

Nobody goes further to bring you closer

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[0 : 00] It's just gone half past six, the sun is just about out and I'm in the garden. This is not somewhere that I would normally be this time of day so why have I brought you here? Well today it's Easter Sunday. This is my rather feeble attempt to bring you to where it all started. You see we're in a garden, it's only just about light and I'm on my own. In the Bible we have four slightly different versions of the story of Easter morning, each one putting a slightly different slant on it. But they all have a number of things in common. It was early in the morning, it was in the garden and the followers of Jesus were feeling very lonely and very afraid. Now right now I know that a lot of people are feeling very lonely and very worried. Of course there's nothing new about loneliness and anxiety but what's distinctive about this time in history is the sheer scale of the isolation. We're all on lockdown. This week one person told me that the thing they're finding hardest about the lockdown thing is not quite knowing how to end phone calls. It's not currently feasible to wrap up things by saying well I've got to go now because

I've got to be somewhere in ten minutes. The same person incidentally and they're in their mid-40s was telling me that in an unsettling reversal of their teenage years they're now yelling at their parents for going out. Seriously this is a time of unprecedented isolation and with it a profound sense of loneliness and fear in a lot of people. Now for many many people the lockdown itself will mean that they're simply not seeing anyone. Some of us will be experiencing the isolation that comes with either being in hospital ourselves right now or having a loved one who is. And for some it will actually be the experience of being in confinement with others that brings acute loneliness and fear. The absence of space for social interaction outside of the home means that all too many find themselves cooped up in situations from which they desperately need to get out. According to the charity

Refuge the National Domestic Abuse Helpline has seen a 25% increase in calls and online requests for help since the lockdown began. Anyway back to this garden.

Easter is a time for joy and for celebration. Jesus is alive he's conquered death and holds out the promise that an amazing eternity is in store. But if we're to understand any of that story properly we need to remember that it all started with a profound sense of isolation and fear in the garden. In John's Gospel the focus on Mary Magdalene shows her making her way in the dark to an empty garden tomb. It's right there in that place of fear and loneliness that she meets with the risen Jesus. Later in the evening of that same day we see the disciples in isolation locked in through fear that they might face the same treatment as Jesus.

And again it's right there in that place of isolation and worry that Jesus meets with them. If you're feeling isolated lonely and afraid in any way at all today there's something important that I want you to know.

[4 : 32] It's in precisely that place that God wants to meet with you. He might not remove you from it straight away but he will certainly point you beyond it to the resurrection that is coming your way.

But there's one other part of this story that really stands out to me at this time. And it's when Mary recognises Jesus in his risen form. Notice what he says. He says, Don't hold on to me. I don't think he was talking about social distancing. But what did he mean?

It's intriguing because later on in the same chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus specifically tells Doubting Thomas to touch him. So what does he mean?

Over the years theologians have come up with various explanations. The one I find most engaging is that when Jesus spoke to Mary, he wasn't simply saying, Don't touch. Back away.

But rather he was saying, Don't hold on to me. Don't cling. Don't hold on to me. That's because the very next thing he says to her is go. Go and tell the others that I'm alive.

[6 : 00] In other words, Jesus met with her in her place of isolation and fear, but he didn't want her to stay there. He wanted her to share that life transforming reality that she just experienced and not to keep it to herself.

Thomas, on the other hand, hadn't experienced that. He hadn't experienced the reality of Jesus's resurrection as Mary had.

I'm guessing he was also feeling pretty isolated and afraid. And so when Jesus orders him to touch his risen body, he does so because he simply wants him to know the peace that comes through believing.

So both Mary and Thomas needed more faith. Mary needed to loosen her grip, whereas Thomas needed to strengthen his.

The resurrected Christ gave both of them the faith they needed, pointing them beyond their place of isolation and fear. If you're feeling isolated and afraid today, my prayer is that, just like Mary and Thomas and all the other disciples, you will encounter the presence of the risen Jesus.

[7 : 25] In the words of what I think may have been an old TV commercial, nobody goes further to bring you closer. tamper■ making an old podcast from a discovery of life according to a■■■ to Accessibility World.

That's your walk olmazer in his own st■ Ayee Mad cheek. The performance of as a reference to a Earlier Dream finish. The announcement of the decision was 2 nivewide Cayw cross and buoyant and querinating what you do on a basis. The excitement of yesterday might just be something that's not considered deep enough to ask her.

That you can deliver what I've done before this and thought of whatever usage of your break or something that might make them apart. Because of course my attention been more likely worked out all over a couple years ago.