

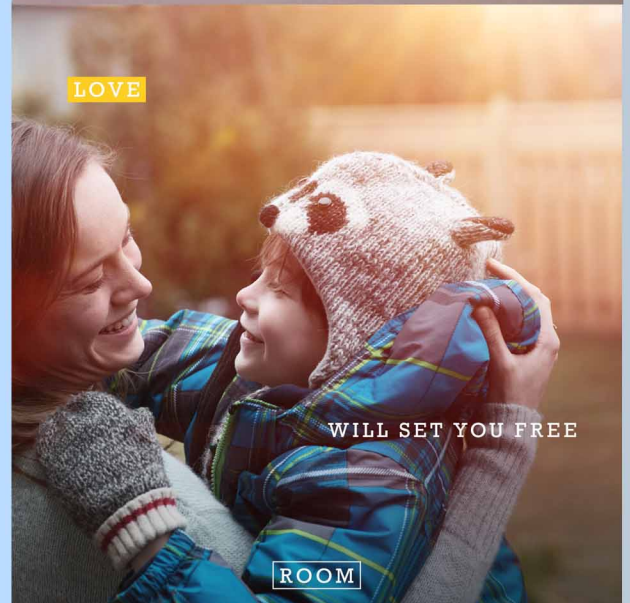
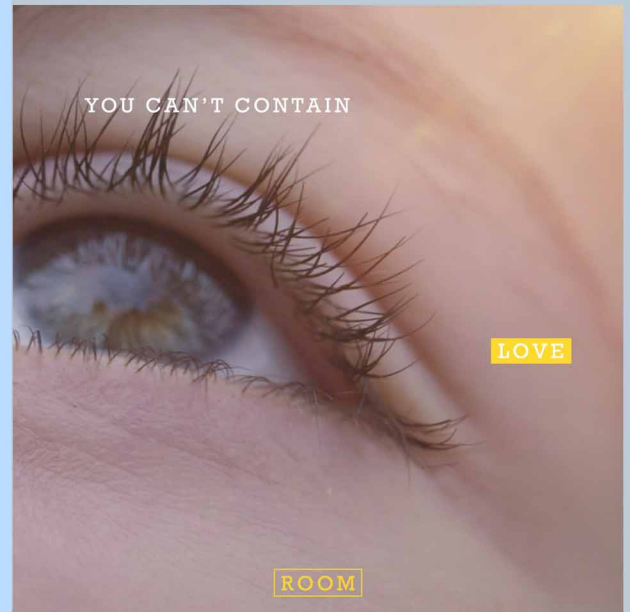
ROOM

Faith Discussion Guide

Introduction

Room is based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Emma Donoghue. It tells the story of a young woman who is held in captivity for seven years. During this time, she is raped by her captor and gives birth to a young boy, Jack. When Jack is five, the two of them escape and return to her childhood home. Even though she and Jack are now free, they both carry the scars of the imprisonment with them into their new life together.

The following is a set of discussion starters and questions for conversation intended for group use. Each topic concludes with two questions, one individual and one communal.



The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out.
Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.
~Exodus 2:23

Captivity

The first half of *Room* never leaves the room in which Ma and Jack are held captive. As such, it is a claustrophobic viewing experience that effectively conveys what such a confined life might feel like. They have few comforts aside from a few books, a television, and their imaginations. Jack's reality is room, and Ma has convinced him that everything he sees on television exists in an imaginary world, not the real world. Ma's life was cut short the moment she was captured and put in room. Even though Ma and Jack's liberation feels exhilarating, their freedom still has marks of captivity. The trauma still weights on them, to varying degrees, and forces Ma into a psych ward. Jack has trouble communicating with other adults and continues to view the world around him through either television or room lenses. It will be years before either of them are no longer held captive by room...if ever.

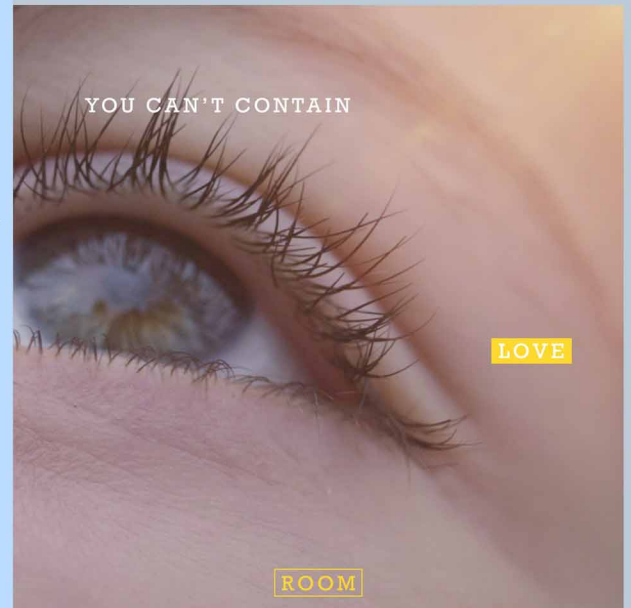
Thankfully, most of us will not face the horrors of captivity that Ma and Jack faced. In fact, most of us will never directly know anyone who does. However, people in our communities and around the world find themselves in situations very similar to this. They might be slaves or indentured servants. They might be trapped in abusive relationships. They might be held captive by memories of traumatic experiences. Whatever the case, countless people know all too well the soul-crushing experience of captivity. As people of faith, we must constantly be on the lookout for these situations and prepared to meet them with love and grace. We must be God's ears to hear their cry and God's presence in their lives to help them achieve freedom.

Questions for Consideration

1. What holds you captive?
2. How is your community ministering to those in captivity?

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The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners [...].
~Isaiah 61:1

Liberation

Room includes one of the most cathartic scenes in recent cinema. After having been held captive for seven years, Ma devises a plan to free her son. Faking his illness, she forces their captor to rush Jack to the hospital. Along the way, Jack jumps out of the truck and is rescued by the police and reunited with his mother. Their reunion on the street just yards away from room is breathtaking.

Closely related to the above discussion of captivity is the theme of liberation. Far too many people around the world know the feeling of captivity, be it physical, mental, or spiritual. Christians around the world are called to be people of liberation. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet proclaims what God has set forth for him to do. In Luke, Jesus reads these words at the beginning of his ministry. Unfortunately, to many people, Christians seem more like oppressors, those who oppress, wound, and imprison others.

Scripture is full of images of and metaphors for liberation from Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt to Jesus casting out demons to Paul writing about freedom in Christ. In Room, Ma and Jack's escape from room and their reunion with one another is an awe-inspiring glimpse of the joy and relief that liberation brings.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about moments when you have experienced liberation. What happened?
2. How are you cultivating liberation in your communities?

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I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs,
and will tear open the covering of their heart;
there I will devour them like a lion,
as a wild animal would mangle them.

~Hosea 13:8

A Mother's Fierce Love

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In *Room*, it is clear that Ma loves Jack with every fiber of her being. She nourishes him, soothes him, educates him, and entertains him. She hides him from their captor and is fiercely protective of him when he threatens to touch him. Might Ma be a model for us to think about God?

Although they have frequently been ignored throughout the history of the Christian church, scripture is full of feminine and maternal images for God. Thankfully, many ministers, theologians, and laity are (re)discovering them and integrating them into their individual and collective faith practices. For people with no positive male role models or abusive father figures, these images are a blessing and a way to think about God that is not affected by their painful experiences.

Questions for Consideration

1. Talk about the role mothers have played in your life. In what ways have they been a divine presence in your life?
2. Does your community embrace maternal/feminine images of God? If so, how? If not, why?



No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life
for one's friends.
~John 15:13

Sacrificial Love

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As we discussed above, Ma loves Jack more than anything else in life. In fact, we might rightly say that Jack is—or has become—Ma's life. He is for her a source of joy, comfort, and strength during their imprisonment. Yet as the film progresses and she grows weary of her situation, she is willing to give up her life so that he can live his.

In John, Jesus commands his followers to love one another as he loves them. He follows this up by saying that there is no greater love than a willingness to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus' entire life and ministry embodied sacrificial love, and it should be the heart of Christian devotion and practice. Hopefully, none of us will have to face a situation like Ma faced with Jack, but there will be times in our lives when we might be called to sacrifice something we love dearly for someone else or a greater cause.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about where you have experienced sacrificial love in your life. Where/when did you give it? Has it been given to you?
2. Enacting sacrificial love is a profound spiritual practice. In what ways are you cultivating this practice in your community?



And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb,
but when they went in they did not find the body of the
Lord Jesus.
~Luke 24:2-3

Life Wins

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Whenever a film tells a story of someone overcoming insurmountable odds or achieving a great goal, many critics refer to its narrative as a “triumph of the human spirit.” You’ve probably got more than a couple of favorite films in this sub-genre. At the risk of sounding trite, **Room** is a celebration of the human spirit and the power of life in the face of death. At every turn in her captivity, Ma chooses life. Her daily workout routine with Jack, the imaginary world(s) they create, her willingness to set him free, and their ultimate reunion are all examples of life winning. The conclusion to **Room** feels so satisfying and hopeful because it was hard-earned.

In her first interview after her captivity, the reporter asks Ma if she ever considered taking her own life. She also implies that Ma should have thought about giving up Jack as an infant so that he could have a better life. There’s so much talk in society today about being pro-life. Abortion, the death penalty, and assisted suicide dominate headlines. These are all overwhelming issues that demand thoughtful responses from the Church. However, they cease to be just “issues” when we know people facing them directly. As people of faith, Jesus reminds us that he gives us not only life, but life abundant. How will we share it with those around us?

Questions for Consideration

1. Where and when have you seen life win?
2. How do you promote life in your community?



How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
~Psalm 13:1-2

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Where is God?

In Ma's first interview with the press, the reporter asks her if she ever felt like God had deserted her during her captivity. Ma struggles to answer the question and the reporter moves on. In this brief exchange, Room raises profound, if well-worn theological questions. Where is God when we suffer? Why does a benevolent God allow such evil to go unchecked?

Throughout scripture, diverse voices echo these questions. Despite most of our attempts at theological certainty, fear, anger, and doubt are woven into the fabric of our faith. Consider the psalmist's plea above. Or recall some of Jesus' final words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But to doubt God's presence in Ma and Jack's experience is to ignore one glaring possibility. Could we find God in the midst of a mother and son's love for each other? Is God not presence in Ma's nourishing and protecting Jack? Can we hear God's voice in Jack's laughter? To suggest these possibilities is not to ignore the evil of the situation or the ways in which they have victimized. It does, however, open up ways in which we can see and experience God even in the darkest experiences of life.

Questions for Consideration

1. If you feel comfortable doing so, discuss the times in your life where you have felt abandoned by God. What was the situation? How did you move beyond it, if you did?
2. Do you make space in worship and other devotional spaces for the "absence" of God? How do you discuss these experiences in your community of faith?

