

4th April 2021 10 am Easter Day

Service led by Lindsey Attwood; includes interview by Andrew Attwood with Emma Latham about Listening to God during Lockdown. Talk by Andrew Attwood.

This transcript is only of the notice about church opening, the interview and the talk.

Notice about church opening

[Lindsey:] Okay. Welcome everyone to our Easter service ...

- And it's just a notice to give as well about what's going to be happening at the minute with the church, and opening and with all the restrictions easing and what's going to be happening. So the PCC have agreed to restart our socially distanced services in the church building on May 30th. This will include the 8am, 6pm and the midweek service. The 10am will start as well, but we will need to rotate who attends, because of numbers; so more detailed information will be shared ahead of that date, so that's something to really look forward to.

Interview with Emma Latham: Listening to God in Lockdown

[Andrew:] Hi Emma, Good to see you.

[Emma:] Hi, Andrew, and you.

[Andrew:] Thank you very much for being available to answer a few questions. Let me start with this first question: during lockdown, what are the key things you think you've been learning as a Christian?

[Emma:] Right. I think one of the most pressing things, if you like, one of the most powerful things that I've learned over this time is that sometimes when we suffer, that's when we rely on God the most, that's actually when we learn about Him the most. It's not a pleasant experience, and it certainly reminds me of, you know, in the pressing, in the crushing, you are making new wine. And I think, you know, I haven't found lockdown the easiest thing: I'm an outgoing, kind of person who likes to be with people, and so I think being more confined and restricted, I have found that quite difficult, but it means that I have to press into God more, I have to rely on Him. And sometimes we learn things the hard way, don't we?

[Andrew:] Okay, well, given that that's been the kind of context in which you've been learning, are there any particular things that you think God has been showing you or saying to you during this time?

[Emma:] I think it's just about relying on Him, going deeper with Him for me, I think that's been an important thing, you know, when life is busy, you sometimes feel that you, know, you can fit God around the edges of life, but actually you have to put God right at the centre of life and then everything else flows from there, and I think that's something that, me being me has a tendency to do that, I'm very busy and then I fit God into all the gaps I've got, whereas actually God's saying, "I've got to be in the centre and then you fit everything else around Me." Which seems obvious, but for someone like me it's quite hard.

[Andrew:] I know, we are continuously learning that lesson all the time. So in the light of that, I mean, what kind of hopes or thoughts do you have for the church as we then flow out of lockdown at some point?

[Emma:] Um, I think, I've been trying to sort of this think about this and make a note of it. I mean, I feel as if God's saying, we have to keep our eyes and our ears focused on Him, and that we have to be careful, I think, about having too many projects and good ideas for what we're going to do when lockdown is over, and kind-of having a programme and it all laid out. And actually I feel like God's saying, "See what I'm going to do, see what I'm going to do, and you might be surprised about the areas that I'm going to lead you into, so don't get too ahead of yourselves, planning lots of programmes and what the 'new normal' is going to be, you know, trust in Me, waiting to see what I'm going to do. Have your ears, your eyes and your hearts open, and I'm going to take you in places

that you perhaps hadn't even imagined that I could take you into." So, I just think there's that, there's that eagerness and desire, of course within us all to kind of plan, to have great projects about what's going to happen when lockdown's over. It's almost like God's saying, "Wait for Me. Don't get too ahead."

[Andrew:] That's really, really helpful, Emma, And much of that is chiming in with what I'm beginning to feel at the moment anyway. Thank you very much for answering my questions. It's good to speak to you.

[Emma:] Alright. Thanks Andrew.

[Lindsey:] Thank you, Emma, that was really, really helpful and that's interesting, because that's some of the things that I've felt as well, so it's great to hear other people's experience of what God is saying in the moment, and I know, I'm one of those people who loves to think, "What am I going to be doing? What can I be doing?" And God often says "Just be still." And so that's great to hear that. Thank you.

Reading: Luke 24:36-49 [NIVUK 1984]

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. **38** He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? **39** Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. **41** And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?"

42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, **43** and he took it and ate it in their presence.

44 He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. **46** He told them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, **47** and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **48** You are witnesses of these things. **49** I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Talk

[Lindsey:] I'm just going to pray for Andrew now before he talks to us.

Father God, thank You for Andrew, and I just pray, Lord Jesus, that You would inspire him with words from You. And I pray, Lord, that we'd be lifted up by the Holy Spirit, so bless him, Lord Jesus, and help us to hear what You're saying. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[Andrew:] Amen. Thank you, Lindsey.

Good morning all again. Happy Easter! It's really good to be with you, even though it's remote again. This is an opportunity that comes round every year but it's such a dazzling story, it is so pleasant and enjoyable to be able to talk about it.

The place I want to begin, as we talk and as we think about this passage in Luke, two thoughts, really. First thought is this: things are much worse than you think, but things are much better than you can dream. I'll just say that

again: things are much worse than you think, but things are much better than you can dream.

I was just scanning some articles on the web this week and I came across the story of a woman who went to the doctor's with what seems to be a small thing. She had detected a small lump in her breast, maybe about two or three months prior, but she had not done anything about it, so she delayed doing anything about it, and then eventually went to the doctor's and the news was not good at all. It was a lump that was very serious and she was going to have to immediately go into chemo and have some surgery, and it was pretty close to terminal; she did survive. But that was something that felt like a small thing, but actually turned out to be an enormously terrible thing.

Okay, well another story that I came across in the news recently, there was a Hungarian couple, I discovered, who were extraordinarily poor, they lived almost carved into the side of a cave, almost like a shack, living in Hungary, not far from Budapest, and they were tracked down by some lawyer, painstakingly tracked down, because they were the relatives of an old grandmother that they forgotten about. And they inherited \$6,000,000,000. Bit of a surprise! Bit of a change from living in a shack, almost in a cave, and then your life is changed completely unexpectedly. So there's things that happen in the world that are dramatically terrible or dramatically amazing, and the Easter story captures something of that extremity.

I think when I think back to a personal story from many years ago, when Lindsey and I were in Bristol and I was training for Church of England ministry, I can remember when Emily was a little toddler, and she was lost, she got lost in a big shopping mall. It was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life, to have this little two- or three-year-old just wander off and then suddenly disappear. And we spent some very anxious minutes searching around this shop shouting at everybody, "Can you see our daughter?" until eventually, a few minutes later, discovering that she'd just walked in between some clothes on a rack, and it was such a relief. Such a huge relief. But that sense of experiencing loss and panic and danger and then to have some good news at the end of it - gosh, that was indelibly marked on my memory,

The Easter story shows us two key things:

- The Cross proves how lost we are without God,
- and the Resurrection proves how saved we are because of Jesus.

So the Cross proves how lost we are without Him, and how saved we are because of the Resurrection. He goes beyond, way beyond any human measure for ourselves of what we think God might be like, it reveals things in complete technicolour.

Let's go back to this story that Lindsey read from Luke 24: it's the very end of Luke 24: verses 36 to 49. And what you have there is the latest encounter. It's not the start of the chapter, it's about the third encounter of the risen Christ, where it begins early in the morning and you have the empty tomb, and the women are confused by what's happened and they see shining men telling them, "He's not here. Why will you look for the living among the dead?" And then you have the story of Emmaus, of two doubting men walking away with their despair written all over their faces, and Jesus walks alongside them.

And now you have this story, where all of them are gathered together, beginning to piece together these unusual experiences, and it says, "And Jesus stood among them." This is what you would call a 100% shock: the shock of seeing a living man who was crucified. You don't get anything more raw than this. The Jewish people would understand the brutality and finality of crucifixion. They weren't naive, kind of ancient folk who thought people easily rose from the dead. They knew that dead people stay dead. So the idea of someone who they knew had been brutally killed standing in front of them, looking entirely different, is the most bizarre, weird, impossible to categorise experience.

And it's almost entertaining as you move through this story of Luke 24, of Jesus giving these scared disciples interventions to help them understand. He knew that these frail human beings would need quite a lot of help to get this truth in. So He has an empty tomb. He has a walk with two of them. And then He meets them, and He shows them His hands and His feet. He shows them. He says, "Look, it is I! See my hands, see my feet." He is giving that proof upon proof upon proof. It's Him. It even goes as far as saying in Luke's account, Jesus saying, "I'm not a ghost." That would be a natural response, wouldn't it. Just think about categorising it yourself: if you were there, you might automatically presume, seeing this person is an apparition. Seeing this person is perhaps a hallucination. Of course we know from psychology, from all kinds of tests these days, hallucinations happen to one person at a time. You can't have a group hallucination. So, is it a ghost? Is it a kind of a disembodied spirit come to visit them? And Jesus clarifies this, He says, "Have you got anything to eat?" And He eats fish in front of them. This is someone made of flesh and bones and blood. This is a physical raised Jesus, utterly astonishing, almost impossible to compute or comprehend. And so Jesus begins to tease out for them what this all means. He starts to talk about this as the fulfilment of God's Word through suffering. It's to do with forgiveness of sins being achieved. And it's pointing now to Good News for all the nations.

But before I move into the message of it, I really do want to dwell on the reactions of the disciples, because this is where we sit in the story. I don't know about you, but even after 30-something years of being a Christian, it still defies some of my understanding what it must be like to see a risen crucified man. Luke 24 verse 5 said that the women at the tomb were terrified. It's says that when they came back to tell all the other disciples initially, verse 11, it says that the men dismissed the women's story as an idle tale, but it does say in verse 12, nevertheless, Peter rushes and runs to the tomb, I think we hear more about that in John's account, because he needs to see for himself. I don't know about you, but that would be me, I would need to lay my eyes on the evidence: if someone's saying something so extraordinary, I would need to see it for myself.

And you have the Emmaus walk, where I think we're basically catching up on two men who are depressed. I don't know how you've ever felt in your life where there have been phases where you've had your confidence knocked or your hopes dashed. Jesus walks alongside depressed men, and He doesn't condemn them for it. He says, "Ah, come on, foolish guys, let me take you through the Scriptures," and their hearts burn, burn with something when He's with them. In verse 37 in this particular account that Lindsey read, it says again, "They were startled and terrified." Verse 41, "Joyful and disbelieving." I mean, it's a very honest account. One of the things I love about the Gospel accounts is the honesty of the testimony, it doesn't kind-of make the disciples look all shiny and heroic, it says they were joyful and disbelieving.

How might you react to the story of the Resurrection? How might you react to the sudden shock of someone who you thought was lost, now standing in front of you again? It raises lots of natural questions. It would have raised lots of natural questions for the apostles. It would have made them think, "If You're alive now, why did You need to die?" And so you come back to this refrain: things are much worse than you think, but things are much better than you can dream. Jesus shows them His wounds. When Jesus is showing His wounds to the disciples, He is showing proof that it's Him.

But He's also saying, "I've overcome death." The greatest enemy of the human race is death. Nobody wants it, nobody likes it. Most people are afraid of death. And for a man to show wounds that should have killed Him, and it did kill Him, and now He's here again, is proof that death is no longer in charge, death has been overcome by the One who's stronger. I can remember back to when I first

became a Christian, and I was absolutely in shock at experiencing Jesus, it was kind of like a visionary experience; it wasn't Jesus tangibly there like the apostles, but I can remember being a bit stunned. And I do remember that the experience of His love for me helped me cope with what was going on. It was almost like He had to show me His care for me, to adjust to the fact that it was Him. Absolutely amazing. Jesus goes the extra mile to help frail humans like you and me. Understand what's happened: you'll read on, if you carried on with Luke's account into Acts, that Jesus appeared to them over a number of days. That's a sign of His shepherding pastoral care to people who would need to see again and again and again, "Yes, it wasn't just a dream. Yes, it wasn't just a ghost. He's truly, really risen from the dead." Human beings need that kind of repetition for something as significant of this to go in.

But while I was thinking about this, a particular image came to mind. When I was a student first time round I had a one-year course in Sheffield, I was doing an art course at the time, and I would routinely travel to my cousins who were living in Rotherham, so I travelled from Sheffield to Rotherham. I travelled on the bus maybe two or three miles past endless miles of Sheffield steelworks. At that time they were beginning to knock down quite a lot of the steelworks, but it reminded me of the intense working context of Sheffield steelworks. I don't know if you've ever seen on video or on the net, where it's mostly men, in very dark environments, surrounded by molten metal held in huge canisters with men in visors and thick gloves and operating at a great distance with long tools, so they don't get close to the molten intense heat, protective gear and long tools. I always used to remember that there was pub after pub after pub, because it was so hot that the men would come out and drink so much beer to cope with living in that kind of intensity in the steelworks. Why would I share this image? The intensity of the steelworks is a small glimpse into what it would mean to think we now live in a different age. A man has come back from the dead. The apostles are standing in the company of someone who was dead and is now alive, and will never die again. His body is now different. He's an entirely different creature to them, because He's never going to decay. He's never going to die, and the sheer reality of that is such an intensity that it's almost like we need, we need a gap to even survive being close to the Resurrected One. You would have to change to be around someone who is alive from the dead, it would change you, it would change your understanding, it would change how you would think, it would change what you believe about reality.

And so again, by the time you get to verse 45, Jesus helps them by opening their minds. It says, "And He opened their minds to the Scripture." How many of us have read through aspects of the Old Testament, and gone, "Ahah! Oh my goodness, look at that!" because you get glimpses and signs of Jesus all the way through the Old Testament, and Jesus had to open their awareness to say, "These wounds mean that. These wounds, this suffering is to deal with the fulfilment of God's Word. Mercy has triumphed over judgement. God is victorious over sin and evil."

And now something even more profound: not only are human beings made in the image of God, which you would understand from the Old Testament; human beings are now more valuable than they ever knew before. You and I are more valuable than we ever knew before, because there is a different kind of price tag round our necks. The death of Jesus Christ was for us, and His resurrection is for us. Why? Because He loves us so much. And it's more than simply having us as His representatives, it's having us as His adopted ones. More than forgiveness, but actually adopted forever into God's family. From that point on, the disciples are not simply followers of Jesus, they're now going to be resurrected representatives of the Resurrected One. They're going to carry His Resurrection power, and they're going to represent Him in the real world.

Now, how do we put this into normal life? How do we cope with this? I think, I just want to skim back to the beginning of how our nation first responded when we started to hear about COVID. Can you remember? This is all the way back

before the first lockdown. So before March last year, I can remember messages from various government responses. We had the Prime Minister, we had the Home Secretary giving us words of reassurance. This was January, February of last year, and they were saying, "Look, everything will be under control, everything's going to be fine. Our National Health Service is more than capable of coping, we have everything in place. We've heard rumours about this COVID-19 virus, but we just want to reassure everybody." We all now know that was a dramatic underestimation of a problem. A *dramatic* underestimation of the problem. You get it? Things were much worse than anyone could have dreamt. I had a very quick look on the website recently just to do with the latest figures around where we're now at, in the wake of this pandemic. As of yesterday 2,800,000 deaths. Amazing. Also amazing, and the news starts to change its tone. There are now 547,000,000 vaccine doses that have been administered. Amazing! All of this is so incomprehensible compared to where we were before the first lockdown. You see the vaccines have changed the truly dreadful story into a story of great hope. This is a picture for us. It's a picture that points back to the horrendous death of Christ, for the horrendous situation that needed to be rectified and the Resurrection news changes the dreadful news into something extraordinary.

I want you to soak in the dramatic changes that have been brought about by Jesus' Resurrection, and you won't get this until it's soaked in repeatedly. This is more than forgiveness. This is adoption. This is more than a fresh start. This is a sure and certain hope from now into eternity. The Resurrection is proof of a complete overthrow of Satan and evil. It means he no longer has authority. It's a foretaste (this is really important) It's a foretaste of the new creation to come. You know, when Jesus showed His resurrection body to His disciples, He's saying, "This is going to be the new normal. In the end, you're all going to get one of these: a life that will never decay, a body that will never decay." His promises for us, as well as for Him, is a complete vindication of Christ's offering for our sins, and it's absolutely amazing news for anyone who is in Christ. Do you realise how upgraded your value is now because of Christ's death and resurrection? You're not just a human being. You're not just a human being who is made in the image of God. You are now saved, you're no longer lost, you're now renewed, guaranteed a future, representing the Resurrected One. Do you understand that? Do I understand that?

Let me just show you something to finish. There's lots of daffodils around, lots and lots of daffodils and they're beautiful, they are still one of my favourite flowers. This particular set of daffodils somebody got for my birthday recently. And you will know that they're glorious, but because they're cut, this daffodil will fade, this daffodil will curl, and it will have to be discarded. If ever there was a picture of the human race, a cut flower is it. It's got a kind of glory to it, but it's not connected to life. It's not connected to its original source, because we turned away from God. But if you are joined with the Resurrected One, you will never fade. If you're connected to Jesus Christ, the Risen One, you will never die. Do you understand that? You will never die. Though this mortal frame may fade, and though you may enter into the grave, though you may be cremated one day, you will get a new body, you will enter into the new heavens and the new earth, and you will see Jesus Christ face to face, you will never fade away. You will never end.



Prayerful Reflection

So I just want to finish with some words of prayer. Let's be quiet for a moment.

Just in the stillness, be aware of the seriousness of Easter, of the urgency of the Cross, the necessity of the Cross.

Admit your own need because of the brokenness, because we've been cut off, because of our frailty. Now, lift your head and see that things are much better than than any one of us could dream.

Holy Spirit, would You reveal to us again on this day the risen Jesus Christ. Would You reveal to us the One who died for us and rose again. Come Holy Spirit.

And I pray that Jesus will be stood right by you, wherever you are, that you would hear His voice, "Peace be with you," that He would show you His hands and His feet.

And I pray, Lord Jesus, that You would open our minds to understand. Lord, even in the intensity of being in the presence of the Resurrected One, would You help us to change. Cause us not to recoil, cause us to stay in Your presence. And I pray, Lord, that Your Resurrection life and power would flow through us today.

Lift our heads, overcome our doubts, show Yourself to us again and again, and teach us to truly believe that You're alive.