home – so let's take a look at what John describes in this morning's reading of the week following the first Easter nearly 2000 years ago.

Time and time again, Jesus had spoken to His disciples about what must happen – 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the Law, and be killed and after three days rise again.' But they wouldn't hear of it. They knew better than the Son of God. Peter rebuked Him, James and John made plans for the time when they thought Jesus would be king in Jerusalem and they would be at his right and left hands. None of His followers understood what He was saying and they made no effort to find out or to prepare themselves for what the Lord said was about to happen.

So now they have been suddenly bereft of their Friend and Teacher and Lord, and they are utterly broken and helpless. It is evening on the first day of the week, on the third day following Jesus' crucifixion; they are cowering in a locked room genuinely fearful that they might meet the same fate as the Lord had, at the hands of the crowd or of the authorities; they are grieving, they feel abandoned and frightened, they are wondering what on earth lies ahead for them, and they have no-one to turn to. At least, that's what they think.

Yet at that very point in their lives, Jesus Himself comes and stands among them, saying, 'Peace be with you!' He shows them His nail-pierced hands and His spear-riven side and brings great joy to them, as everything He had said to their unlistening ears so many times before His death falls into place.

To Thomas, who was absent the first time that Jesus came and who would not believe the testimony of the other disciples, Jesus comes again a week later and shows Himself specially, leading him to a convinced faith and to a transformed life. And what I would like to encourage you to take hold of this morning is that to us who live at such a distance in time (though not in significance) from the events we read of in the Bible, Jesus still comes into our own particular situations and circumstances and can change our lives if we will only give heed to what He is saying instead of putting off yet again our thinking about the deep things of life.

Let me challenge you this morning to look full in the face of those things that you would probably much rather not think or talk about, things that could bring you a great deal of trouble and pain if they are brought to the surface by circumstances that are outwith your control. I'd like to home in on three such things – perhaps you can think of others – and consider how Christ deals with them in us as believers.

The first one takes us back to what we were thinking about last week – fear. It is one of the most paralyzing of human conditions and it is little wonder that we try to suppress it – we know that it holds us back and so we try to brave it out, often by denying to others and even to ourselves that we are frightened. Maybe we don't mind admitting the phobias that others think of as irrational or even humorous – but what about the deeper fears that trouble us. What if we (or someone close to us) falls seriously ill? What about death – our own death or that of someone close to us? How often do we talk openly about such things? How often do we even think about them? How regularly do we pray about them? Perhaps we are afraid that people will think us weak or silly; perhaps we think that somehow talking about such matters will make them more likely to happen. We may not care to admit it, but how much we are like those disciples of Jesus that first Easter evening, locked in a room cowering from fear.

Jesus came to them, though the door was locked. The very first thing that Jesus did was to speak a word of peace to them, in a phrase that appeared three times in our reading this morning, that echoes down the ages and sounds as clearly here today as it did then. 'Peace be with you!' It was no veneer of calm that He was offering them but the peace and the wholeness that in Hebrew is called shalom and which Paul would later describe as the peace that passes understanding, a peace that goes deeper than the conscious mind to the far reaches of the spirit.

And the reason the peace which Jesus brings is so significant is that it deals with the root causes of fear – it transcends illness and death and all other fearful things, and it envelopes us. To the fearful disciples Jesus brought a peace that filled them with joy. To you, if you are willing to admit your fears to yourself and to God, Jesus will bring the same all-encompassing peace. Are you willing to open your ears to hear Him and your hearts to receive Him? To you Jesus says this morning: 'Peace be with you!'

Another thing that can niggle away in the deepest corners of our being is doubt. We doubt ourselves and we doubt our own abilities; we doubt the promises and the sincerity of others, and sometimes we doubt even the Gospel message. Not always, not consciously perhaps, but sometimes there is a question mark hovering in the air over this or that aspect of our faith. And how much our lives are undermined because of it. Uncertainty troubles us and leads us to cling on more and more to things we can be certain of, things we can see and touch, things we can prove with our minds, things we can be sure of because we have experienced them in the past. But what do those certainties give to us in the upheavals that may come upon us in the present? And what about the future, all unknown to us? What happens if someone asks us, or if circumstances force us, or if God calls us to stride out along an uncharted path in life? Before we are willing to set out along the way, we demand all kinds of assurances that there is no way we are going to be let down or made a fool of.

Thomas was rather like that in this morning's passage: "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into His side I will not believe." (v.25b) And often we behave in exactly the same way. Thomas demanded

evidence and as Jesus responded to that very specific request Thomas touched the risen Christ whose resurrection he doubted. It will not always be that way: "Because you have seen me, Jesus said to Thomas, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (v.29) But to the doubter, Jesus still brings faith if we are genuinely seeking Him and not just out to test Him because we are not willing to take Him at His Word. The Gospel tells us that 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples,' and that 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.' (v.31)

To doubting Thomas, Jesus brought reassurance and an answer to his prayer. To you, if you are willing to accept that the future may not always be seen or certain; if you are willing to reach out and put your hand in the Lord's hand, Jesus brings the same reassurance through His Word. Are you willing to trust Him even (and perhaps especially) when you cannot see? To you today Jesus says: 'Peace be with you!'

And a third thing, finally, that can damage our lives if it is allowed to go unchecked, is a sense of aimlessness or lack of purpose. Questions about the meaning of life are all too rarely asked and hordes of human beings charge on through the years with attitudes and goals that are little different from those of our unbelieving neighbours – eat, work, sleep, reproduce, repeat.

No sooner had the Lord Jesus risen from the dead and made Himself known to the disciples than He was commissioning them for service, He was calling them to go out in His name and change the world in a wonderful new way. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that He breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' If you forgive anyone's sins their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven." He gave them a very particular mission in life – go and make disciples, baptising and teaching. He called them to a new way of living – the way of forgiveness. And He equipped them with power from on high through the Holy Spirit.

To the disciples who had spent the previous days since Jesus' death sadly, emptily, without motivation, locked in at night for

fear, held back by doubts even when news of the resurrection began to filter out, Jesus gave a purpose, a mission, and the strength in which to fulfil that mission. To you, if you are willing to accept His call, He gives the same challenge, He offers the same motivation, He provides the same power. 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' Are you willing to walk in His way of forgiveness? To you Jesus says: 'Peace be with you!'

So, how about it. Have you stopped recently to consider where you're going in life and what is going on deep within you to help or to hinder that process? Or are you just pressing on, the auto-pilot engaged, the way you've always done, coping with the little hiccups, wishing away or burying the things you'd rather not think about, desperately hoping that nothing serious will come your way? Because what happens if trouble does strike you or those close to you? Are you prepared? Where does the Lord Jesus enter into it all? Have you asked Him to deal with your fears, as He surely can? Have you asked Him – specifically asked Him – to increase your faith? Have you asked Him to fill your life and direct your paths? Ask Him these things in these days, today, now. And His promised peace will be yours.

To you Jesus says: shalom alechem, 'Peace be with you.'