

As I mentioned last week, this Easter season, we're taking our time to go through John's gospel and look methodically at all the resurrection stories that he accounts, which means that this week we're just focusing on one paragraph. And normally this paragraph isn't given much attention because it's linked very closely with what follows. And what follows is the story of the person who's not there when this paragraph takes place. The disciple "doubting" Thomas is the one missing. He's not with the disciples when Jesus here appears to them.

So we'll be thinking about Thomas next week, but this week we're freed up to focus all of our attention on what's happening in this intriguing paragraph and look how it begins: "When it was evening on that day, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." The disciples were sheltering in place, they'd self-isolated. They're hiding behind locked doors, afraid of the people outside. The disciples were facing the same question that we're facing. When is it safe to go out? The disciples are in lockdown and remember this is happening after the resurrection. This is the evening of the resurrection. Peter and John have already been to the empty tomb and come back. Mary Magdalene has seen the risen Lord and given her account to the disciples and yet it says the doors of the house were locked because of fear.

Fear is a natural and powerful emotion and there's a lot of it about at the moment. I was cycling down Fay Avenue the other day and a man was coming up on the pavement. He jumped to the far side of the pavement and shouted something at me. I think he was asking me to do something but he wasn't asking very nicely and I was very pleased that he had a mask on because I couldn't hear exactly what he was saying. But clearly just the sight of me on a bike had frightened him. Sometimes fear is good. Fear helps us to avoid a catastrophe. It's the fear of falling off that stops me riding too fast on my bike.

The Bible talks of fear sometimes in a positive way. We see that in the reading we had from the Epistle from 1 Peter where Peter encourages his readers to live and I quote, "in reverent fear." The meaning of fear in that context is close to the word "all". The God who we worship is magnificent, is beyond our understanding. We are always to remember that, that he is truly to be revered because he is an awesome God or an "ahh-some" God as you like to say over here. And in that sense, fear has a role to play. And yet the Bible also says not once, not twice, but 365 times the Bible says, "Be not afraid." In fact, the most common exhortation in the Bible isn't love God or love your neighbor, it's fear not. Here are some of the examples. Some of my favorites, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Or from Psalm 23, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." And from the Psalm set for today, "The Lord is with me. I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

There comes a point when fear is unhelpful, when it holds us back. I'm very mindful of this as we start to think about when the church will be allowed to reopen and that isn't going to be anytime soon. It's not going to be in the immediate future, but it will happen and I want to make sure that we're prepared for that and one thing we could be doing now is addressing any fears that people may have about returning. We've all been locked up in quarantine for weeks. We're quite rightly going to have concerns about all being together again, and the staff and the vestry are looking at a plan to manage our transition. We're getting guidance from the Bishop about how we transition back into the building to make sure that's a safe and as comfortable as possible.

We need to learn to live again without fear. We need to continue to be sensible, cautious even, but not fearful. The disciples learned here to live without fear and what made the difference to them? It wasn't the circumstances on the other side of the locked door. What changed was what

happened inside the room, not outside. See the rest of the opening verse from this paragraph, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'peace be with you.'" Peace. That's the antidote to the fear that we feel. A vaccine for the Coronavirus may be a year away, but antidote to fear is here now. Jesus still offers his people peace. Let's seek the peace that Jesus offers.

We can meditate on any of those 365 verses in the Bible. They're all there on Google. There's one for everyday. Find a few moments in each day to be still, to be quiet, to ask God to give us His peace in these difficult and distressing times. When in dread, remember Jesus rose from the dead. He will come near when we're quarantined with fear. Here's some great advice from St. Paul. "Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Wouldn't quarantine be so much more bearable if we let God's peace guard our hearts and our minds? Jesus offered the disciples His peace. He also promised them His Holy Spirit. It says, "He breathed on them and said, 'receive the Holy Spirit.'" And by so doing Jesus fulfilled his promise to the disciples that He would never leave them. The same spirit that Jesus breathed on the disciples is with his people today. Let's remember that in these long days of quarantine when it's easy to feel alone and isolated. God is with us. He dwells within us by His Spirit.

The 365 times in the Bible we're encouraged not to be afraid are usually followed by the reminder that God is with us. It was there in all of the verses that I mentioned earlier. You may have missed it, so let me read them again. "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Even though I walked through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." And here's an extra one for good measure from Deuteronomy. "Be strong

and bold. Have no fear or dread of them because it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not fail or forsake you."

The God who came to the disciples in lockdown in Jerusalem all those years ago still comes to his people with peace and the promise of the Holy Spirit. Let's try and turn off the noise and the distractions and turn to God in prayer to seek him in stillness and quiet and find within us the God who is close by. We can find him in the stillness. We can enjoy the company of the God who is always with us. And one thing that might help with that is a simple service of Compline that Rebecca is going to be offering this week and again, look out for that on the website. And remember, peace does not come from our distance, from our troubles, it comes instead from the nearness of the Savior.

Let me leave here with the last verse of the epistle that we read from Peter. "Through Jesus Christ you have come to trust in God who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory so that your faith and hope are set on God." May our trust increase and our fear decrease, and may our faith and hope be set on God now in this time of pandemic and forever. Amen.