**Collins Street Baptist Church April 27, 2025**

**Easter 2: John 20. 19 – 29**

**What are we doing in the upper room?**

As people often say, ‘There’s a lot going on.’

Recently I read this quotation from the autobiography of Pope Francis: ‘Life is directed to something that goes beyond this life.’

There is more going on than we can presently see and manage. The last few months have demonstrated this very dramatically. The turmoil that is the Trump regime continues so unpredictably, and most of us have reached a point where we just don’t want to know any more. It is frightening to see a world where aid programs have simply stopped; medical care in Gaza and so many other places has been throttled; institutions and agreements that have maintained world peace for 80 years are just swept aside; and the whole agenda of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is not just abandoned, but mocked and abused. The empire strikes back!

I imagine that the disciples of Jesus felt something like this too. The one for whom they had such high hopes, world changing hopes, was dead. All they could do was to huddle together, to hide, in fear of their own lives.

I am reminded of something else Pope Francis said: I was privileged to meet him in 2018: I was leading an international commission of Baptists, in dialogue with the Vatican; and on the day we met with the Pope, he turned to us and said: ‘We had better get together or they will eat us alive.’ No-one was quite sure who ‘they’ were, or are, but we each had our suspicions in our own churches.

The disciples of Jesus were sticking together in fear indeed of being eaten alive, perhaps quite literally. They were gathered, we read, in a room with the doors locked, for fear of the Jews. That’s interesting in a number of ways.

Throughout Christian tradition, this room has been called ‘the upper room’. But the text does not actually say that. It probably was an upper room, in a large house, if it had a door to be locked, as most houses did not have rooms with doors to be locked. In a common person’s house, the only room with a door was the storeroom, where vegetables and seeds were kept. But in the city, larger houses would have upper rooms, and this tradition of the ‘upper room’ is probably based on the fact that later stories of gatherings do name an upper room, even in one case where someone fell out the window.

The doors were locked, for fear of the Jews. In John’s Gospel, ‘the Jews’ is an expression used in various ways. Sometimes it is used in a simple descriptive way, about their customs or traditions, like the large urns of water at the wedding feast at Cana; sometimes it’s a positive affirmation —‘salvation is of the Jews’, Jesus said; and other times in a negative and critical way. Here it is probably a reflection of the concern the disciples had that they would, like Jesus, be offered up to the Roman authorities as sacrificial targets: there was a lot of social unrest, and the civic leaders might try to assure the Romans that they could keep their own people under control. So ‘the Jews’ here doesn’t mean the Jewish people so much as the leaders who secured their own positions by dobbing in those they considered a security threat.

So here they are, and in a sense too here we are, in an upper room, a place of retreat, hoping to hold it together, in a world that is going mad.

But just then, unannounced and without bothering to open the door, Jesus stands in the midst. This is one of a series of appearance stories, which don’t even begin to explain how Jesus could be alive, or pass through locked doors, or walk along a road to Emmaus, but then disappear. Jesus just appeared.

The language and the content of their interchange is really interesting too. Jesus begins with his everyday greeting, ‘Shalom’ functions much the same as our ‘Hi’, or ‘G’day’—then he shows them his hands and his side. This is to say, Yes, this really is me. And the disciples rejoiced. Blown away, we might say.

You can imagine that the conversation *might* have gone to something like: So how has it been for you?

Or even, What are you doing here, hiding like this? What’s been happening?

But nothing like that. In fact, Jesus straight-up commissions his followers to go and do what he has been doing. There is something like a formula here, which has been seen in earlier teaching: What the Father has given him, he now gives—but this time it is a mission. They are to go and share God’s healing or forgiveness, lifting up those who feel alienated, unloved: and this authority or capacity is up to them. If they do it, well and good. And if they don’t, then that love and hope will not come into the world.

This is real empowerment. And responsibility.

But notice what is not said, too: You see there is no blame here, for the fact that just days before they all abandoned him, let him down, denied him. There is no demand that they do better. No, there is pure grace. You, my friends, you are now it: Go, empowered by God. And with that, his breath, the very life breath of God, is given to them. Holy Spirit. And he is gone.

Look what happens next. They realise that one of their best mates, who has been with them all the while, is not there. I’ve read many explanations of this, most of which disparage Thomas as some kind of coward or irresponsible character. In fact we have no idea, but my own view is it’s just as likely that there was a sale on at Myers during Passover, and his wife had been after him for ages to get some new trousers. Hiding amongst the crowd of shoppers.

The disciples went and found Thomas, who was I think deeply hurting, and does not want to be let down again. Thomas was known for asking difficult questions, and you might imagine that at least in some churches or groups he would be frozen out, or just not invited to the next gathering. But no, the disciples, filled with joy and hope, went and got him—They met again, in the same place. The upper room has become a place of inclusion: and we read of Thomas’ personal encounter with Jesus. Healing and hope.

Here in Melbourne there is a growing branch of an Indian church called the Mar Thoma Church. It is strongest in the southern state of Kerala. It is a lively community which includes a rich combination of evangelical vision and the ancient worship traditions of Orthodoxy. They speak and continue the language that Jesus actually spoke, Syriac. I have been privileged to supervise doctorates for some of their leaders. This church dates its own history from when St Thomas, who met Jesus in that room, later went to India: He took that commissioning of Jesus and went to India with that Gospel.

You see, what happens in this ‘Upper Room’ is not just that they huddle in fear. The very place where they are hiding becomes a place of inclusion, transformation, hope, and commissioning.

In John’s Gospel, the resurrection stories centre on Jerusalem. In Mark, there is the story of the empty tomb and a message, pointing back to Galilee: He goes before you into Galilee, as he told you. This too was their place of retreat: getting back to where it all began, getting back to their fishing. But again, that is where they meet him, and where they receive their commissioning. ‘Feed my lambs.’ ‘Go into all the world and preach the Gospel.’

So what of us, who gather here, in our own way unsure what on earth is happening in the world?

In many ways we are like that gathering behind closed doors, unsure of who we can trust, frightened for our lives. The doors are not actually locked just now, but for most people a church is a rather forbidding place. We are no longer part of everyday life. And it’s sad to say that there are many who feel that church is not a safe place.

What are we doing in this, our ‘upper room’?

There are those who would urge us to leave here: perhaps to join with some other ‘out-there’ group, where is it all happy, bright and breezy, a focus on feeling good. We can help you to feel that way …

Others would have us stay here and stick to our knitting: at least we are faithful to how things were meant to be—whether that is in musical style, or a form of theology and language that means something to us, even if no one else understands a word of it.

No, I suggest we stay in the ‘Upper Room’, not as a place of defence, not as a place of looking back, but as a place of patient waiting, a place of expectation: for as the Gospel suggests, somehow Jesus turns up, and extends a hand of peace, and breathes his life-giving Spirit, and speaks his words of commissioning. We can’t make it happen, but we can wait in expectation.

We do not abandon this place, this huddle, this holding together in wonder: for our wondering may be transformed into hope; our sorrow into joy, and our shame and fear into a new sense of mission, even responsibility.

This is the place of new creation, even in this ‘upper room’. Maybe we will always be this little group gathered here: but it is a choice as to why we are here, and what we are doing.

May it be that now, and again and again, Jesus comes and speaks his words of new life.

**Benediction**

Go now in the peace of God,

Sustained by hope,

Open to the surprising presence,

Open to the transforming presence,

Willing to become part of that presence,

Until the whole creation sings with that love and joy

Amen