**John 20:19-31. God meets us where we are.**

I’d like to begin this morning by trying a short reflective exercise. Ask yourself how many different stages there have been in your life. For me, I could pin the stages in my life to places where I’ve lived: I could say there was my Kiama phase – where I spent my school years. Then there was my Sydney phase, where I studied music, then Jay & I married, and we’ve moved 12 times– so I’ll quit while I’m ahead…... For some of us, our lives may be delineated by place, or age, or relationships.

Find someone behind you, in front of you or next to you, and spend just a couple of minutes sharing with each other perhaps three stages in your life that you can identify off the top of your head. Perhaps where you spent your school years, where you spent your early adult years – where you are now – that sort of thing.

2 mins!

I’m sure if we had more time, we could think of many more. Life is very much a journey, isn’t it? And within that journey there are defined stages, which are all woven together to make us the person we are.

There’s another kind of life journey we embark on – and that’s the spiritual journey.

I’m sure we’d all agree that we’re not just flesh and blood – or we wouldn’t be here this morning, to worship God - we are spiritual beings as well. And just as we embark on a physical journey in life, so we embark on a spiritual journey.

Author and counsellor Selwyn Hughes has this to say about the Spiritual journey:

“Though we do not all travel along the road of discipleship at the same rate, I believe there is a divine pattern at work. In other words, while the Holy Spirit respects our individuality since every person is different, there are certain stages and experiences which we all must go through for spiritual formation to take place. The phrase ‘spiritual formation’ simply means God’s creation of the image of Christ within us – or in other words, becoming Christ-like.”

The first stage on that journey is recognising that Jesus is our Lord and surrendering our lives to him. That may be a growing realisation for some, and a more defined experience for others. But that is just the beginning. As Selwyn Hughes says, God then takes us on our respective journeys and works in us throughout our lives to make us more Christ.

This week I had a long conversation on the phone with a young person I’ve had a lot to do with over the years. He’s not in the best place right now. He’s recently been diagnosed with severe depression and he is struggling in every area of his life, including his spirituality.

He rang me from a Christian convention that a friend had dragged him along to, hoping it would be a shot in the arm for him. Unfortunately, the convention had the opposite effect. It threw into sharp contrast how little faith he had in comparison to all those bouncing young people around him who all seemed to be on a spiritual high.

He said to me, “I just don’t know what to do. I don’t know if I should just throw this Christianity thing in and be done with it, or whether I should keep going. I’ve got so little faith right now…”

This young man is in a very difficult place in his spiritual journey at present. Perhaps it’s a place where some of us have been. But it’s not the end of the road for him. It’s rather a very significant place in his spiritual formation. He will discover things in this place that he will not discover anywhere else.

It’s a bit like finding ourselves suddenly plunged into darkness – say during a power blackout. If we sit still in a darkened room, very slowly, we will adjust to the darkness, and notice things we wouldn’t notice if the room were brightly lit. We’ll hear sounds we don’t normally hear. We may pick up an aroma, or notice a draught on our face. Our other senses become fine-tuned.

If we are willing to sit with spiritual darkness, rather than ‘chuck it all in’ as we may be tempted to do, we will gain spiritual insights that we would otherwise miss. God is at work in every circumstance in our lives to make us more like him.

For many of us who are called to minister to others, experiencing a time of spiritual darkness seems to be something that God weaves into our formation as a disciple. It gives us a deeper understanding of the suffering of others.

If we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ encounters with his followers after the resurrection, we see a curious pattern. We see Jesus meeting his followers right where they are in their spiritual journeys – and moving them forwards. They’re all different. And we don’t see Jesus criticise them or condemn them – we simply see him meet them where they are, and help them to move forward.

All of the disciples at this time were shattered, disillusioned and afraid. They’d all had such hopes that Jesus, whom they believed to be the Messiah, would deliver Israel from the Roman occupation. But it had not gone as expected. Jesus did not resist, he just let them take him. He didn’t even miraculously come down from the cross – he simply died – like the other two criminals. They’d lost all hope.

But Jesus restored each one of them gently and firmly, providing just what they needed to move on in their faith. In today’s Gospel reading, we read of John – the ‘disciple Jesus loved.’ For John, it simply took the empty tomb for him to believe and be restored. (John 20:8).

Mary Magdalene was quite different. She was one who really needed a lot of help to restore her faith. The empty tomb didn’t do it for her – as it had for John. Neither did the sight of two angels in the tomb. She was so consumed with her grief it seems she didn’t even notice they were divine beings when they spoke to her. Not even the appearance of Jesus himself broke into her shell of grief. She thought he was the gardener! Note how Jesus didn’t lose patience with her. Ok – the empty tomb didn’t do it, the angels didn’t do it – and showing up in front of her didn’t do it. So he used what would do it – he spoke her name, in the way that only he could. And then Mary recognised him!

The other disciples, with the exception of Thomas, were hiding out behind locked doors, afraid that the Jews would come for them as they had come for Jesus. They were not only grieving, they were in fear of their lives. Jesus ministered to them in a way that shook them out of their grief and fear. He came right through the locked doors, and appeared in their midst.
“Howsitgoing?” he said.

Actually, he didn’t say that – he really said, “Peace be with you.” – And it blew their minds! Then for whatever reason, he did something really concrete – he showed them the holes in his hands and side. That seemed to do it. They recognised him and were overjoyed!

Then of course there was Thomas. I see similarities between Thomas and the young man on the phone. They both were besieged by well-meaning friends, filled with joy, who simply wanted to share what they had. But for both Thomas and my young man, their friends’ joy had the opposite effect. It showed them what they were missing, and made them feel worse. Thomas retorted, “Unless I see for myself, I will not believe!”

(As an aside….for those of us who find ourselves caring pastorally for someone who is in a bad place, there is a lesson here, isn’t there? We need to come alongside people who are suffering, with sensitivity and compassion. We need to weep with those who weep, and not try and jolly them out of what they’re feeling by being overly positive and enthusiastic.)

Jesus didn’t condemn Thomas for wanting what the other disciples had received. He simply gave it to him.

Peter, whose story comes later, was in a different place again. As well as everything else he was wrestling with guilt, because when it came to the crunch, he had denied Jesus. When Jesus appeared to his disciples in the locked room, Peter was feeling worthless. What a beautiful story we find in John 21 where Jesus gently reinstates Peter, by having him confess his love for Jesus three separate times – one to counter each denial – and commissions him as a leader of the disciples.

As we sit here this morning, we will each be in a different place in our faith journey. Some of us may be on a high, some of us on a plateau – perhaps where we’ve been for years – some of us may be in a slump. We may be full of enthusiasm, or like Peter, we may be feeing inadequate or even worthless.

Take heart. Jesus knows us intimately. He knows our strengths, and he knows out shortcomings. He can take us from wherever we might be in our journey towards Christlikeness, and move us forward. He simply needs our willingness to engage with him in this task.

A little saying I’ve carried with me from my youth group days is this: you cannot steer a parked car. I think that says a great deal. We need to be willing to move forward and be ready to go in another whatever direction Jesus leads.

This Eastertide, as we listen to stories of the disciples as they encounter the risen Lord, let’s determine to move forward from wherever we might be. May we be encouraged to turn our face to jesus afresh, and be willing to work with him as he moves us on to maturity in our faith.

Let’s pray.