

27th April 2025 – Morning Service

Margaret Bradley

Easter Greeting

On this second Sunday of Easter, we declare: Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

StF 311 – The day of resurrection

- 1) The day of resurrection,
Earth, tell it out abroad!
The passover of gladness,
The passover of God!
From death to life eternal,
From earth unto the sky,
Our Christ has brought us over
With hymns of victory.
- 2) Our hearts be pure from evil, that we may see aright
The Lord in rays eternal of resurrection light;
And, listening to his accents, may hear, so calm and plain,
His own 'All hail!' and, hearing, may raise the victor strain.
- 3) Now let the heavens be joyful,
Let earth her song begin,
The round world keep high triumph,
And all that is therein;
Let all things seen and unseen
Their notes of gladness blend,
For Christ the Lord is risen,
Our joy that has no end.

St John of Damascus translated by John Mason Neale

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Holy God, we come together on this first day of a new week, the Lord's Day, the day of Resurrection, to offer you our worship and praise. Your creative power is astounding. The whole universe is alive with your energy and we see signs of it breaking out around us in the new life of Spring. Your immense love for all that you have made is amazing. We see this focused in the life and death of Jesus, where you reveal that this is a quality of love that cannot be quenched, even by the hatred and bitterness of the cross. In Christ's Resurrection you give us hope of renewal in our darkness. And so we come, in wonder and with joy, to celebrate your being and your goodness, in the knowledge that your Spirit is amongst us now, uniting us with you and with one another.

If we come with doubts, have mercy on us. If we come in despair, have mercy on us. When we fail to be your faithful witnesses, have mercy on us. When we do not forgive as we have been forgiven, have mercy on us. Come to us now, in the power of the risen Christ, as we open our hearts to receive the gift of grace from the one who promised grace, peace from the one who promised peace, and life from the one who promised life. In Christ's name we pray. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

Reading: Acts 5: 27-32

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.'

Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.'

Reading: John 20:19-29

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

StF 316 – When Easter to the dark world came

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| 1) When Easter to the dark world came,
Fair flowers glowed like scarlet flame: | 6) And friend to friend in wonder said:
'The Lord is risen from the dead!' |
| Ch) <i>At Eastertide, at Eastertide,
O glad was the world at Eastertide.</i> | 7) This Eastertide with joyful voice
We'll sing: 'The Lord is King! Rejoice!' |
| 4) When ten disciples met in fear,
Then 'Peace,' said Jesus, 'I am here.' | E) <i>At Eastertide, at Eastertide,
O sing, all the world, for Eastertide</i> |
| 5) When Thomas' heart was hurt and grieved,
Then Jesus' wounds his doubt relieved: | |

W H Hamilton © OUP

Reflection

Can you possibly imagine what it would be like if a terrorist suddenly came in through the church doors and started killing members of the congregation? This is what happened as worshippers were celebrating Easter Sunday morning communion in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, on 21 April 2019, when three Catholic churches and three luxury hotels were bombed. Around 270 people were killed, including 27 children, and hundreds more were wounded. The World Methodist Council was one of many denominations to send messages of condolence and solidarity. All eight of the bombers died in the blasts, but the truth behind the attacks is still not known, due to lack of investigation by the government. Last week members of the churches lit candles and held commemoration services, as they have done for the past six years. It could not have been easy to proclaim to those traumatised people the Easter message that the power of goodness is stronger than the power of evil, that love is stronger than hatred.

It could not have been easy to declare that darkness and shadows do not overcome the light. The line 'No more we doubt thee', in the much-loved Easter hymn 'Thine be the glory', must have stuck in some throats. It would be amazing if people didn't have doubts. And yet, the priest of one of the churches in Colombo was saying, 'This is the time they want the presence of God in their life. There is no way this will affect the power of the church and the faith of its believers. The church is a symbol of hope in its darkest hour.' The vast majority of the population of Sri Lanka, belong to the Hindu faith, but there is also a large number of Christians. Methodism has over 40,000 followers on the island, formerly known as Ceylon, worshipping in 200 churches. According to tradition, the Gospel was taken to Sri Lanka by the apostle Thomas, also known as Didymus meaning 'twin'. He is the patron saint of India among Christian adherents and many children are named after him. Yet this disciple has popularly been called 'Doubting Thomas'. Perhaps he might more accurately be seen as 'Questioning/Seeking Thomas' and then 'Believing Thomas'. Today's Gospel reading tells of the process by which his growth in faith came about. Thomas' story reminds us that our response to God is a personal one. It gives US permission to question and doubt. And it challenges us to mission.

Thomas' story reminds us that our response to God is a personal one

On the Sunday evening after Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples huddled together for mutual support, united in their grief at Jesus' death, in their anger with those who had killed him, in their own guilt for deserting him and in their fear that they too might be arrested. In this situation, John's Gospel tells us that they experienced the presence of the Risen Christ. As a result of their overwhelming encounter, their despair was changed to joy, their bitterness to forgiveness, their guilt to reassurance, and their fear to confidence. For some reason Thomas wasn't with them that night and so, the following Sunday, he had to go through his own separate process of meeting the Risen Christ.

Have you ever been in a group of people who have all shared a common experience apart from yourself? It might be having a child, or grandchildren, they might all have seen a TV programme, or been to a particular place, perhaps had a certain religious experience. Everyone is sharing in the conversation, but you have nothing to contribute because you are not familiar with what they are talking about. If you have ever been in this sort of situation, it may help you to appreciate what it was like for Thomas that week, when the women and the other disciples had seen the Risen Christ and he hadn't. Feelings of isolation, being on the outside of the group, unable to join in, cursing himself for not being there, envious, wondering what it was like, asking himself why, although he had been a faithful follower, he had been left out and not been blessed in the same way that the others had. Thomas hears what the rest of the group have to say. But their words, 'WE have seen the Lord' weren't enough for him. He wanted an encounter of his own. We all begin by hearing about the good news of Jesus from other people – from our parents and grandparents, our Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, friends and ministers. But there comes a point in our lives when we make our own personal declaration of faith as Thomas did, 'MY Lord and MY God!'

StF 303 – I know that my Redeemer lives

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| <p>1) I know that my Redeemer lives-
What joy the blest assurance gives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my everlasting Head.
He lives, my everlasting Head.</p> | <p>3) He lives, and grants me daily breath;
He lives, and I shall conquer death;
He lives, my mansion to prepare;
He lives, to lead me safely there.
He lives, to lead me safely there.</p> |
| <p>2) He lives, to bless me with his love;
He lives, to plead for me above;
He lives, my hungry soul to feed;
He lives, to help in time of need.
He lives, to help in time of need.</p> | <p>4) He lives, all glory to his name;
He lives, my Saviour, still the same;
What joy the blest assurance gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives!
I know that my Redeemer lives!</p> |

Samuel Medley

Thomas' story gives us permission to doubt and ask questions

We've noted that Thomas' story reminds us that our response to God is a personal one. It also gives us permission to doubt and question. You may be acquainted with the Easter song *'He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.'* When this was being played while the collection was taken at church, a woman sitting behind me started to sing it, so I turned round and smiled. Her response surprised me. 'But I don't feel that he DOES walk with me.' I had to admire her honesty. Although some preachers insist that everyone has to have faith, I don't believe that God turns anyone away because of their lack of faith, or because they have doubts and questions.

Some people manage to go through their life utterly and absolutely convinced of the claims of the Christian doctrines that they never ask any questions at all. Others are more sceptical. This has always been the case, but it is probably more so now than ever before. We live in a scientific age where people demand proof and want rational explanations.

Just before last Christmas, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was re-opened after re-construction work had been carried out following a structural fire which had broken out a week before the Sri Lankan bombings. An American woman was quick to post up on social media a picture of a cross that remained intact while everything around was burning. In her eyes this had been specially protected by God. 'Please explain to me how you don't believe in God after seeing this,' she tweeted. Scientists were quick to respond that the cross remained intact because, in a fire of 600 degrees, the melting point of gold is 1064 degrees. Crosses that were made of wood were destroyed. It was not God, but physics. Like many others, I did find the picture of the cross a moving symbol of hope shining in the darkness, but I could not see it as she did, as a supernatural intervention.

Most Christians lie somewhere between the two extreme positions of unquestioning faith and total scepticism. We believe, but we also have questions that bother us. These are some that people have shared with me. The one that comes up most often is, 'Why does a loving, all-powerful God allow suffering?' They ask, 'Is God really so harsh as to turn away children who die before they are capable of making a personal response of faith?' People who have been married twice have asked whose spouse will they be if there is an after-life. Others ask what is the point of praying for peace and harmony in the world when it achieves nothing. Further questions include: Was there a rational explanation for the miracles? Is it necessary to believe in the Virgin Birth? How, precisely, does Jesus' death on the cross save me from my sins today? Is it not abusive for a father to require that his innocent son should be punished for wrongs that others have done? What are we to make of the Second Coming? And so on. There are all sorts of questions that we have to grapple with, and to do so doesn't show weakness or lack of faith. God created us with enquiring minds, not as unthinking robots, and honest doubting can lead us to a greater awareness and commitment.

I've been preaching now for nearly 50 years. Immediately prior to offering as a Methodist Local Preacher I went through a troubled time spiritually. I'd been brought up in a devout Christian family that attended the Salvation Army. I also attended a Methodist Sunday School and became a teacher there. The person I married came with me to church, around which most of our social life revolved. Then, suddenly, out of the blue, everything started falling apart. I started questioning aspects of Christian doctrine that seemed to me to be incredible. Worship became a chore rather than a pleasure, and yet I felt compelled to keep going. Christian friends tried to help, but they didn't seem to really understand what I was going through. And so, slowly and painfully, I began to put everything back together again, so that it made sense to me. In that experience there was a profound sense of God's nearness and God's commissioning to take up the ministry of preaching. Having been in the position of having to hang on by my finger-tips, this became something very precious and unshakeable. I'm not suggesting that this has to be the route for everyone. It just happened to be part of my own spiritual growth. Today's Gospel story is an encouragement to all seekers who ask questions. It's being repeated today wherever people go through a period of doubt into a full flowering of faith and solid commitment.

StF 296 – Christ has risen

- 1) Christ has risen while earth slumbers,
Christ has risen where hope died,
As he said and as he promised,
As we doubted and denied.
Let the moon embrace the blessing;
Let the sun sustain the cheer;
Let the world confirm the rumour.
Christ is risen, God is here!
- 2) Christ has risen for the people
Whom he loved and died to save;
Christ has risen for the women
Bringing flowers to grace his grave.
Christ has risen for disciples
Huddled in an upstairs room.
He whose word inspired creation
Is not silenced by the tomb.
- 3) Christ has risen to companion
Former friends who fear the night,
Sensing loss and limitation
Where their faith had once burned bright.
They bemoan what is no longer,
They expect no hopeful sign
Till Christ ends their conversation,
Breaking bread and sharing wine
- 4) Christ has risen and forever
Lives to challenge and to change
All whose lives are messed or mangled,
All who find religion strange.
Christ is risen. Christ is present,
Making us what he has been -
Evidence of transformation
In which God is known and seen

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Thomas' story challenges us to mission

Thomas' story reminds us that our response to God is a personal one. It gives us permission to doubt and ask questions. Finally, it challenges us to mission. Thomas, Peter, and the other Apostles, were commissioned to go out from the safety and security of their own gathering, into the world, to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' We saw in the reading from the Book of Acts how Peter and others proclaimed the Gospel message to the Jewish elders. Thomas went to India and Sri Lanka. They didn't find it easy. What made it easier was their personal experience of the presence of the Risen Christ alongside them and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

We too, today, are called out of our safe, secure community of like-minded people, and to leave our comfort zone. We are called, not to sit and wait for people to come in to us, but to go out into the world to represent Jesus there. We are all under divine compulsion to Go for God. We feel the enormity of the task before us. We are deeply conscious of our own inadequacies. But, like the first disciples, we have the resources to enable us.

Today we rejoice in the Easter faith, in God's mighty act in raising Jesus from the dead. We give thanks that God comes to us as we ask our questions and as we live by faith. And we commit ourselves to continuing the work of Jesus so that others might come to claim with Thomas, and with us, 'My Lord and my God!'

Giving Thanks

We bring our thanks to you God, for your marvellous creation and for all the signs of new life breaking out around us, reminding us of your power not only to create, but to re-create. We thank you for Jesus, our Saviour, who lived and worked among us; for your mighty act in raising Jesus from the dead and for the hope that we have been given of sharing in his resurrection life. We thank you for all your faithful people whose lives have revealed your love and truth throughout the ages and for the way that your Spirit is transforming lives and situations in the world today. And we bring our thanks for every way that you have blessed each of our lives.

Intercessions

God of love, we remember all those followers of Jesus on other continents who are celebrating Eastertide. Especially today we would pray for our fellow Christians in Sri Lanka, for Wesley College and Methodist College, and for our mission partner there, Sarah Lowe. We pray for the church in our own land, that you will renew it and raise up much-needed Ministers and Local Preachers. And we commit to you the worship and mission of the congregations in our Circuit. May your church everywhere know your presence and be a sign that Christ is risen.

God of mercy, we pray for peace among the nations, in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Syria, and especially in the land of the Resurrection and the cradle of your promise of salvation to all humankind; for a settlement there that offers justice and security to Palestinian Arabs and to Israeli Jews. May Christ, raised from the tomb, bring life and light to the lands we call Holy, and to all the world.

God of compassion, we pray for those who are in need of hope and reassurance; those who would like to believe, but find faith difficult; those who need healing of body, mind or spirit; those who are mourning. May all find comfort, strength and freedom in the living Christ.

God of glory, we remember those we have known and love who have died. May we all come to share at last in the grace and light of life eternal.

Collect for the day

Faithful God, the strength of all who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we who have not seen have faith and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 297 – Christ is alive!

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| 1) Christ is alive! Let Christians sing;
His cross stands empty to the sky:
Let streets and homes with praises ring;
Love drowned in death, shall never die. | 4) Women and men, in age and youth,
Can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
And find the way, the life, the truth,
Revealed in Jesus, freed for all. |
| 2) Christ is alive! No longer bound
To distant years in Palestine,
But saving, healing, here and now,
And touching every place and time. | 5) Christ is alive and comes to bring
Good news to this and every age,
Till earth and sky and ocean ring
With joy, with justice, love, and praise. |
| 3) In every insult, rift and war,
Where colour, scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
And lives, where even hope has died. | |

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Blessing/Sending out

May God, by whose glory Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen you to walk with him in his risen life. And the blessing of God the Creator, Son and Spirit be with you throughout this Eastertide, and for ever. Go out into the world in joy, to serve God, knowing that the Risen Christ is with you. Alleluia!