

Beside The Seaside - 25th April 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Hey everyone, how are we doing today? My name's Matt, the Vigorous and Johns, and welcome to this week's Sunday Session.

Whether your preferred time to tune in involves taking it easy like Sunday morning, a lunchtime lull on a manic Monday, perhaps with a nice curry for a Ruby Tuesday kind of evening or even beyond into the week.

Whenever you're watching, it's good to be in your esteemed company once again as we wind our way through this week together. Well, it's certainly been quite a week for dramatic news stories ranging from short-lived European Super League shenanigans, its corrupt coronavirus contracts it seems here in the UK, a sense of justice in the George Floyd case in the States, and then a huge second wave of COVID in India.

All sorts of stories which illustrate the complex and at times concerning connections which community life brings. Life in which we can't fail but feel the need for God's guidance, God's goodness to come to the fore and show us the better way to be.

And so God, as we gather together in this way with you, would you use this time now to mould our minds, harness our hearts and inspire our spirits to ensure that we're facing the right direction with you.

[1 : 3 0] Turn us around from anything you know we need to leave behind, and instead may we grasp the height, the depth, the breadth of your love for us and for your world.

Captivate us with the possibilities of what a life lived in your ways of truth, justice, generosity and joy looks like. Help us to picture and put into practice what that means for us in our homes, our churches, our community, our country.

Indeed, thank you that in Jesus we see you as someone who loves the local, someone who moves into the neighbourhood and works things out from there. And so in whatever context we find ourselves today, whatever setting, whatever street, give us the assurance and the ambition to know that by your Spirit working through us, we can make a difference in this world, helping it to become more of the place you always intended it to be.

Be with us now as we explore more of what that might look like in our lives today. And we invite you to sculpt and shape us evermore into your likeness, please.

Thank you, God. Amen. All right. Well, this week in this post-Easter season, we're going to continue to think about the difference that the resurrection of Jesus makes to our lives.

[3 : 1 0] Now, as you've seen over recent weeks, once Jesus had risen from the dead, we're told in the Gospels of Luke and John of various encounters Jesus has with his disciples.

And so on the day of his resurrection, he appears to Mary Magdalene. He spends time with Peter. He journeys with those two on the Emmaus Road. And he appears to the disciples that same evening as they all gathered together in Jerusalem.

A week after Easter, John tells us the disciples were again all hanging out in this same room in Jerusalem, when Jesus appears to them again, this time to Thomas in particular.

Thomas, for whatever reason, he popped out to get some shopping or something. He'd missed seeing Jesus on that Easter Sunday evening. So a week later, Jesus makes a special point of appearing to him too, telling him to touch his scars and so on that we looked at last week.

Now, what's interesting though, is that all of these appearances happen in and around Jerusalem. Even Emmaus is only a couple of hours walk from Jerusalem.

[4 : 2 0] And when Jesus eventually ascends to heaven, that's an event which happens on the Mount of Olives, which again is on the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem. And yet in John's Gospel, we're told of another encounter Jesus has with his disciples.

Only this one takes place all the way up north on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, about 75-80 miles away from Jerusalem. In fact, here's how John describes this encounter.

Afterwards, Jesus appeared again to his disciples. By the Sea of Galilee, it happened this way. Simon Peter, Thomas, also known as Didymus, Nathaniel from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

I'm going out to fish, Simon Peter told them. And they said, We'll go with you. So they went out and got into the boat.

But that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore.

[5 : 32] But the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, Friends, haven't you any fish?

No, they answered. He said, Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.

When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord. As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, It is the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment round him, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the water.

The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred meters. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it and some bread.

Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish you have just caught. So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three, but even with so many, the net was not torn.

[6 : 52] Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. None of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. So, as John says, this was the third time the risen Jesus had appeared to the disciples.

Once on Easter Sunday evening, the next week to Thomas and the disciples, and then here, by the Sea of Galilee, some time later. Tradition says it took place on this stretch of the shore, and it's a place you can visit today for a paddle, or a prey, or perhaps even both at the same time.

And yet it's interesting that we're told Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two others, probably Andrew and Philip, since we know they were from this area of Galilee too.

These seven disciples had ventured all the way back up to Galilee from Jerusalem. And I say it's interesting because in Luke's gospel, we read that on that Easter Sunday evening, Jesus had specifically given the disciples this command, stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

[8 : 15] A reference, it seems, to the festival of Pentecost, which would take place some seven weeks after Easter, and a time when the disciples and all kinds of other visitors to Jerusalem would receive the Holy Spirit, the permanent presence of God with them, and this idea of being clothed with power from on high.

And yet it would seem that these seven disciples, at least, hadn't followed Jesus' instruction to stay and wait in the city, but had instead gone back up north, back to their homes on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Why would they do this? Well, we can speculate, but I think the obvious answer is probably the best one. They got tired of waiting.

Now, in hindsight, we know, when we read the book of Acts in the Bible, that the Holy Spirit would come at Pentecost just seven weeks after Easter. But the disciples wouldn't have known this, and so, by three, four, five weeks after Easter, I suspect they'd simply had enough of waiting.

They'd maybe run out of money as well, and so no doubt led by old impetuous Peter. A number of them had decided to pack up and go home. And yet, when they got there, I suspect it was a pretty underwhelming experience to be back home.

[9 : 38] Is this it, they might have thought, back here again? Yes, Jesus has come back to life, but what are we meant to do now? He said we were to wait, but wait for what? But then being back here in Galilee, well, it's as sleepy as ever.

What are we meant to do with our lives now? And so, perhaps it's no surprise that we read this. I'm going out to fish, Simon Peter told them, and they said, we'll go with you.

I mean, of all the verses in the Bible, it's got to be one of the most boring. I'm going fishing, want to come? Yeah, whatever. You know, that's the kind of impression you get of how they're feeling, how these disciples are interacting.

This in-between, waiting, uninspired, bored state of mind. A state of mind which was no doubt compounded by the fact that they caught nothing that night.

I mean, you can just imagine how old Peter was chuntering under his breath as he dragged his empty net back in. And yet, I quite like it that John tells us this kind of mundane detail about the disciples, that they were listless, bored, indifferent, unproductive.

[10:51] Because I know I, and I imagine many of us, can identify with their state of mind, especially over these recent months. Indeed, I was reading a New York Times article the other day, as you do, you know, proper exotic me, I tell you, but it was an insightful piece because it was explaining how I think many of us are possibly feeling at the moment.

You see, if we go back to this time last year and the first wave of the virus, I can remember there being a real sense of bewilderment, of anxiety, of grief, of fear.

You know, we had these worries about empty supermarket shelves which were compounded by the virus dominating daily news bulletins which we'd feel compelled to watch, all of which was feeding into a general sense of anguish.

Now, some folks patterned down the hatches at the time understandably so shielding and secluding themselves. For others though, particularly frontline workers, it was foot to the floor heroic activism in trying to combat this unseen viral enemy, you know, real fight or flight stuff.

And yet, a year or more on, having endured a long winter and a particularly bruising second wave in the months after Christmas, we're now living with the consequences of all this emotional long haul that we've been through, all of this stress we've been carrying and perhaps most of all, we're living with the consequences of the long-term absence of our usual social networks and interaction.

[12:28] depression. How does this feel for many of us? Well, what I don't hear too often these days is of people saying they're currently flourishing, you know, living the dream and loving life and so on.

Equally though, for those susceptible to depression, well, things may not be quite as bleak as they were, say, three months ago. I mean, I know everyone's different, but for me at least, a bit of sunshine really does help with my own sense of lowness.

And with lockdown life gradually lifting, there is a renewed scope for hope. And yet, according to this New York Times article, whilst we may not, on the whole, be experiencing the ultimate highs or the lowest of lows of life, there is, therefore, a common sense among many of us that we just feel a bit middling, you know, a bit joyless, a bit aimless, a bit puff your cheeks and shrug your shoulders, you know, a bit meh.

And so the word sociologists are using to describe this current state of mind is this. They call it languishing. We've moved, if you like, from being people in anguish to being people who languish. Languishing is a sense of stagnation. Feels as if you're muddling through your days in a bit of a fog as to what to do, struggling to find delight and instead living a somewhat lacklustre kind of life.

[14:01] Indeed, we could describe languishing as the absence of well-being, the in-between no-man's land between feeling low and feeling high.

Languishing dulls our motivation, disrupts our ability to focus, makes us less productive. It's not our fault, it's as much about our circumstances as it is about our headspace.

But whilst it's not mental illness, neither is languishing the picture of mental health either. Maybe that's a description which sounds familiar to you at the moment.

Now, it's not a state we're doomed to stay stuck in, but the trouble is this languishing condition kind of creeps up on us. We might not notice the dulling of delight or the dwindling of drive.

We might not see ourselves slipping slowly into solitude. We might feel indifferent to our indifference, apathetic about our apathy. And yet, because we don't always realise how we're feeling, we don't necessarily seek help or know how to help ourselves.

[15:17] And so to go back to the disciples up in Galilee in the weeks following Jesus' resurrection, I suspect they were probably in this languishing state of mind.

All of the drama and adrenaline of Jesus' crucifixion and the joy of the resurrection had begun to fade and they'd reverted back to what they knew.

But somehow this fishing life, which used to be enough for them, well I suspect it now felt somehow unfulfilling, unremarkable, unproductive if you like, all a bit lacking.

And yet the good news is that far from criticising the disciples for disobeying his command to stay in the city, and far from chastising them for losing their mojo and so on, what does Jesus do?

Well, he goes to where they are. He seeks them out on the seashore, miles. From where he'd been. Jesus meets them where they're at in all of their languishing, lacklustre location.

[16:28] And what's the first thing Jesus says to them? Well, we're told this. He called out to them, friends. It's a term of compassion, a term of kindness.

happiness. There's something quite special when someone calls you their friend to your face. Hello, my friend. Or they introduce you to someone else as their friend.

It lifts us because we feel valued and special, accepted and loved. I think that's the sense we get here from Jesus, the kind of tone of voice he was using.

He's not cross with his disciples for succumbing to disillusionment or for disobeying his direction and returning to Galilee. Nah. He understands the rollercoaster they've been on and why they might now be languishing a bit.

Just as I'm sure Jesus does with us for the past year and more that we've been through. The good news is Jesus sees the disciples and therefore us as his friends.

[17:29] People he's laid down his life for. So he's not about to give up on them or on us. Now, even if we do at times lose our spark or feel pretty foggy in our faith.

Indeed, in the story, Jesus proceeds to enable the disciples to eventually catch a net full of fish. An illustration of the abundant, exuberant, productive life which Jesus longs for his disciples to know as they follow his call for their lives.

Now, how might Jesus want to help fill the nets of our lives once again to lead us out of our languish and back into wholeness and peace, back into restoring our sense of well-being?

Well, I think the clues, as they so often are, are all there with Jesus. You see, for a start, on calling out to his disciples, Jesus says, Friends, haven't you any fish?

It may seem like an annoyingly obvious question, almost rubbing their noses in it, but it's a question which forces the disciples to recognise and name their predicament.

[18:45] No, they answered, we haven't got any fish. You see, Jesus, it seems, wants them to acknowledge that all is not well with their lives.

That what used to work for them isn't doing the business anymore. And it seems to me that Jesus would want to do the same for us in whatever state we currently find ourselves in, calling out to us, friends.

You're not quite yourself at the moment, are you? And for most of us, if we're honest, I imagine we might answer, no, Jesus, I'm not really.

Acknowledging our mindset, identifying our listlessness, giving it a name such as languishing, can often be a necessary way to start the journey back towards well-being.

Indeed, psychologists find that one of the best strategies for managing emotions is to name them, since it gives us a familiar vocabulary to understand what might feel like an unfamiliar experience.

[19:54] sense. It's no accident that through his spirit, Jesus counsels us. This therapeutic healing we've talked about before, you know, helping us to understand where we are in order to lead us to where Jesus knows we could be.

And it may just be that realizing we've been languishing, perhaps, a significant first step for us today. And then, what does Jesus do next?

Well, knowing that they'd so far been unsuccessful in their fishing trip, he tells the disciples this, he says, throw your nets on the right side of the boat and you will find some fish.

And indeed, they did. And so, secondly, just as Jesus gives his disciples a new goal to focus on, so too a useful way to ease ourselves out of any languishing kind of mindset might be to focus on a small goal to strive towards.

Here, the small goal for the disciples is to land a catch of fish. No great shakes in the grand scheme of things for these fishermen, but it was a small victory that Jesus knew they could achieve.

[21:13] For us? Well, this New York Times article suggests that the best kind of small goal to strive for is one which is of just manageable difficulty.

You know, something which stretches us perhaps, but which isn't overwhelming or impossibly difficult. The good news is, these small goals that we can achieve could be anything from solving a

word puzzle to putting up a shelf.

You know, anything that slightly stretches our skills and rekindles our enthusiasm. Ideally, it will mean carving out daily time perhaps to focus on a challenge that matters to us.

You know, an interesting project, a worthwhile goal, a meaningful conversation, something that's a step towards rediscovering some of the energy and enthusiasm that we've maybe missed during all these months.

And so I wonder, what small win could you aim for today? And then tomorrow? What catch could Jesus help you land?

[22 : 23] Small but significant steps to climb back up to a more positive place? And then what does Jesus do next?

Well, on recognizing him, the disciples, led predictably by Peter, make their way ashore. But what do they find? Well, we're told this.

When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it and some bread. Come and have breakfast, says Jesus. Knowing that you can't beat a fish finger sandwich.

The fact that Jesus was already cooking breakfast reveals that he knew he wanted to spend some time with his friends. And so a third way of maybe helping us out of a languishing mindset is that it's good to find a way to bond with others.

A way of going beyond our own experience so that our own sense of time, of place, of self, melts away. Bonding with others takes us out of our own head in a way which can lift our sense of languishing.

[23 : 39] Now, this may be in person, you know, making the effort to spend time walking or in conversation with someone else. And again, as we've said, being interested, asking questions and so on will expand our horizons and our engagement with others.

in a healthy way. But equally, and you may think this is especially good news, apparently a box set binge can often do the trick as well as it can lift us out of our own life and instead immerse us in a story where we feel attached to the characters and concerned for their welfare.

I mean, I know for Gemma and I, we've been enjoying the series This Is Us on Amazon Prime.

We're midway through a five season marathon, but I know it's taking me beyond myself because I'm welling up at certain scenes far more often than I'm perhaps proud of.

But equally, alongside my box set binge, and I've been grateful for a few good in-person doorstep conversations this week, as well as a few pub garden pints and tears of laughter which have come this week as well.

You know, however it comes, however we can be transported out of or beyond our own situation by bonding with others, whether that's vicariously on screen or through in-person conversations, well, this bonding can work wonders in helping to combat any sense of languishing we might be feeling.

[25 : 12] So, firstly, naming. Finding a name for how we're feeling. Secondly, achieving. Focusing on small, achievable goals.

Thirdly, bonding. Finding a way to bond beyond ourselves. These are three ways which sociologists have identified as a route out of languishing.

But interestingly, these are three ways which Jesus seemed also to instinctively appreciate and put into practice to help clear the fog for his own fisherman friends.

The good news is that however we're feeling, Jesus understands. But more than that, just as he did by relocating all the way up to Galilee in order to track down his wayward friends, so the resurrected Jesus will both pursue and provide for us a way through whatever we're feeling or experiencing.

You know, if languishing is indeed something of our own current state of mind, and don't worry if it is because we're far from alone if that's the case, then this model of naming, achieving and bonding may well help us to navigate our way back to well-being, both within ourselves, but also with Jesus this week and beyond.

[26 : 43] And so God, as we prayed at the top, would you help us please to know your guidance and your goodness this week.

If we're struggling, particularly with feeling that we're somewhat languishing in life at the moment, would you help us please to perhaps put this naming, achieving and bonding framework into practice?

thank you for your kindness, your thoughtfulness, your compassion for us. Thank you that you understand the pressures we're under, and yet simply long for us to live in a state of well-being,

both for our sakes, but also for the way in which we'll be more equipped to play our part in your kingdom purposes.

Thank you, God. Amen. All right, well the St John's Band have come up trumps once again this week with a recording they've made of a song called Broken Vessels.

It's a song which speaks of our fragility, but how through God's amazing grace, we are saved and set free for life with God.

[28 : 00] Amen. All these pieces, broken and scattered, in mercy gathered, men did our know.

Empty handed, but not forsaken, I've been set free, I've been set free.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.

Oh, I can see you now. Oh, I can see you now. Oh, I can see the love in your eyes.

[29 : 36] Laying yourself down. Ohh, look what I said, I can see you now.

A drop of throne's over in of your life now. and now I can hear.

Ah, I can see you now. You take your You set your treasure in jars of clay.

So take this heart, Lord. I'll be your vessel. The world to see your life in me.

Amazing grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

[30 : 44] Oh, I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see.

I can see you now. Oh, I can see the love in your eyes.

Laying yourself down. Raising up the broken till I...

I can see you now. I can see you now.

Thank you.

[32 : 08] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[34 : 52] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Saved a wretch like me Oh, I once was lost But now I am found Was blind but now I see Oh, I can see it With amazing grace How sweet the sound Saved a wretch like me Leaving yourself lost Once, once, once But now I am found Was blind but now I see Oh, I can see it now

Oh, I can see the love in your eyes Laying yourself down Raising up the broken children Oh, I can see it now Oh, I can see the love in your eyes Laying yourself down Raising up the broken children

Oh, I can see it now Oh, I can see it now Oh, I can see the love in your eyes

Laying yourself down Raising up the broken children To lie Fantastic And huge thanks to the band for all of their inspired songs which help us to worship God each week Thank you as well for engaging with these sessions week by week and as usual, there's an extra time with some additional thoughts and questions to consider should you wish But we'll leave things there for today

And yet as we go on our way let's do that in the knowledge of God's blessing flowing over us And so, may the blessing of God Almighty the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

May that blessing be behind beside and before us in every aspect of our lives so that we would live in ways which reflect the love the joy the peace of the God who cherishes you and who cherishes me more than we could ever know both now and always Amen you you you you you you you