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hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. And the topic we're thinking about today is a, um, it's really fundamental one for us all as Christians, which is the fact that, um, we can have a fresh start with God. Uh, when I look back over my own life and my own ministry, there's lots of things I feel quite proud of and things I know I've done well, but my personal history and my ministerial history is also littered with errors and mistakes and some really awful failures that I deeply, deeply regret. Uh, there are times when I really messed up and I've made decisions and I've done things that I'm far from proud of. And I guess it's the same for all of us when we look back over our lives. Um, there are things of which we are quite proud and there are things of which we are pretty ashamed.

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Um, part of living a healthy spiritual life is being able to forgive ourselves for the things that we've done wrong in the past. Um, but that idea of forgiving ourselves is a, is a whole topic on its own. And we're not going to be thinking about that today, maybe in a future podcast. But instead, I want to focus on the fact that God is always ready to forgive us, and that when we come to him with a heart, uh, heavy with sorrow, he will always forgive us for what we've done wrong. And he will always give us a fresh start in life. And to think about this, I want to draw on the passage from John chapter 20 verses 19 to 31 when Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room after his crucifixion and resurrection, and he says to his disciples, "Peace be with you". And then he restores them as his followers, as his disciples. Now for my money, this is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. So let's have a think about it now.

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I've been a Vicar now for 27 years. It's 2020 as I record this, yeah, 27 years. And one of the greatest privileges about my ministry has been the opportunity to, uh, often work overseas. And I've worked, uh, in many different countries, but most of all I've worked in India, which is a country I love so much. And the first time I worked in India was in the early 1990s and I was there for just over three months and, uh, worked in a lot of different areas. Uh, some very urban areas like Delhi or Bangalore and, uh, others were really rural and remote. And for a short period of time, uh, I was working in a place with a group of Christians. It was basically a clearing in the jungle, a collection of wooden huts with verandas set out into a square with a cleared sandy area in the middle.

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And the first night I was there, we were all told to go to bed as soon as it was dusk. And I asked why. And, uh, I rather wish I hadn't because as dusk settled, um, dozens of cobras and other dangerous animals came out of the jungle undergrowth and made their way through the clearing. Uh, I guess to look for food or whatever else it is cobras do at night. And, uh, we were all told to make sure that we closed our windows tight and put plugs into our sinks to stop the spiders and the scorpions coming in. Uh, well how do you think I slept that night? Uh, you've got it. I did not sleep a wink. I had the windows closed. I had

the sink covered towels by the door, paper in all the door locks. Uh, the light was on and I was huddled up in bed, uh, scared by every noise and outside you could hear the wildlife, uh, slithering past the door.

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I've never felt so anxious in all my life. Uh, I couldn't wait for that night to end. Uh, I just felt abject fear. And this story from John's gospel that we're thinking about in chapter 20, uh, begins with the disciples, um, experiencing abject fear as well. The story starts like this. It says "it was evening on the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked". So the big question is, who were they afraid of and why? Just prior to this event, uh, Mary Magdalene had been to the tomb and she'd seen that it was empty and she ran and she told the disciples and Peter and John had gone back with her to check it out. Uh, then the disciples went back home. Mary stayed at the tomb crying and that's when she met the risen Christ.

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And then John writes this. "So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her". So why didn't they go looking for him? Wouldn't you have gone looking for him? I think I probably would have done, but they didn't. They stayed behind locked doors. Or John says in the reading that they had locked the door "for fear of the Jews". But to be fair, that isn't really a very credible excuse. First off, there's no sense in which the Jews had arranged a posse to hunt down the disciples. So there really was nothing for them to be afraid of in that regard. And besides when Mary said that the tomb was empty, uh, Peter and John had rushed straight there. Now, if they really were afraid of the Jews or the Romans for that matter, then they wouldn't have gone back to the tomb because that's the one place where the authorities would have been hoping to catch them.

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They couldn't have been too afraid of the Jews. So what was really making them afraid? What were they really running from? What were they really hiding from. Well perhaps they were actually afraid of running into Jesus. What if Mary was right? What if Jesus had been raised from the dead? What would he say if they bumped into him? They had every reason to be afraid. The last time he had seen the disciples was when they were, um, deserting him. Uh, his arrest in Gethsemane. OK Peter had stayed with him. But then he denied knowing him at all. And the guilt had been so bad that Judas Iscariot had killed himself. So how must the rest of them have been feeling? They were desperately ashamed of themselves. And what would Jesus say if he saw them again? How would he react? Would he be bearing a grudge? Would he be angry with them? Perhaps he will be out for revenge. No, I think rather than going out searching for Jesus, it would be far safer to lock the door and hope that the whole problem will go away.

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Perhaps we are more like the disciples than we like to admit. How often have you, how often have I locked the door to keep Jesus out? Maybe those things in my past things I'm particularly ashamed of. Maybe some fear for the future.

Sometimes we are frightened of what Jesus might think, what Jesus might do, so we lock up our heart and we try to keep Jesus out, locking ourselves in for fear of what might happen, and sometimes we're not even honest with ourselves about why we are hiding or what we're hiding from. Maybe the disciples weren't keeping the Jews out, they were keeping themselves in. But what does Jesus do? Well, he does what he always does when we try to hide from him. In this passage, it says, "Jesus came and stood among them". He enters the room and he breaks into their shame.

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Jesus takes the initiative. He enters the room and he says to them, "Peace be with you". Now these words are the exact opposite of fear and shame and anxiety. Jesus says to the disciples, just as he says to us, it's okay. He's not out to settle old scores. He's not angry with us. He knows the failures. He knows our weaknesses. He knows everything that we have done wrong, and he says, "it's okay. Let's move on". And do you notice in this passage, he doesn't even say to the disciples, "I forgive you"? There is absolutely no mention of the past. It's done. It's finished. It's not even remembered anymore.

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Jesus doesn't drag up the past. He doesn't remind the disciples of their failures. He just says, "Peace be with you" and moves on. And then we get this amazing verse of scripture where it says, "He breathed on them and said to them, 'receive the Holy Spirit'". Now, why is this so amazing? Well, it's because Jesus is inviting us to, uh, start completely afresh and go right back to the beginning with him. In fact, what he's doing is taking us right back to the garden of Eden, uh, for two reasons. Firstly, it's in the garden of Eden that humanity hides from God. Do you remember in Genesis chapter three, verse eight, it says, "That evening they heard the Lord God walking in the garden and they hid from him among the trees". Adam and Eve hid from God among the trees. The disciples were hiding from God behind closed doors.

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And then second, we go back to Genesis chapter two, verse seven, where it says, "Then the Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it". Uh, he breathed life, giving breath into his nostrils, and the man began to live. So God breathed on Adam and he began to live. And in John 20, Jesus breathes on his disciples and in the power of the Holy Spirit, they are reborn. And here is the incredible truth of the gospel; that we can hide from God because of our shame, we can, we can hide from him out of shame for our past, we can hide from him because of our bad habits and our failures and our weaknesses - but because he loves us, so, so much God will come and seek us out and find us and he will not bring up the past.

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He will not make us wallow in shame or guilt. He won't humiliate us. He will seek us out and he will find us and he will say, "Peace be with you". It's okay. I know. And it's okay. So what we've got here really is a story of an act of re-creation. It's like God takes us back to Eden and he says, "it's okay. Let's begin again. It's not too late. It's never too late. It's okay. We can start again". And one

of the most wonderful passages of scripture, of course, is Revelation chapter three 20 where the, um, the risen Christ says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" and Jesus knocks at the door of each of our hearts. And perhaps because of what we know about ourselves, we don't want to open the door to Jesus. Perhaps like the disciples in this passage,

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we want to hide away and keep the door firmly locked, but that will not prevent the love of God reaching out to us. More than anything else in the world, Jesus wants to stand before you and say, "Peace be with you", and to breathe the Holy Spirit on you and bring you to new life, to give us a fresh start, a new beginning. Perhaps today you or I need a new beginning with Jesus. And this can be a day, uh, when we put the past behind us and allow Jesus to breathe his Spirit into us and say to us, "Peace be with you". Perhaps today, uh, God is calling us to symbolically, um, return to the garden of Eden and be re-created in his image and become the people that he longs for us to be, uh, free from past mistakes free to look forward to a beautiful future with Jesus, a fresh start with God.

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So I hope you found this a useful podcast and I'm always really happy to receive your feedback and your comments and you can contact me by email. Uh, steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Please do drop me a line if you want to, and I hope that today will be a good one for you, and that you will know God's peace in your heart and you will know what it is to be truly forgiven by him. So have a great day. Bye.

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