

Sunday 19th April 2020, 2nd Sunday of Easter.

The readings for the day are – Acts 2:14, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; and John 20: 19-31.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+2%3A14a%2C+22-32%2C+Psalm+16+%2C+1+Peter+1%3A3-9%2C++John+20%3A19-31&version=NRSV>

What a few weeks we've had! In what seems a long time ago, we marked Ash Wednesday in our churches and then began our journey of Lent. And then only a few days after that, everything changed! We started to get the indications that things were about to change - letters started coming out to those who were more vulnerable to stay inside for at least 12 weeks and that we would have to start being very careful about what we were doing and where we could go. The shops started running out of supplies including flour and veg and toilet rolls of all things. And then our restaurants and many shops and very quickly afterwards, our churches. What a difference a few days make...

And as a response to this, we've tried to journey as best we can through the rest of Lent, through Holy Week and the passion of Jesus, the emptiness of Saturday and then the joy of Jesus' resurrection. We have shared prayers and reflections, phone calls, and remote services. We have even watched Martin celebrate an Easter Communion in the Rectory and if technology is kind to us this Sunday we will be able to join Martin virtually or remotely as he celebrates communion at The Rectory again on YouTube.

Strange times, unsettling times, but at the moment "It is what it is!"

And so it was with our disciples in our passage today. They too were living in strange and unsettling times. What a difference a few days had made to them – suddenly they had gone from travelling around with their friend and Lord, healing and preaching and teaching to watching at a distance the horrendous killing of their friend and the emptiness left after his death. What a difference a few days make. And then, 3 days later Mary Magdalene went to the tomb found the stone rolled away. Panicked, she ran and found Simon Peter and another disciple and they returned to the tomb to see that what she said was right – the tomb was indeed empty and the clothes neatly folded. And as she wept, Jesus spoke to her and asked why she was crying – and when he called her by name "Mary" she immediately that it was Jesus. Jesus was alive! What a difference a few days made...

What a gift our reading feels today – for just as we are staying in our homes, sheltering and trying to say safe, so too were the disciples – they had stayed inside behind their doors and were hidden in the upper room that evening. For them it was the fear of the Jews. And for us, to stay safe from the virus and reduce the risk too of infecting others.

We can only imagine the fear that they were feeling at that time. Now in the dim of the evening, behind closed doors and windows, they were huddled together, talking in hushed whispers trying to process just what was going. And just when they thought it couldn't get any stranger, Jesus appeared, seemingly out of nowhere! And his words – "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.

We can feel the confusion and the unease of the disciples in that room – hidden away from the rest of Society. Uncertain and frightened. Confused and anxious. And then the amazement and

joy and wonder when he appeared amongst them. (Yes, Thomas said he wouldn't believe it until he saw it, but we've always said it's good to ask questions!) Even in isolation, God was with them.

And so too it is with many of us today – for many of us, we know that this situation may well go on for quite some time, and even when general restrictions are lifted, not everyone will be able to or even wish to go back into whatever will be the real world, back into whatever the new norm will be.

Just as Jesus appeared in the middle of the disciples that evening and said “Peace be with you”, so too we trust and take hope and heart from the fact that Jesus is saying the same to each of us every day. We trust that even though most of us are behind our doors (apart for fresh air perhaps in our gardens or similar), God is indeed in the centre of all of this even in our isolation – breathing his love and his calming presence into our lives and the lives of those we love and care about. We need only think about all that is happening in the world, at all that is good that is going on – the love in action. How could God not be a part of all of that? We need only think about the words and actions of love, the emails and texts and phone calls, the random acts of kindness, in the nervous or anxious smiles across the street, in the clapping for and the banging of the saucepans for the NHS and key workers on a Thursday night. God's love is surely powerfully with us. He is in the touch of those holding those who are sick and dying (when we can't be with them). How much we have to be grateful for – the dedication and love and service of so many seen and unseen workers across the services – some of whom are known to each of us personally, as part of our congregation and community.

God's love shines through even in the dark places – we may sometimes only see it dimly, but it is there. For in the dark times, God is present. God is right there in the midst of the sorrow. He knows what it is to suffer loss and he is grieving with us.

This week, Martin and I have been privileged to lead three funerals – each them very different – one was at Reeth Road cemetery in the beautiful sunshine, with the tulips and the blossom on the trees brightening things up. And the black coats of the horses that bore the coffin gleamed in the sunshine. And despite the fact that we all had to stand several paces from each other, amidst the sorrow, in the isolation, God's hope and love and light shone through.

And then later in the week, at Darlington Crematorium - in “normal” times it would have been a packed chapel, full of golfing friends and extended family. Instead, four of us gathered together, again spread across the room from each other and said goodbye to the family's loved one. And yet, even in the strangeness, God's peace and light and gentle love shone through the grief as we thanked him for a life well-lived and a life that touched others deeply.

No doubt throughout the week we will have watched the news. And amidst the stories of illness and worry, have been shards of light – not least Captain Tom Moore and his wonderful 100 laps of his garden to raise huge funds for NHS charities. His message at the end of it was very simple, but heartening – he said “the sun will shine on you again and the clouds will go away”.

We are living in unusual and worrying times. And we cannot nor should not deny that. But, we are an Easter people, a people, dispersed but united in hope and in love – a love that will not let us go, a love that will hold us gently but firmly, a love that will whisper nudges of encouragement, of comfort, of inspiration and of hope. For even in isolation, our God is with us.

Let's pray

Loving Lord,

Help us to know that you are with us in these anxious and unsettling and isolated times. Help us to trust and believe that nothing can separate us from your love revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.