

The Upper Room ...

... where the four walls can fade away

A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Easter, 7th April 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 20:19-End

When I was little, my older sister used to have an enormous pet rabbit called Pendle. He was full of character, having one ear that went straight up and another ear that went straight down. He was immensely fat, and he was also very strong, and the routine of cleaning Pendle's hutch became a regular palaver. We would take the hutch and put it in an enclosed pen on the lawn and then open the door of the hutch. The idea was that the rabbit could come out and scamper on the grass and enjoy the sunshine and the dandelions and be a proper rabbit out in the open whilst we were able to clean the hutch. In practice, however, he didn't want to come out. In practice, it became a great trial of strength and my sister would have to put on protective gloves because he was strong and fierce and bit and scratched. She'd have to reach into the huts whilst this wretched animal cowered in the darkest corner, and she'd have to drag him out, even though you would have thought there was every reason for him to want to come out of his own free will. Why didn't he want to come out? Because he was afraid, because he felt safer within the four walls of his prison than he did out in the wild world with the sunshine and the green grass and the dandelions.

Why do I trouble you with all of that? Well, it's because in John's gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room, and they are there, gathered in the upper room with the doors of the house being locked for fear - fear of the Jews, but also fear of everything that was out there. There was actually nothing stopping those disciples from going out. They were just scared of what the world might do to them, scared that they might not be safe or scared that they might lose something. They didn't want to be that exposed, that vulnerable. The upper room with its locked doors is where many people find themselves, living lives that risk being closed and limited and anxious because we're scared of what real freedom might look like, scared of the responsibility, scared of the unfamiliarity, scared perhaps that we might lose lose something, or that we might not be as safe or as comfortable. We prefer so often to stay with what is narrow and familiar, even though it's also full of fear and anxiety, rather than find freedom in a world where we're not in control.

But Jesus comes and stands in the midst of the disciples in the upper room. The locked doors are no barrier to him, somehow he finds a way through - the barrier is no barrier. And he says to them, "*Peace be with you.*" No locked door can keep him out. He brings to them a bigger reality, and his promise of peace is the promise of a life free from fear, if only they will trust him. And the door of the upper room is locked on the inside. It's up to us whether we unlock it or not. And we might as well, since the locked door is unable to keep the risen Christ out.

But then there is the scenario where it's not down to us to open the door, where it's locked, if you like, from the outside. There was a prize-winning novel published in 2010 called *Room* by Emma Donoghue, which was later made into an Oscar-winning film. In this story, a young woman has been kidnapped and imprisoned and repeatedly raped, and as a result, has given

birth to a boy called Jack who, when the story opens, is five years old - and it's all told from his point of view.

The only reality which Jack has known is the single room where he and his mother have been imprisoned for five years or longer. Although they have a TV, he doesn't believe that anything he sees on television is real. The news is as make believe as the cartoons that he watches. The only reality is the four walls of the room enclosing them and his mother. It's the story not just of how they survive in the room, but of how they escape and of how Jack's mother has to prepare Jack for the world outside. At first, he doesn't believe there is an outside at all, it seems so unreal to him. When Jack experiences the outside world at last, it's overwhelming. He misses the room where he felt safe and where it was familiar. To his mother's absolute horror, he keeps wanting to go back.

I wonder sometimes whether we aren't a bit like Jack. The world we know is a world where death is a fixed boundary. It encloses us like the four walls of the upper room, and we don't have the key. Because of that fixed boundary of death, we get anxious about all sorts of things; we want to keep death at bay; we want to keep our mortality out of mind. But it's always there, pressing in on us as the ultimate possibility. But the room can only be open from the outside, and we can't imagine what life would be like in a world without the fear of death and the anxiety that goes with that. But Jesus, the risen Lord, comes and stands amongst his disciples, even though the doors are shut and says, *"Peace be with you."* Thomas, in that story, doesn't seem to want to be set free. Thomas doesn't find it easy to accept that the enclosing walls of death might be permeable, that Jesus might have opened a way for us into that bigger reality, that place where we can be set free from our fears and anxieties, our worries about losing what we have, our anxieties about there not being enough to go round. Like Jack, we'd rather stay within the known familiarity of the room instead of venturing out in faith, into the territory of eternal life, of grace and forgiveness and open trust. Like Pendle the Rabbit, we'd rather shrink back into the shadows than experience the vulnerability of a world where we're not at the centre. Like Thomas, we're more comfortable with a small reality we can see and touch and be certain about than a bigger reality we have to trust and explore and encounter in a deeper way.

So Easter is a good season to reflect upon our own fears and the things that we're afraid of, the things that hold us back and stop us from welcoming the future. Because when the risen Christ comes and stands amongst us, the four walls can fade away. The world suddenly seems larger, and our fears retreat as we hear the risen Christ say to you and to me, *"Peace be with you."*

Reading Text

John 20:19-End

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'²⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.