

SERMON

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Sunday Service for Mental Health Awareness Week

Imagine what it must have been like for those first disciples. They've been through a complete rollercoaster of emotions. First the triumphal entry, then the crucifixion, then the resurrection and Jesus appearing to them on several occasions. And now they have watched him ascend to heaven. They must have stood there on the mount of Olivet, staring up at the sky, open mouthed, perhaps even wondering if he'd come back. In fact, they stayed there so long two men in white came and had to tell them, Jesus is gone. And so they had to leave that mountain and go back to Jerusalem to the room where they were all staying, back from the mountain top into the reality of life, and a very uncertain future.

I wonder what emotions were going through them at that time. Concern, anxiety, sadness that they had lost Jesus, a sense of desolation, but above all I am sure, a real sense of a very uncertain future.

I wonder if any of these feelings are familiar to you at this present time? We all go through difficult times in life, but at this moment when we are all facing this coronavirus and all the challenges it brings, many of us are finding it particularly difficult. Now for some of us, some of these challenges are part of our life experience as we struggle with mental ill health. For others this is a new experience and we may not be quite sure how to how to cope.

Mental Health Awareness Week has a very particular significance this year for all of us as more of us are struggling with our own mental health and wellbeing. For some people of faith this is particularly difficult. Surely, we think, my faith should see me through? But we need to face the reality that we are body, mind and spirit. We are whole people. I am just as susceptible to mental ill health as I am to physical ill health. Some of the greatest people of faith struggled with mental ill health issues; CS Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, Martin Luther, Mother Theresa just to name but a few. The Bible is full of struggling, suffering people who God uses in their vulnerability.

So how can we face these challenges? And maybe the experience of those first disciples can give us some pointers.

Firstly, it's that we need to be assured that God loves us – unconditionally. Jesus had reminded the disciples in the Upper room that God loved them. He was staring Peter in the eyes, Peter, who was to deny him, Judas who was to betray him, Thomas who was to doubt him. God loves us as we are, with all our faults and our differences and our issues. He loves us unconditionally. As many parents love their children, as I know my dog loves me, warts and all.

Secondly we need to remember that we are not alone in this life – Jesus also promised the disciples, the Holy Spirit, who would come and be with them, so that they would not have to face the struggles and uncertainties alone. And that promise is for us, the Holy Spirit comes to us, to give us the comfort, to ensure us and assure us. This is a God who knows what it is to suffer physically and mentally. Remember on the cross, as he cried out, “my God my God why have you forsaken me?” God doesn't ask us to pretend nothing is happening. But He promises to walk with us, in and through whatever we are going through. He offers us hope. A hope that is based on that promise that he will be with us. And a hope of a better future with Him in eternity, and it is this hope, this conviction, that will enable us to live our lives in the present. To say as a concentration camp victim said, I believe in the sun, even when its not shining, I believe in love, even when I don't feel it and I believe in God even when He is silent.

Thirdly we need to reconnect and refocus. To reconnect firstly with God, coming to Him in honesty with all our challenges and issues. Remember those disciples, they went back to the room where we read they constantly prayed. Now prayer isn't as complicated as we sometimes make it out. It's simply coming to God. To be with him, to communicate with him, often without words, with all that we are and all that we have, and just to be in his presence. Often when everything is going well, we don't make time for prayer and so often its actually when we are struggling, that we turn to God, to cry out, for his guidance and his support.

But we also need to reconnect with others, because we know that being with others, communicating with others is very important for our flourishing as human beings, so in whatever way we can as difficult as it is now, we need to find ways of connecting with others. Just as those early disciples did, they were all together in that room, to provide support and comfort. “How are you?” I wonder how often you have asked that of someone else, so often the answer we want to here is, “I’m fine thank you”, so we can move on. But are we prepared for the person who does open up to us, in their vulnerability, who tells us the answer truthfully, are we prepared in love to be with and support that person?

And then, of course we need to reconnect with ourselves, to accept ourselves as we are, to love ourselves as we are, because that’s how God approaches us, He loves us as we are. This is also what the disciples had to learn. Peter had to learn that God forgave the fact that he disowned him, Thomas has to learn to accept the fact that he had his doubts, we have to accept who we are, in the knowledge that we are beloved of God. Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem. None of us can live on the mountain top, we’ve all got to live in the reality, the messiness that is our everyday life, but let us remember that God loves the whole of who we are unconditionally, let us take time to reconnect with God, with others, with ourselves, and let us remember that we are not alone in this life. God walks with us, in and through our joys and sorrows, he will never leave us or forsake us. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and staff comfort me.

As we go forward into this week, whoever you are, wherever you are, and whatever you are dealing with at this moment, be assured that you are not alone. God walks with you and offers you his unconditional love.