



Sunday 19th April 2020

Prepared by Kathryn

Welcome to our Service

We hope that you will be touched by the love of God and kept in his peace during this difficult and unprecedented time in our world right now.

Hymn by Anna Waring 1850

In heav'nly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here.
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid,
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?

Wherever He may guide me,
No want shall turn me back;
My Shepherd is beside me,
And nothing can I lack.
His wisdom ever waketh,
His sight is never dim;
He knows the way He taketh,
And I will walk with Him.

Green pastures are before me,
Which yet I have not seen;
Bright skies will soon be o'er me,
Where darkest clouds have been.
My hope I cannot measure,
My path to life is free;
My Savior has my treasure,
And He will walk with me.



Prayer

Thank you Lord that although we are in a time of great difficulty, we are becoming more aware of the beauty around us. The Spring blossom, the sound of birds singing, and the wonder of everyday blessings we often overlook when life is busy. Please guide our world out of this pandemic in a way that is more considerate, less extravagant and wasteful, and more loving and appreciative of other people and the natural world.

Be with all those who have lost someone they loved without the opportunity to say 'goodbye' and give them peace. Open our eyes to the ways that you are at work in our lives at this time.

Amen

It's interesting how at different times and seasons, new phrases and jargon come to the fore as part of our everyday vocabulary, which we never had reason to use before.

We have been hearing Brexit terminology for several years and now we find new words and phrases on our lips as part of the Covid19 season. In particular the word '**lock-down**' describes our lives at present.

Disciples in Lock-down!



This week, I want to look at a group of people in The Bible who are in lock-down, shut away in an upstairs room for their safety. Until recently they had been living their lives; things were going well. They had become followers of Jesus and been at the heart of his ministry and teaching.

They had experienced first hand the most incredible signs, wonders and miracles.

They had experienced his authority over the whole ***arena of the natural world*** on many occasions. One time they had found themselves in the terrifying situation of being at sea when the ferocity of the wind and the surge of the waves threatened to sink the boat. To their amazement, the wind and the waves calmed immediately on his orders!



'Who is this man?' they asked as they tried to get their heads around what they had just witnessed. **'Even the wind and waves obey him!'**

They had witnessed him fast track a whole natural process by spontaneously turning water into the very best wine at a wedding when things were about to get a bit embarrassing for the host, because the wine had run out.

This group of followers had also witnessed the authority of Jesus over ***the arena of sickness and disease*** as the blind, the deaf, the paralysed, the lame, the mentally ill were healed. They had witnessed elderly people, middle-aged and children raised from the dead by Jesus and restored to their families and communities.

They had seen his authority over the ***spiritual arena*** as many people held captive and controlled by dark forces were set free.

Yet, in this passage of The Bible that we are shortly about to read, we find this same group of people in a very different place. In no time at all, life as they knew it had changed for them, due to a sudden and unexpected turn of events. Their future plans and dreams had smashed and they have no idea what the future may look like going forward and that's before they have any idea how their personal lock-down situation may be eased.

Many of us are perhaps feeling a bit like that in our current situation!

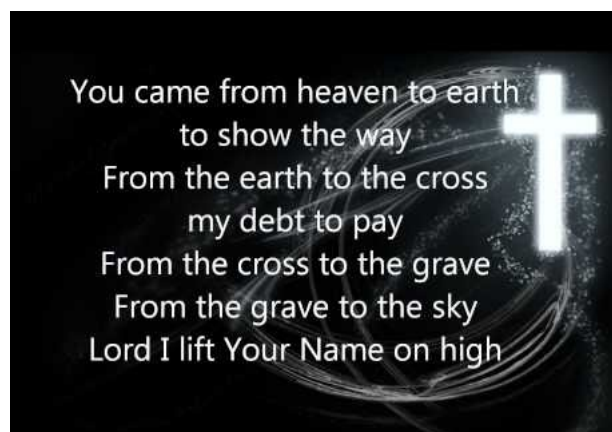
This group of people had been forced into lock-down, not because of a virus, but a political situation which was absolutely explosive, in which they were very much implicated . To go outside would not result in a fine, but likely arrest and death.

Our reading is set on a Sunday evening, the first day of the week, the day we now call

Easter Sunday, Resurrection day!

Jesus had been crucified that weekend and earlier that Sunday morning, some of them had visited his burial place and found the huge stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, the seal broken, security guards not there and the body disappeared.

The rumour is circulating that they have stolen the body and they are now hiding away, locked inside an upper room in a house in Jerusalem in fear of being hunted down and flushed out by those who are desperate to discover the body so they can stamp out the possibility that Jesus may actually have been who he said he was and risen from the dead.



Reading

John 20:19-31 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

continued

But he said to them, "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."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, **"My Lord and my God!"**

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; ***blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.***"

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

³¹ **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

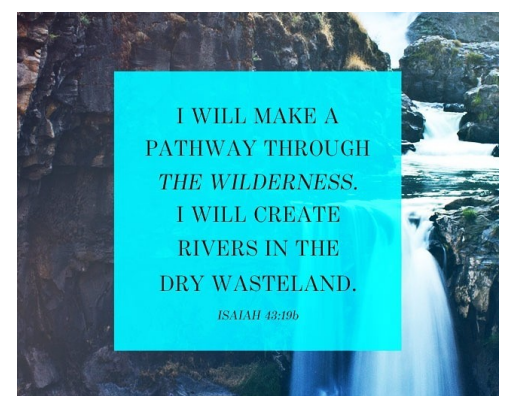


Before Jesus comes into this situation, the individuals who make up this small group of people in lock-down are not in a good place physically, emotionally or mentally. They are in shock, numb, traumatised, confused. Someone they loved, who was their future had suddenly died in the most hideous of circumstances, and it all happened so quickly. They are experiencing raw grief mixed with guilt. They deserted him when he was arrested. They are completely broken and terrified about what is going to happen to them.

We are all experiencing the effects of a lock-down in our world at present; the most surreal, bewildering situation rife with fears for the future or our loved ones. Our prayers and our admiration are with those who are fighting this virus on the front line and our hearts break for those who have paid the ultimate price as they have cared for others.

There is another kind of lock-down I want to refer to this morning and that is the lock-down that can happen in our hearts. Maybe things that are happening to us or have happened to us in the past have surpassed our human capacity to cope with or face and so we have locked down part of our hearts and our emotions so that we don't have to face the pain of it or the ways it has affected our lives, our behaviour or our relationships.

Maybe some of the emotions or fears that the group of followers experienced that evening resonate with you, or have overwhelmed you to the point that you can't function properly or see any hope whatsoever for a pathway through it.



Maybe it's something that happened in your childhood. It wasn't your fault, yet it's left you damaged and had repercussions throughout your adult life. Maybe you made a mistake as a young adult and that mistake has wrecked your life and maybe someone else's and there's nothing you can do to change it. Your life carries a huge 'if only ..'

Maybe, you lost someone and there were things you needed to say or unsay and now it's too late.

Maybe the guilt of something you have done has crippled you and you live in fear of being found out.

Whether we are struggling with the physical lock-down situation or whether we have a lock-down in parts of our heart, the thing we most need is what that group of people we read about needed; the very presence of the risen Jesus to be with us. I love this passage of The Bible and the first thing that I notice is that **despite the fact they are behind a locked door, that does not present a barrier to Jesus!**

In fact, he comes to them through a locked door twice, once on the Sunday evening when one of their group, Thomas wasn't with them and again later on when Thomas is with them in order that everyone of them might witness first-hand his presence, recognise his appearance, his voice, his mannerisms; physically touch him, examine his wounds and personally know for themselves without doubt that he is alive again.

Whatever your situation, there *is* nothing that presents any barrier for Jesus to come to you and bring his very real presence into your situation. Nothing too bad, too complicated or hopeless.



Interestingly, he doesn't necessarily need to come to them on that particular evening. They have already heard from Mary that He is alive and that he is going ahead of them to Galilee where they will see them.

I believe that it was necessary for Jesus to come to them right then for several reasons.

- ♦ **He knew they were traumatised and needing peace**
- ♦ **He wanted to show them that death is defeated and everything has changed**
- ♦ **He wanted to plug them into the new bigger, better story and their part in it, so they could move out from a place of fear.**

On both occasions that Jesus appears to them in the locked room, his first priority is to give them peace, calm their fears and reassure them.

Jesus is bigger than all your barriers and he comes to you to bring you peace and reassurance. He wants you to be free of the burden of condemnation that maybe you carry. All the loose ends and unanswered questions in your situation can be safely handed over to him—he will sort it out. Maybe your trauma is tied up in a situation or a person who isn't around anymore for you to put things right. Give it to Jesus—He will hold the tension of things that were said or unsaid or that can't now be said and replace it with his peace.

Whatever the mess, whatever you've done or not done, however complicated, however unresolvable it seems, Jesus draws near to you and says '*Peace be with you*'

Secondly, he is showing them that life is defined differently now. **Death is now no longer the final word on human existence!**

Death is reduced to a shadow and we pass right through it into our true and for-ever life. Jesus comes into their turmoil and brings not only his peace, but the most amazing hope where before there was no hope. Even in death, even beyond death, there is ever more glorious, real, abundant, inextinguishable LIFE!!



Thirdly, on this incredible visit to them during lock-down, he plugs them into a bigger, better story than they had ever known before.

He reveals that he had been on mission, sent by his Father God, and now he is sending them out with a mission and a purpose to share the incredible message that sins can be forgiven and everyone can have a fresh start.

This is the most glorious message that human beings can ever hear, and brings hope, peace and restoration into the most complex, traumatic and hopeless situations.

When Thomas has witnessed for himself the living Jesus, Jesus pronounces a blessing on all those who would come afterwards who do not have the benefit of seeing the absolute proof for themselves, but will believe based on these eyewitness accounts. **That's us!**

This account that we read is from John and we see that it is John's intention to tell the absolute truth. He says, 'We have heard, we have seen, we saw with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands—He is The Word of Life'. This event has been recorded so that we might know with certainty that Jesus is alive, believe and embrace the message of forgiveness for our sins, our mistakes, and our failures.

I want to invite you to take some time to ***pause and consider*** that he is with you right now. He is not at a distance or hindered by anything in your life, however hopeless it may seem to you. He is with you—he just is. In the quietness, ***ask him to journey with you*** into the locked areas of your heart and take the burdens, the trauma, the guilt, the despair. ***Let him carry*** the unfairness of what may have happened to you, the unresolved loose ends that steal your peace. ***Know that he promises*** never to leave you—***allow him*** to permeate the whole of your life from its very conception to now and everything in between with his peace which is beyond human understanding and meets our deepest need.

Dare to believe that he has a new, bigger better story for your life. A life that is completely forgiven and set free from everything that wants to propel you into those dark prisons that we get so stuck in. His plan for you is personal, it lifts you to a new level where he will empower you to be and do much more than you can by yourself. It's a plan that although not necessarily free of hardship is a good plan for your flourishing and best.

And so to summarise:

- ♦ ***Know*** that he, the risen Jesus is with you speaking peace into every area of your life
- ♦ ***Open your heart*** up to his forgiveness & receive his plan for you
- ♦ ***Step out into the future*** without fear, knowing that he is with you and also goes ahead of you, anticipating your every step, your every need, putting protection in place, defeating your enemies and timing every aspect of your journey through this adventure of 'walking with him' in this world and into your ultimate home already prepared by him with you and all that you are in his heart and mind.
- ♦ ***Don't stay*** locked-down in fear any longer, but experience his presence through these circumstances and be at peace.