Christ Speaks Peace
John 20:19-23

Last Sunday and again today, we're looking at the events surrounding the first day of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Before we look at that, when I was a medical student I had to learn those questions you ask an elderly patient to asses whether or not they are developing dementia, like 'what year is it?' Or 'who's the current prime minister?' Which if you're French is difficult to answer, isn't it?

But of course, the question that none of us would struggle with is, 'what day is it?' 'Doh, it's Sunday.' But have you ever thought why we're here on a Sunday? Why, for the last 2000 years, Christians like us have met to worship on a Sunday? And the answer, of course, is because of this day, that we're looking at today. Because John tells us, the resurrection happened, v19, on 'the first day of the week.' Sunday. And as a result, Christians worship on Sundays.

But as we're going to see, the resurrection doesn't just give structure to our weekly schedule. John tells us it gives us three things: an answer for the heart, an answer for your head, and an answer for your life.

An Answer for the Heart
Verse 19, 'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews…'

So the disciples are afraid, and it's evening, and given the time of year, it's probably beginning to get dark. And everything is worse in the dark, isn't it? I mean, I do not like spiders, and our garden shed is a breeding ground for spiders. It seems to attract them from all over the neighbourhood. And even during the day time I have to steel myself to go in the shed. But at night? When one might drop on you, or leap up at you - fangs bared? The dark magnifies our fears, doesn't it?

And these disciples are afraid enough to have locked the doors. So what are they afraid of? Well, John tells us: 'the Jews'. The Jewish religious leaders, the authorities. Because we know from Jesus' trial that they want to know the number of his disciples, the scale of the threat. And if they have arrested and executed Jesus, they're not going to hesitate to do the same to them. Plus, if news is beginning to seep out that Jesus tomb is empty and his body has gone, and the authorities know they didn't take the body - who are their first suspects going to be? These men hiding behind locked doors.

But don't you think their fears bear a striking resemblance to our own? Because if their fears have them under lock and key, think how fear might have you under lock and key. Like here, the fear of danger, the fear of death, or just the plain old fear of others.

Now you might say, I don't think I live in fear of danger. Sure, but those of us who are parents, how much of our parenting can be fear based? And our children are under lock and key because of what sociologists like Jonathan Haidt have called *safetyism*.

And like we saw last week, we might say we're not afraid of death, but we take every step we can to avoid it, or take control of it. You see the writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes how Christ came 'to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject *to lifelong slavery*' (Heb 2:15).

'Well, I wouldn't say I've been in lifelong slavery to the fear of death', and I get that. But probably most of us would admit that we want others to think well of us. That there's some level of fear

being disapproved of, and why we're afraid of what others might think of us, or say about us. But isn't that just a variation on the fear of death? Because if those people think bad of me, something inside of me, like my self-worth, dies. And if I don't have their approval, my own self-approval dies. And so we can be afraid of saying what we think, or living like we should. In other words, just like these disciples, we can live under lock and key.

And if you're not yet a Christian, just consider whether fear is causing you to hold Christianity at arm's length. That it's also got you under lock and key. Because maybe you realise that to become a Christian will require a total life change, and a shift of allegiance. And something's holding you back. Is that the fear of what others might think, or the fear of what you might lose, or just the fear of change? Is your door locked *from the inside*?

But of course, it's not just the opinion of others we can live in fear of, is it? During this month, some of us are doing this thing called Drawn to God. And every day Manu gives a Bible passage and we have to create some piece of art like a painting, or a drawing, or a song inspired by the text. And I'm doing it, and when I post something, am I anxious about what others will think, and whether I'll get more love heart emojis for my painting than Su gets for her decoupage? You bet! But Su will tell you what really cripples me, is not the opinion of others, it's my own opinion of myself! That I beat myself up for not being good enough!

And a number of scholars have pointed out, that toxic combination of fear of others and self-condemnation is almost certainly lurking at the back of the disciples' minds. Because if the message of Jesus' resurrection, that Mary Magdalene first brought, is beginning to spread, these guys will have heard the news. And with it, they're probably reflecting on their conduct of the last few days, and the knowledge of their personal failure. And if that was you, you would not be shrugging it off, would you? 'Why was I so stupid? Why was I such a coward? Why did I behave the way I did?'

But of course added to that is the fear of *Jesus'* disapproval. I mean, you can probably remember being a kid, and you'd done something wrong, and your mum said, 'wait till your Father gets home.' And you waited. And they're waiting. What will he say when he comes?

And so maybe, like them, you can be plagued by a guilty conscience or the knowledge of personal failure. And you *want* to encounter God… but. Like them, you want to encounter Christ… but fear and self-loathing keeps him at arm's length, and the door of your heart is shut.

And yet, it's into that locked space that Jesus comes. Verse 19, 'Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."' And if he had said that just once, you could dismiss it for a casual greeting: 'Shalom, hi everyone, I'm back from he dead.' Except he says it twice: v21, 'Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you."'

So there are no accusations. No apportioning of blame. No trial by a jury of one. There's just peace: the shalom of God himself. The peace of everything being put right. Because if they were expecting a rebuke, or a passive-aggressive Jesus, they've not yet understood what happened at the cross, have they? Because the Resurrection Sunday peace that he now speaks over them, is the fruit of the 'It is finished' of Good Friday.

Because what's finished? The atonement of their sins has been finished. The propitiation - the turning away of God's wrath has been finished. The crushing of Satan has been finished. And all

their failures dealt with. Because at the Last Supper, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus said to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you… Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). And now, into their troubled hearts, he speaks peace.

And when you know that he loves you so much that he died for you; that at the cross he experienced infinite trouble of heart so that you might have peace; that he was cast into the fear-filled dark, so that you might come into the light; and when you know that he has risen from the dead, it answers the fears of your heart. Because if Christ is alive, where is death's sting? And if he loves you that much, what does it matter what other people think of you? Because everything and everyone else stands in his shade.

But of course, John doesn't just mention the locked doors to highlight their fears. He mentions them to highlight the fact that Jesus got past them.

An Answer for the Head

Verse 20, 'When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.' So the doors are locked, but Jesus appears anyway, and not because he's some kind of ghost. His body is real and physical, it's flesh and bones. In fact, it's more than real and physical, because he shouldn't be able to be there, but he is there. So how is he there?

And John doesn't try to explain. He just says, it happened. And if you're not yet a Christian you might go, 'O come on, surely you don't believe real flesh and blood people can walk through walls? They just believed this stuff because they were primitive and superstitious.'

Except, CS Lewis, who was hardly primitive and superstitious, describes that as chronological snobbery: the idea that they only believed because they were ignorant toothless peasants.

Because that doesn't even begin to do justice to what John and the other New Testament writers are telling you. Did they know their periodic table? - no. Had they read Shakespeare? No. Could they use an Excel spreadsheet? Fortunately no.

But they did know that when you're dead, you're dead, and that the dead don't rise, and that real, flesh and blood people can't walk through locked doors! It's why John's telling you the doors were locked! And yet he's also telling you, it happened!

And something must have happened, mustn't it? Because go back to the fact that today is Sunday. And the fact that Jewish people worship on Saturdays, the Sabbath. It's one of *the* crucial, unchangeable markers of what it means to be Jewish. And these men are Jewish. So what happened to make them shift their day of worship from the Saturday to the Sunday, and they start calling it, the Lord's Day? Something must have happened mustn't it? Something that totally upended their identity.

But think, who were they worshipping on the Lord's Day? Because if the Sabbath was a crucial identity marker, who the Jewish people worshipped was *the* crucial identity marker: The Lord, our God, the Lord is one. And unlike all these pagans with their idols, you cannot make an image of him, because he is not a man or an animal or anything in between. So what must have happened to persuade these Jewish men and women to start worshipping *a man* as God? And not just any man, for some of them, like James, their brother. Because have you ever been tempted to think you're

older brother was God come in the flesh? I mean your brother or sister might be many things, but God is not one of them, is it?

And for all of them, they'd seen him die the death of the cursed. What could have happened to persuade them that far from cursed he was the Giver of Life, and God incarnate? Something must have happened, mustn't it?

And John is saying, 'hey, I get your skepticism. I was where you are. So I'm simply telling you, we saw him alive again. We saw him in a locked room he shouldn't have been able to access. And we saw his physical wounds.'

And think of those wounds. If this was an effort in first-century celebrity photo-shopping, John would probably have airbrushed them out, wouldn't he? Because this message has got to go out into an empire where glory was idolised, and only slaves and scum were crucified. So a god with wounds? And the wounds of crucifixion? That is never going to sell. Unless, it's not an effort in photoshopping, and Jesus really did stand among them, and tell them: look at my wounds.

And so the resurrection of Christ doesn't just answer our hearts, it answers our heads. There is reason to believe.

And yet, his wounds also speak to our hearts, don't they?

You see, every other religion gives you either a god who is impermeable to suffering, or a teacher who smiles at your suffering. Only Christianity gives you a God with wounds. In the aftermath of World War 1, Edward Shillito wrote a poem called *Jesus of the Scars*, in which he says,'Not a god has wounds, but thou alone.' Buddhism will tell you - you're suffering because you're too attached. That's why you're wounded. Stoicism will tell you your suffering is down to your attitude, grin and bear it. Islam will tell you, Allah really isn't moved by your suffering.

But Christianity tells you, look at his wounds. And God knows what it is to be wounded. He understands what it is to be scarred. But he was wounded that one day you might be made whole.

An Answer for Your Life

Now, if you look at any of the recent survey data on people's sense of well being, at least in the West, it makes for sobering reading. Because it documents, the rising levels of hopelessness, pointlessness, and loneliness.

But this passage tells us, the resurrection of Christ answers all three.

Firstly, look at their response to Jesus' presence: v20, 'He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples *were glad* when they saw the Lord.' Why glad? Because all of a sudden life doesn't seem so hopeless and dark. And if Christ has risen from the dead, death is not the end and neither is our personal failure. Which means you can live with hope, and that has the power to make you glad.

Secondly, look at the purpose he gives them. Verse 21, 'Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."' In other words, 'guys it is time to unlock the doors and go out into the world.' And *almost* from that moment on, these men's lives were filled with purpose.

Unlike the lives of many of us in the West. Which is hardly surprising is it? Because if as secular materialism teaches us, we're here by chance, and life has no higher meaning, and we're not here for any higher purpose, how can you live your life with any sense of purpose? Ultimately there isn't any purpose. 'Hey, we can save the planet - that's a great purpose to live for.' Sure, but it's a planet that will one day burn up or freeze over and how you live will ultimately make no difference. 'Well, we can live for our loved ones.' Loved ones who will one day die and be eaten by worms and, like the rest of us, be totally forgotten. Is it any wonder people feel hopeless and life feels pointless.

But when you know Christ is risen from the dead, and there is a point to everything, your life can also be filled with purpose. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, having set out the full impact of the resurrection of Christ, 'Therefore my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain' (1 Cor 15:58). Your life and your work are not pointless, they are filled with point, because Christ has been raised from the dead.

But if you noticed, I said *'almost'* from this point on these men's lives were filled with purpose'. Because look what Jesus does and says next: v22, 'And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."' And commentators are divided: Is Jesus actually imparting the Spirit to them here, or is this just a sign foretaste of what's to come at Pentecost?

And personally, I think this is just a sign and a foretaste. Because here they see Jesus risen from the dead, and are glad. But by the next chapter they're drifting back into their old lives. Are they glad? Yes. But are their lives as yet transformed? No.

But that promise of power and life transformation is there. And if they had to wait until Pentecost to get it, you don't. You see, we're all after some kind of inner power, or strength, or resolve to live life with purpose and meaning, aren't we? And what all the data shows is that secularism cannot give it to you.

But the gospel can. And does. As Paul puts it negatively: 'Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Rom 8:9) - implication being: if you *do* belong to him, if you are a Christian, then you do have the Spirit. And he goes on, and 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies.' (Rom 8:11).

So, we long for purpose, and the power to live with purpose. Well, Paul says, through the indwelling Spirit, the resurrection of Christ that can give it to you.

But thirdly, and finally, it answers our loneliness, because it calls us into a community of grace. Verse 23, as Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." And so the message that Jesus sends them, and by extension us, out into the world with is the proclamation of the forgiveness of sin.

Which tells us that our greatest problem is not fear lurking in our hearts, or the doubts we wrestle with in our heads. It's not hopelessness, or pointlessness, it's sin: the sin, the self-centredness, that separates us from God and from each other.

And our secular culture has no answer to that sin, does it? Because either it refuses to name it as sin, because you *should* be the centre of attention, and you *should* have your own way - which is why relational and societal discord are so high. Or, it does recognise it as sin, but woe to you if you commit it, because there's no atonement or way back, if you do.

But the gospel says that in the death and resurrection of Christ the way back has been opened. Because this is forgiveness with a face on it: 'If *you* forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven…' Which means forgiveness is found in the community of God's people. A community which proclaims, Christ has died for our sins, and he has been raised, and so whoever repents and believes will be forgiven, just as we have been forgiven. But if people would rather carry the burden of sin themselves, no one's going to strong arm them in. They're free to stay outside.

But on the inside, the resurrection of Christ can answer the fear of our hearts. It can answer the doubts of our heads, and it can answer our longing for hope and purpose and community.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, why not become one? Repent, believe, for the forgiveness of sins. And if you are a Christian, he sends us out with the same message he sent these disciples out: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and everything is filled with meaning.