

Leith- 22nd May John 20:19-23

Hi good morning, my name is Annie-Kate Williams for those who don't know me. I thought I would give you a little bit of a brief about myself before I launch into it. I am the intern here at Leith and Studentsoul and at the end of the internship I will be an ordained minister. I am married to Cecil for over 5 years now. And he is a mental health nurse. We did a lot of travel the past two years and coming back to Dunedin I thought would be more normal even boring- but no so- so far! We have bought a house, started new jobs and are having a baby in November so boring normal life hasn't happened yet and probably won't- but are excited about the journey. As an intern Geoff New who is part of this congregation and preached a few weeks ago, He is my preaching tutor at Knox. So if there is anything you don't agree with in my sermon please see Geoff. But seriously if you have any questions or queries about something I said today please feel free to talk to me about it after.

Easter- does that seem like a long time ago? Pentecost was last Sunday- that even feels like a long time ago! I know we are in the post Pentecost stage of the year but I want to go back to the night the disciples were gathered together with the doors locked.

Easter has just been- Jesus dies on a cross, on Friday and then rises from the dead! Resurrection- the empty tomb, Angels and grave clothes, Mary, goes to the tomb, sees it is empty. Mary sees Jesus and thinks he is a gardener at first. But it's Jesus and Jesus tells her to go and tell the other disciples. This all happens in the morning - Mary goes and tells the disciples- they come running- then we assume they go back to their homes. On the same day, on that evening, this is where the story for today happens- it's at this point that it starts.

John 20:19 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, Fear of people

Why were they locked away? Why did they fear the Jewish leaders? Growing up in Sunday school it always seemed like ahh the silly disciples. They didn't have to fear those people- God is in control. And I have read ahead and the disciples don't

die for a while. They will be fine! Well - Jesus was their leader and they have been learning to teach what Jesus taught. With Jesus. And Jesus has been killed. So it's quite understandable to me now that ohh they have reason to fear their lives. That's an understandable response, a justified response even to be afraid. We know they weren't killed right after Jesus but most of them were killed because of Jesus in the future years. Locking the doors for fear of the Jewish leaders- yea fair enough! Get it fear enough! Fearing for their lives is a very real human fear.

There would have also been confusion, grief- why did Jesus die? Why is the tomb empty? Did Mary really see Him or is that just her grief speaking? What will we do with our lives now he is gone? Why did he die? What do you think they were thinking? What kind of head space do you think the disciples were in?

Fear, confusion, grief, uncertainty but it is fear that has them in the room with the doors locked.

I went to a hall of residence first year and the first week there was about 15 people who emerged on the first Sunday morning to go to church. By the 3rd week there was less than half of that- out of 140 people. There was many of what I call under cover Christians. I kept finding them throughout the year but they would normally go straight back into hiding after talking to me. Undercover Christians. Fear of people.

Fear silenced them about their faith, it put God into only part of their life- in a box- that was only opened at safe times. Reputation, friends- fear paralyzed not just what they did but who they were.

The disciples locked the doors for fear of the Jewish leaders- people. Personally where do you lock doors for fear of people?

Fear can be deliberating. My mum is a teacher and my grandmother was a teacher and my great grandmother was a teacher was a teacher- so I have a few teacher stories. There was a child who was so scared he would get the answer wrong that he just wouldn't answer anything especially in maths but it flowed into every area where he might get it wrong. He was a smart kid but fear was just gripping him to a point where he couldn't function, he couldn't do a lot of his

school work. I can't remember if there was anxiety attacks but I wouldn't be surprised. Fear stopped him in his tracks. Fear was totally taking over his life. And could change his life.

Does fear stop you? What doors do you keep locked?

What about as a community? As a community do we fear people coming in?

I think Leith is really diverse as far as people go and it's a real strength. What about new leaders- a real change is happening with the leadership at Leith. Richard going for a couple of years, the search committee looking for someone to fill the leadership role. Fear around that might be a normal response but will we lock the doors and let fear debilitate us?

Or are we locking our doors at small group? Do we metaphorically lock the doors at church and not really want outsiders to come?

I've been part of a couple of Bible studies at halls of residence- There is an aspect where people hope that no one opens the door and sees them there in the Christian group. I've even been in one where the door was locked!

We can lock God up in our private life for fear of what others may think, what they may say. Or there are spaces that we are ok with unlocking the door – places where we feel more free to talk about our faith and express it like church, a small group or with friends. Would anyone feel safer if the doors here were locked?

Fear can cripple us. It can make us stuck, it can silence us. We can lose joy and hope. We can get tied down to fear and lock the doors rather than be free. Free to be who we are, free to express thoughts, ideas, free to be you- a person in relationship with God. Or fear can keep others away from us, keep people out. Fear can be justified. And a normal response.

The disciples had locked the doors because of fear. An attempt to keep the Jewish leaders out. ~~fear-~~

They couldn't keep Jesus out.

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."

Peace showing, peace, sending

Jesus came and stood among them. In the middle of the fear, confusion, uncertainty, grief Jesus comes and stands among them. He didn't stand in front of them, or above them. He came and stood among them. To me that's so relational, very personal- this is who our God is. In the middle of their fear, when the doors are locked, they are in this place that isn't great. And what does Jesus do?

Does he come and tell them- hey I taught you better than this? Why are you so afraid when you know better. Don't you know already that God is more powerful than man? Did he tell them off for being fearful? For locking the door? No Jesus says none of this. Jesus comes into the place where they are. He comes and stands amongst them, in their fear, He comes into the locked place and says "Peace be with you"! Shows them it's Him. "Peace be with you"! That's my God! This is what Jesus is like!

They had fear- Jesus brings peace.

Jesus didn't take away the threat- He didn't say -those guys won't kill you don't worry about them. He was saying- in this place, in this situation, in you, "peace be with you". He does the work IN them. Peace is not a fluffy word here. It's not like a fake reassurance, and it's not just something to make you feel better. It is powerful. God's peace- which transcends all understanding. Phil 4:7

Jesus didn't just say Peace He also showed them his hands and side. Physically giving them proof, reassurance.

And It's as if the disciples don't understand, like they don't grasp that it's Jesus until after he shows them his hands and sides. THEN they are overjoyed- it's weird they don't recognise Him.

But this happens a lot in both the old and new testament. They have eyes but they cannot see, ears but they cannot hear. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Psalms, Matthew, Acts, Romans and maybe more books, all reference seeing but not seeing, hearing but not hearing. In the new testament- people often don't recognise Jesus once he is risen. But I suppose we often don't recognise God either, a lot of the time. Jesus gives the disciples proof that it's him then they are really really excited.

Excited by the Presence of Jesus

He showed them his hands and sides- showing it was Jesus, who had really died, who was no longer in the tomb he was put in, and now was really with them. And it's the same for us. He really is alive! Jesus gives them what they need to believe. Often we think it's us who do the believing part of the relationship. But God gives us the ability to believe, he shows us himself. This is what our God is like.

Is the midst of fear and doubting- Jesus comes into the middle of them, into the midst of them and says peace be with you. Do you see what this says about who our God is, and what our God is like. This is our God. It's like he knows exactly the turmoil going on for them and meets them there, in a caring way, meets them in that space of fear, confusion, doubt, inner turmoil.

Their thoughts about God were not all nicely ordered and correct, attitudes and thoughts weren't in the "right" place for God to show up. Jesus shows up in the middle of it all. We don't need to have it all together for God to come amongst. We don't have to have the right attitudes or be in the right place or atmosphere. In the middle of the locked room, fear, confusion, doubt- that is where Jesus showed up.

He didnt change the circumstances, but Jesus came amongst and gave peace.

This is what our God is like!

He shows up among them- says peace be with you- shows them it's him- they are really happy then Jesus says for the second time Peace be with you.

Whenever something is repeated in the bible pay care attention, it's really really important.

ONCE UPON A TIME There once was a king who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried. The king looked at all the pictures. But there were only two he really liked, and he had to choose between them.

One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror, peaceful towering mountains all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds.

All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace.

The other picture had mountains, too. But these were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky, from which rain fell and in which lightning played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all.

But when the king looked closely, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest – in perfect peace.

The king chose the second picture. The king explained, “peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace.”

Jesus didn't change the situation or circumstance around them. He did something more powerful. He came amongst, God's peace is powerful, life altering, life

changing. Just like the little boy's life was changed by fear, our lives can be changed even more powerfully by peace.

After saying peace be with you for the second time Jesus sends them. In the flow of the passage Jesus takes them on a journey- and it's not a journey from anything they do but its Jesus' love and grace. Coming into the locked place, peace, proof, reassurance, peace then I am sending you. Jesus believed in them even when they had probably just been thinking Jesus was dead. It wasn't on their own merits , it was all Jesus. A place of fear to an excitement being in Jesus presence to being sent.

He speaks purpose and life into their situation. We don't have to have it all together for God to send us out. It throws in the gutter the idea that we need to have our lives all together, reading our bible daily, having regular quiet times and then I will be ready for God to use me. That wasn't how it worked here. We don't have to muster up awesome faith for God to say I have something for you to do now.

The disciples were not at a mountain top place in their faith. They were in a valley, not in their spiritual prime and Jesus comes into that valley with us, says peace, says here it really is me, peace and now I'm sending you! Its remarkable really.

We have to see the whole passage together, all the parts make the picture. The coming amongst, peace, showing his hands and side, peace, sending out,

18:19

And then Jesus breathed on them. and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus physically breathed on them! Often we separate the physical and the spiritual in the western world but they are very connected. The Holy Spirit is not just a spiritual thing that doesn't translate to the physical part of our world.

Jesus breathed on them which is a reminder from Genesis where God breathed new life into Adam.

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Gen 2:7

The Holy Spirit – new life.

God breathed into Adams nostrils. When Jesus breathes on the disciples I don't think its breath to flow over them and then be gone in the wind. I think breathing on them is meant to affect them, to go inside. Receive God- like breath.

Peace transforms, Jesus' coming amongst us changes things, And now Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit as breathing new life. We are not to stay the same. This passage shows the disciples on a real journey.

Jesus breathed on them and then He says receive the Holy Spirit. As if the Spirit is both something given and received.

And as this passage is all connected- Just been sent- and now empowered to do that by the Spirit. We are not sent alone but empowered, renewed, rejuvenated, with new life by the Spirit.

The last part of this passage says

²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

I don't really understand this passage very much. But what I do get is that we are to forgive. And this would be with the help of the Spirit- not on our own strength. The disciples could have had some justifiable anger towards the Jewish leaders for having a big part in Jesus death- But Jesus says forgive. Have you heard it said 'forgive people not because they deserve it but because you do? I don't really like that statement but I like what its getting at. The bible says it better. Not forgiving people can really affect us. Hate, bitterness they don't look good on us. Not forgiving others can really affect us AND them! As part of- peace with us- like Jesus said 2 times, we need to forgive. But the good news is we don't have to do this on our own strength but with the Spirit. Forgive.

The journey the disciples are taken on in a very short amount of words is amazing. The flow and movement of this passage is amazing. What God does in that locked

room is so transformative. Jesus comes amongst, peace, Jesus showing them it really is him, excitement in his presence, peace, sends them, breathes on them, new life, empowered by the Spirit, before tells us to forgive.

I am going to finish by reading the passage twice, and as I read I ask that as you listen, be asking God what He wants you to hear this morning. Which bit is He using to speak to you? Or maybe He is speaking to you about something else entirely. But I encourage you to use the last couple of minutes listening to what God might be saying directly to you. And then I will pray.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."

Lord thank you for being among us. Help us to recognise you, help us to see you, help us to hear you this week. We ask for peace in our lives in the midst of all that going on we asking for your powerful peace. You have sent us, and so I ask that you guide us in that each day, whether we recognise you or not. Breathe new life in us as we receive your Holy Spirit. Empower us with your Spirit and help us forgive. Thank you for who you are. Amen