

Open Space

SAINT STEPHENS SOUNDWELL

MAY 2020

Don't touch me!



HAVE A LOOK at this painting of the story of Mary Magdalene going to Jesus tomb on the first Easter day taken from St John's Gospel chapter 20.

It's a fresco, a wall-painting, done by an artist called Giotto in a chapel in Padua in Italy in about 1304 so it's about 700 years old!

Jesus is on the right, firmly indicating with his wounded hand for Mary to back off! "Do not touch me!" he says to her!

The other disciples are on the left, still asleep, because it is very early in the morning.

Behind, sitting on the side of the empty tomb, two angels look on at the scene, concerned but somehow detached from it.

Mary Magdalene desperately reaches out to her Lord, all she wants to do is touch her beloved. The man who was so dear to her, whom she thought was dead is alive and of course she wants to embrace him!

All *we* want to do, especially in times of trouble, is reach out and touch those closest to us. But we can't, it is forbidden because it could spread sickness. We know it is the right thing to do, yet it feels so wrong..

We feel what Mary is feeling in this moment, conflicted, confused and frustrated, perhaps in a way that even Giotto couldn't have done in his day seven centuries ago.

That is a special blessing reserved for us this Easter, in our day.

How can that be a blessing you ask?

Well, after all, it is only us and Mary and Jesus who are truly alive in this picture.

The disciples are asleep.

The angels know Jesus as their Lord, but not as their Saviour.

It is only Mary and ourselves who have that living relationship with him at this moment.

We share in Mary's joy and in her pain, we cannot have one without the other.

That's why we have been so blessed this Easter. That is why this was an Easter we will never forget, because of the special blessings it brings.

Nevertheless we have just had the strangest Easter that any of us can have experienced.

No waving palm crosses on Palm Sunday, no feet-washing on Maundy Thursday, no time at the cross with Jesus on Good Friday and no jubilant celebration of Christ's victory over death on Easter Day, well not in church anyway!

We shared with Christians all around the world in hastily-adapted devotions for what is the most important festival in our faith.

We were forced into isolation and social distancing to protect each other.

From the middle of March, it meant that schools were mostly closed, our usual way of life hugely disrupted and, worst of all we could not gather together to worship and pray, sing God's praises and share in the Good News of the resurrection hope that Jesus brings.

It all happened during Lent, and what a Lent it was!

We started off meeting for Ash Wednesday, holding Sunday services as usual and on Wednesday evenings we met for our Lent Course, 'Talking Jesus'.

By the end of Lent, just a few weeks later we were largely confined to our homes and only allowed out to get essentials and take limited exercise.

Some of us were not allowed out at all and became entirely dependent on others for essential supplies and medication.

Our world was turned upside down and to a large extent it still is.

At Christmas we had never even heard of the Novel Coronavirus or Covid-19.

By Easter it dominated all our lives and thinking, everything we do, or don't do, is dictated by trying to control this highly infectious disease. *Continued overleaf>*

Open Space

MAY 2020

Mission Partners
with St Stephens:

Bristol City Centre
Soup Run
Bristol/Uganda Link
Christian Aid
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the Sisters of
the Church
Emmaus
Fair Trade
One25 Project
The Bristol Noise

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St Stephens
SOUNDWELL

And worst of all it separated us from loved ones. We could not have any face-to-face contact with anyone apart from people in our household, if there were any, not even our dentist or hairdresser.

Not even our nearest and dearest. That was undoubtedly the cruellest part.

On Maundy Thursday I watched a re-dedication service led by Viv, the Bishop of Bristol. Normally it is held in Bristol Cathedral. It is packed with hundreds of clergy and Lay Ministers re-affirming their ministerial vows and a big congregation.

There is great ceremony as the Bishop blows onto the holy oils to consecrate them with the Holy Spirit.

Not this year. Even a Bishop's breath could be infectious!

Instead Bishop Viv was alone in a room with one other person speaking into a camera which was live-streamed into people's homes.

They did the very best they could but it was a strange and somehow disturbing experience. It lacked any sense of community and that would be the same for any church or cathedral, football stadium, theatre or concert venue. By now we all understand why mass gatherings of any type are banned around the world.

Bishop Viv in her sermon asked the question **'Where is Christ in Coronavirus?'** A question most of us must have wondered about in these unsettling times of isolation and fear.

So let's return to the Easter story. In John 20 we read that when Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb on that first Easter Day she discovers that it is empty and immediately goes to tell the other disciples. She wonders who might have taken the body away.

When she returns she meets the risen Jesus but doesn't recognise him at first, believing him to be the gardener. It is only when Jesus calls her by name that she realises that it is indeed Jesus, who has risen from the dead.

Mary was a dear friend and follower of Jesus so imagine her overwhelming joy at seeing him alive! Of course she would want to go to him and embrace him to prove to herself that she wasn't seeing things.

But Jesus tells her firmly not to touch him, and rebuffs her. *But why?*

He says he has not yet ascended to the Father so she must not touch him.

Some translations use the English words 'do not cling to me' which more closely reflect the Greek meaning.

There has been a lot of debate over the years about the precise meaning of this incident.

- Was it because His body wasn't present in a way that could be touched?

- Was it because Jesus wanted Mary to start to think of him as a spiritual being because he was going to ascend to heaven shortly?

- Was it because Mary and the Disciples now needed to move on to their new tasks of spreading the Gospel rather than clinging on to their old lives with Jesus in person in Judea?

Well it could be all or any of these.

What struck me this year was that Mary was forbidden to touch Jesus, her beloved Master, in a similar way that these days we are forbidden from touching some of those closest to us.

As we know very well by now 'social distancing' is one of the few tools we have to help control the spread of the virus. It is crude and has massive impact on our lives, but until there is a vaccine and widespread testing is available it's pretty much all we have.

The infection cannot be stopped, only slowed, and that is how to do it.

We also know this applies to all sorts of physical closeness, that is why we cannot meet in church at the moment, that is why we couldn't shake hands at the Peace just before we stopped meeting.

So what can we learn from the 'social distancing' between Jesus and Mary Magdalene that first Easter Day?

Well, for me, reflecting on some of the possible meanings outlined above perhaps we should be asking ourselves some important questions:

At St Stephens we send out resource packs which give the readings for the day and the people who say our prayers of intercession have written them out for us so we can join in with that, so what is so different?

- Ask yourself: 'What am I missing about not being able to meet together with my sisters and brothers in church and other groups?'

It is natural to feel sad about what we have lost, even temporarily.

Give thanks for what you have experienced in the past and pray that you will be able to experience those benefits again, perhaps in different ways, in the future.

After the resurrection the Disciples became Apostles and had a new task which was very different from following Jesus around in a small backwater of the Roman Empire. They now needed to go out to spread the Gospel far and wide to other countries, often putting themselves in great danger.

They could no longer cling to Jesus as a dear memory from their past.

- Ask yourself: 'The Novel Coronavirus has changed our world in very profound ways and will do so for years to come. Am I 'clinging to' old fond memories of the way things used to be when God is calling me to embrace new ways of being a Christian?'

- Ask yourself: 'Am I 'seeing' Jesus as He wants me to see him now?'

Does He want me to be in a different relationship with Him now? More spiritual perhaps? More prayerful? More attentive to what He wants from me rather than what I want from Him?

These are difficult questions for us because as humans we tend to like the familiar and routine. Please don't hesitate to discuss this with friends and people from church because these are things we will all need to be working out together in the future.

Of course the Ministers are always here to talk to you too, so please don't hesitate to pick up the phone.

The month of May this year has two more Christian festivals:

Ascension Day, Thursday 21 May, when we remember Jesus being taken back up into heaven, and the great festival of **Pentecost** on 31 May when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church.

As part of the international *Thy Kingdom Come* project on the 11 days between Ascension and Pentecost, churches are encouraging us to pray that others can come to know Jesus. More than ever these days we need to know that Jesus knows and loves us. More information about this is included in your pack this month.

Again like at Easter they can be opportunities for us to think more deeply about the personal significance of these events for our lives as individuals as well as the life of the wider church.

These extraordinary times have shaken our world to its foundations.

I'm sure all of us have had our faith challenged in ways we never thought possible. Where is Christ in Coronavirus?

Where is Christ in our individual experience of this life-changing event? What does it mean for us as individuals, our church and our faith?

Like the wider world we will personally be profoundly changed by this, let's embrace those changes and be inspired by the response of the Apostles because it was only through their adaptability that the Church was able to grow and spread around the world.

As we say these days it 'went viral'!

Peter Robbins

Managing our Mental Health in the Pandemic

The whole point of the severe restrictions on our freedoms at this time is to help manage the impact of Covid-19.

Most people appear to have no immunity against it and there is much that scientists don't understand about it.

We just have to do the best we can to limit its effects.

I am a trauma specialist, I help people who have experienced terrible things to come to terms with them and not let them dominate the rest of their lives. Usually it is with groups or individuals who have witnessed some dreadful incident or been involved in accidents or serious crimes.

People sometimes ask me 'don't you get upset or depressed by listening to these awful things all the time?'

I reply 'Yes, occasionally, but I have learned ways to limit that because otherwise I couldn't do my job and I wouldn't be of help to my clients.'

I don't have to be some special sort of person or very hard-hearted, I just have to learn how to manage it.

Extraordinarily the whole world is experiencing a kind of collective trauma at this time.

One of the definitions of trauma is that it is a *life-changing* incident.

Our lives have been very significantly changed by what is happening to our world at the moment. And it happened in an instant. And it is not clear how or when it will end.

Another factor is experiencing *fear for our lives*. Novel Coronavirus can kill in what can seem to be unpredictable and indiscriminate ways.

So although it does affect some groups more than others, all our lives are potentially at risk. We all have that fear to some extent.

Another is a sense of *powerlessness*. Much about the virus is not understood, the control measures so far are crude and have massive impact on us. Benefits can seem intangible and we have to have the science and logic behind the decisions carefully explained to us.

So the current situation shares some features in common with trauma. That is why most people are finding it hard to deal with.

The kind of things we can do to help ourselves to protect our mental health are in some ways analogous to what we are doing to protect our physical health from the virus:

Self-Isolation

Just as we try to minimise our contact with other people so we need to carefully **manage exposure to negative news**.

The media, including social media, are full of negative and upsetting news.

That can have an impact on our mood.

This is made worse because there is less to distract us in terms of entertainment, sport, church activities, positive family events etc.

So limit yourself to one news bulletin a day, perhaps the early evening ones so you are not exposed to upsetting things before bed.

We cannot isolate ourselves entirely from the realities of life and we do need to know what is going on to inform our prayers so we are up-to-date with the latest position, but we do not need to know the detail of distressing cases or endless speculation about the future. It is OK to turn something off if you have just had enough bad news for one day.

Research

Scientific researchers investigate the unknown. That is their job not ours. Although they work with hypotheses they do not guess at the results they will come up with and neither should we.

Jesus said: 'Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.'

Matthew 6:34

It is very hard for us not to look ahead and get ourselves into a spin about the unknown. We wonder 'What if this? ... and what if that?...' which is what Jesus was trying to warn us against.

Instead, we need to focus on what we need to do today to meet our immediate needs 'One day at a time' is the maxim!

Jesus is saying that we need to develop a mental discipline, so when we catch ourselves doing it we can stop ourselves worrying about an unknown future over which we have little control.

These are unprecedented times for both professionals and everybody else. We have never had to deal with anything like it before on such a scale. Sometimes we will feel overwhelmed by it all and sometimes we will feel more positive. We are all human after all.

Congratulate ourselves on our successes!

The Government is always quick to acknowledge the successes that happen every day, and we need to do the same for ourselves.

What have I achieved today? What have I noticed about the world around me? How have I made a difference to someone else's life?

Of course that includes prayer time and bible study. There are lots of broadcasts and computer-based resources to help us feel less isolated in our faith as well as the excellent resources provided by your parish church.

Look after ourselves and be compassionate towards ourselves.

Continued overleaf>

FROM THE REGISTERS

SINCE MARCH Funerals

● APRIL 14: Olive Parr (84).

The celebration of Olive's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold her husband, Bob, their children, Denise, Jon and Robert, along with their families and Olive's many friends and carers in your prayers.*

● APRIL 15: Marjorie Janet Williams (87).

The celebration of Marj's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold Marj's grandson, Isaac, his Dad, Terry, brother Jack, and niece, Aimee, along with Marj's good friends in your prayers.*

● APRIL 17: Margaret Moyle (87).

The celebration of Margaret's life was held at Canford Crematorium. *Please hold her sister, Eileen, her nieces and nephews, Lesley, Nick, Kathryn and Andrew and all their families, along with Margaret's Church family in Horfield and her many Guiding friends in your prayers.*

● APRIL 21: Brenda Eastman (87).

The celebration of Brenda's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold Brenda's nephew, Nigel, friends, Derek & David, Trish, Helen and Godson, Ollie, as well as her friends at Deerhurst Care Home in your prayers.*

● APRIL 22: Herbert (Bert) Philip John Lloyd (84).

The celebration of Bert's life was held at Westerleigh Cemetery. *Please hold his wife, Janet, children, Karen and Ian, and their families in your prayers.*

● APRIL 23: Allan Norman Bull (95).

The celebration of Allan's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold his son, David with Janice, Allan's nieces and nephews and their families, as well as his good friends and neighbours in your prayers.*

● APRIL 23: Susan Herlingshaw (70).

The celebration of Sue's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold her sons, Andrew, Philip, Christopher and their families, as well as Sue's partner, John and his daughter, Hollie in your prayers.*

● APRIL 24: Joan Blowfield (74).

The celebration of Joan's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold her husband, Geoff, sister, Mary and her family, as well as Joan's many friends and neighbours in your prayers.*

● APRIL 27: Sylvia Arberry (86).

The celebration of Sylvia's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium. *Please hold her children, Jayne with Lawrence and Mark, and her many Grandchildren and Great-Grandchildren in your prayers.*

● **Scott Murray (58)**. Scott has also died recently and the family have chosen not to have a funeral service. Please do hold them in your prayers at this time.

MAY CYCLE OF PRAYER BEGINNING SUNDAY OF EACH WEEK

03	St Mary Redcliffe & Temple School	Neil, Carey, Marin & Eliza Humphrey Sue and Martyn Humphrey, Roger Hurkett Roccus, Rozina, Adan & Jereome Inayat	Mulberry Gardens Mulberry Grove Narrow Lane
10	Kings Oak Academy	Carole Jackson, Lou Jefferies, Jan Johns Grace Jones, June Jones, Pat Jones Bronwen Kucharski	Neville Road North View Nympsfield
17	John Cabot Academy	Kristine, Ian, Emily & Jack Lockwood Mike Long, Gerald Marshall, Gill Mayo Julia Merrifield, Clive Milkins	Peartree Lane Pembroke Road Penny Lane
24	Downend School	Carol Millard, Holly Miriam Andrea Monks, Margaret Moore Leonard, Josie, Tanya & Bradley Morris	Phoenix Grove Pinewood Pool Road
31	Mangotsfield School	Carol Murphy, Dave Newton Cordelia Nolan, Peter Smyth & Serena Katy, Tom, George & Theo North	Portland Court Portland Place Portland Street

MAY 2020 DIARY

REGULAR WEEKLY GROUPS:

TUESDAYS	01.30pm	} Knit & Natter: <i>suspended for the time being</i> See & Know: <i>suspended for the time being</i> (For toddlers & carers) (Term time)
WEDNESDAYS	01.00pm	
THURSDAYS	09.00am	
	01.00pm	

SERVICES AND OTHER GROUPS/MEETINGS/EVENTS:

Cancelled until further notice!

See our website for adult & family activity and support materials:
www.saintstephensoundwell.org

<Continued from overleaf:

We need to look after ourselves to enable us to help others.

We know Jesus took time to go off and pray, to have time apart to listen to his Father so he could help those who came to him.

So, if you are able, use the exercise allowance to get out of your home to get some fresh air and have a change of scene. Whether you live alone or with others that way you are less likely to become crushed by a sense of isolation and confinement.

Perhaps sit quietly and appreciate your surroundings. But also try to seek out distractions such as interesting television programmes unconnected to the virus or the endless online opportunities to learn new skills or raise your spirits.

The important thing is to give ourselves a break from anything about the virus to remind ourselves that there are other things in life and in time things will change.

Speak to others!

Just because we are physically separated from others it doesn't mean we can't communicate.

This unusual situation means we are more likely to feel isolated but in fact we have just the same opportunities to speak to other people over the phone or electronically.

I have heard some wonderfully creative ideas like a Rainbows group who do craft activities via Zoom with all the families taking part, which would not have happened before.

Another person who runs a support group for veterans has set up regular meetings online so the members can continue to support each other.

Where there is a will there is a way!

Within the parish we have set up 'Phone Church' and the 'Care 5' groups which are brilliant ways to stay in touch with each other.

If you are not involved with this and would like to be simply talk to one of the Ministers about it.

These are excellent examples of how quickly and well we can adapt to quite extreme circumstances and continue to be the Lord's presence for each other.

Additionally:

The Mind website has some excellent tips and resources.

<https://www.mind.org.uk/coronavirus-we-are-here-for-you/>

The NHS Every Mind Matters website has many very practical ideas to manage our mental health:

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

The Church of England has also produced some information about this topic including looking after our spiritual welfare. Look up 'Guidance on mental health and wellbeing' and 'Coronavirus' on the CofE website.

If you do not have access to the internet ask one of the Ministry Team to help you get the information.

God bless you all and may you experience the Risen Lord in new ways in this new world of opportunities.

Peter Robbins

We follow Jesus

WE have been using the words above as part of our sharing of the Peace at St Stephens for well over a year.

It feels as if we, as a Church, have a growing sense of wanting to journey with our Lord Jesus... we are ready to travel with Him where He is leading. And yet now most of us are trapped in our homes by isolation and fear.

It has been all the more poignant because the lockdown has started at a time when we normally travel together through the experience of that first Easter.

The irony is having the desire to travel with Jesus, and yet because of age and health, being held back in isolation.

It is hard to bear, especially when many are giving of themselves in the NHS, healthcare, all the many essential services and in many other acts of love and service. No wonder we want to join together in applause at 8pm on Thursday evenings!

MY PRAYER IS:

LORD JESUS, teach us to use this time to get to know You better, to thank You for Your road to the Cross for us.

Please take us on a journey of exploration of our faith in You:

- * to live in the joy of Your resurrection;
- * to delight in the gift of Your gift of forgiveness;
- * to radiate Your presence in our lives;
- * to hold before You in prayer our world, its brokenness, the defeat of the coronavirus, and all those who are in need;
- * to look for and expect Your Holy Spirit's presence and power in all the world around us, in people, in events, in Your creation, and especially in our own lives.

May the Master, Jesus, take you by the hand and lead you along the paths of God's love and Christ's endurance.'

2 THESSALONIANS 3:5.

Sandy Cooper

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