

9th April 2023 – Morning Service

Easter Day Martin Rider

Call to Worship

In 1920 the Soviet Union held a great anti-God rally in Kiev. For an hour the great speaker, Bukharin, ridiculed the Christian faith with argument and abuse. At the end of his speech, listeners were invited to ask questions. A Russian priest stood, faced the people and simply said, “Khristos voskres!” (Jesus is risen!). At once the people rose and answered, “Voistinu voskres! Alleluia!” (He is risen indeed. Alleluia!) The atheist speaker had no answer. Let us echo their cry of faith as we respond in English to the priest’s call: Jesus is risen! **He is risen indeed, Alleluia!**

We shall begin with two short Easter hymns, the first of which was written in 1978 by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at that time a seventy-five-year-old, retired Methodist minister. The second is by Noel and Tricia Richards.

StF 292 – After darkness, light

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| 1) After darkness, light; After winter, spring;
After dying, life: Alleluia! Alleluia! | 3) Turn away in grief; Turn away in faith;
Celebrate his death: Alleluia! Alleluia! |
| 2) Take his body down; Lay it in the tomb;
Love has overcome: Alleluia! Alleluia! | 4) Come whatever may, God will have his way;
Welcome, Easter Day: Alleluia! Alleluia! |

Fred Pratt Green © 1978 Stainer & Bell Ltd CCL No. 515642

StF 293 – All heaven declares

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| 1) All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord.
Who can compare with the beauty of the Lord?
Forever He will be the Lamb upon the throne.
I gladly bow the knee and worship Him alone. | 2) I will proclaim the glory of the risen Lord.
Who once was slain to reconcile us to God.
Forever You will be the Lamb upon the throne.
I gladly bow the knee and worship You alone. |
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Noel & Tricia Richards © 1987 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Prayer

Amazing God, Creator and sustainer of life throughout the universe, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours as we celebrate the day on which you raised Christ Jesus, our Saviour, from death, fulfilling your plan to redeem humankind from the power of both sin and death. Your boundless grace sent Jesus to become the One Perfect Sacrifice that atones for the sins of this world. Through Jesus’ resurrection we are offered eternal life through faith in him, not through our own merit or works. God most gracious and holy, hear and accept our worship this morning and help us set aside all distractions and anxieties, so we may offer you our adoration and praise.

Thank you, O Lord, for this beautiful world that you created for us, for all the good things we enjoy: for people who have cared for us, guided and inspired us, but most of all, thank you for loving us, even when we are faithless, unloving and unlovable, for without your grace, we would be hopeless and lost.

Merciful Father, forgive us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have failed to do, for we know we don’t always love and serve you wholeheartedly and we don’t love others as we’d like them to love us. We are profoundly aware of the terrible suffering our Lord Jesus bore to take away the burden of human sin, so help us change from self-centred to Christ-centred living and forgive us in his holy name. Loving God, Christ Jesus died and rose for our salvation so we believe you have not only pardoned us, but call us to walk with you. Help us to do so, empowered by the Holy Spirit, so that by serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour your holy Name through Christ Jesus our risen Lord. **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.**

We shall sing a hymn written jointly by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty in 2003. The words reflect the resurrection story in a very moving way and the music complements them, so I think this hymn will become an Eastertide favourite for years to come.

StF 309 – See what morning

- 1) See, what a morning, gloriously bright,
With the dawning of hope in Jerusalem;
Folded the graveclothes, tomb filled with light,
As the angels announce Christ is risen!
See God's salvation plan,
Wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice,
Fulfilled in Christ, the Man,
For he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!
- 2) See Mary weeping, 'Where is he laid?'
As in sorrow she turns from the empty tomb;
Hears a voice speaking, calling her name;
It's the Master, the Lord raised to life again!
The voice that spans the years,
Speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us,
Will sound till he appears,
For he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!
- 3) One with the Father, Ancient of Days,
Through the Spirit who clothes faith
with certainty;
Honour and blessing, glory and praise
To the King crowned with power and authority!
And we are raised with him,
Death is dead, love has won,
Christ has conquered;
And we shall reign with him,
For he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

Stuart Townend & Keith Getty © 2003 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Prayer of Intercession

God most gracious and holy you have given us this remarkable, beautiful and self-sustaining world and have blessed our lives in so many ways that we know our response should be to serve our neighbours as your earthly hands, doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can. May the perfect example of Jesus, our risen Saviour be our guide in how we serve our neighbours and play our part in building a better world.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine and Jerusalem, asking that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among all nations and peoples, so peace and justice may be established and prevail. We pray, too, for the governments of the world's nations, that they may govern justly and with mercy. Hear our prayer for our enemies and those who wrong us that we may bear a Christian witness and offer peace for hostility and kindness for hatred.

We offer our prayer for healing to the victims of natural disasters especially populations inundated by recent flooding in Malawi, Brazil and New Zealand, those caught up in the tornadoes in Mississippi and Central USA, besides everyone affected by the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

Compassionate God, we pray for the leaders of wealthy nations to be generous in offering aid to countries where there is great poverty and suffering, in particular lands which are afflicted by droughts and famine. We ask that efforts to take grain and oil from Ukrainian ports to ease the plight of the world's hungry will continue despite the war and we ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide victims with desperately-needed aid.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, those bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them.

Gracious Lord, where it is possible let us be part of the answer of our prayer for those around us, by being sensitive to their needs and offering practical support. Enfold them in the warmth of your love that they be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

We pray for the whole Church of Christ, that professing one Lord, one faith and one baptism, all whom Christ has called may learn to live in the unity of the one Spirit and take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. We pray for everybody who takes the gospel to the world that they are able to draw all-comers to Christ Jesus through their sincerity and boldness of spirit. And also to all who receive God's Word, that they may discover his holiness and glory.

We thank you and praise you for all your saints in this world and the next. Grant them the fullness of your eternal joy. Strengthen us by their fellowship, so we may follow their examples and guide other people to know and love Jesus the risen Lord. Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and may Jesus Christ our risen Lord inspire and guide us in all we do and say. **Amen.**

Reading: Matthew 28:1 - 10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

We continue our worship with a hymn by Revd. Samuel Medley, an Eighteenth Century Pastor at Byrom Street Baptist Church in Liverpool. Penned by a man who in his youth was almost as godless as John Newton, but who found faith after being seriously injured in a naval battle and nursed back to health by his God-fearing grandfather. This hymn is a great statement of resurrection faith.

StF 303 – I know that my Redeemer lives

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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!

Samuel Medley

Sermon

There are quite a few discrepancies in the gospel accounts of the resurrection, for the stories were written decades later in different places. Moreover, the authors did not try to describe the resurrection itself, but concentrated instead on its effects on his followers: bewilderment, joy, fear, doubt, assurance and exhilaration. Matthew wrote for mainly Judeo-Christian followers, so there are some details aimed to explain the empty tomb and why the chief priests were claiming that the disciples had gone during the Sabbath night and had stolen Jesus' body whilst they slept. It is indeed quite possible that such rumours were spread, but anyone who thinks for a moment can see how absurd those claims were.

The disciples were so dispirited and afraid they hid during the crucifixion, leaving Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea to place Jesus in the tomb. It is extremely unlikely that they would have found the courage to brave armed guards, to push away the boulder that sealed the tomb and steal the body and – if we take into account John's description of the grave clothes being folded where Jesus lay – spend time undressing the Lord, then redressing him. Moreover, Passover Sabbath night was especially holy and no Jew would remove a body from a tomb, adding desecration to the prohibition to work on the Sabbath. Finally, what would they have done with such a body, for the chief priests would have conducted a thorough search if they had thought such a theft had occurred after claims of the resurrection started being made. Indeed, if they had not witnessed the risen Lord, they would have been demoralized to form any plan, other than to escape from Jerusalem in case they were rounded up.

Matthew's account began at daybreak with two Marys, Magdalene and the mother of James and Joses, going to the tomb where they had seen their Master laid. They may well have gone to determine whether or not they could gain entry to anoint the body according to Hebrew custom, though Matthew did not say they were carrying spices. The earthquake was not intended to be literal, but the experience tells the listener that God had intervened in an earth-shaking way. The sealing boulder had been rolled back and an angel, God's messenger, was sitting on the stone. His appearance resembled Jesus at the transfiguration and left the guards petrified and unable to intervene.

The angel told the women not to be afraid, for he knew they were looking for the crucified Jesus. He then declared, 'He is not here; he has risen, just as he said', and he led them to witness the empty tomb. This is both important and remarkable, for Matthew chose two women as the first witnesses of the resurrection. At that time one woman's evidence in a court of law had to be corroborated by another, to the two Marys fulfilled that legal requirement. Secondly, women had no real status in Jewish society at that time: they were chattels of their father until they married, whereupon they became chattels of their husband. I can sense Twenty-First Century women bristling with rage, but whilst I share your sense of injustice, it was simply the way things were done at the time. Think for a moment. Almighty God gave the honour of being the first witnesses of the most earth-shattering event in history to downtrodden women, not to Peter or any of the disciples and certainly not to members of the Sanhedrin.

Moreover, the angel gave them the task of being the first apostles, for he told them, "Go quickly and tell the disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'"

Understandably, they were both fearful and exultant, for they must have felt overwhelmed by what they had witnessed and would have been concerned about how the men would receive their news, yet they hurried back to that locked room. Their faith and obedience were rewarded when Jesus appeared to them and allowed them to grasp his feet to reassure them he was real and not an apparition. How often do we feel the need to hug when faced with loss or uncertainty and when words aren't enough? Then he repeated that they should not be afraid and should relay the message to his followers.

You may wonder why Matthew referred to meeting them at Galilee, rather than Jerusalem. It is probably because it was in Galilee that God's salvation dawned, whereas it was Jerusalem where the darkness of rejection and death was centred. Again, it is a reversal of power: Jerusalem was lauded as the Holy City, whereas Galilee was despised as third-rate – a place from which no prophet was likely to come from. In other words, Christ's resurrection brought God's kingdom to fruition, a kingdom where the poor and lowly are exalted, whilst the proud and wealthy are brought low. The status quo was challenged, and still is to be, for it is of little use just to proclaim the resurrection if we don't live it out day by day in how we care for one another, in particular for the weak, vulnerable and marginalised in our society and the wider world. The angel told the women, 'Do not be afraid. Christ is risen!' Let us be courageous in our service of others, knowing that we serve the Living God who loves not just us, but everybody, to the uttermost. Don't give into fear even in the bleakest situation, for Christ is risen! Alleluia! Amen.

We close our Easter worship as we sing a hymn written for Easter at Hockley Congregational Church, Essex by its Minister Revd. Brian Wren, who had particular concern for the needs of the Developing World.

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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Benediction

May the light of God's love fill our hearts and dispel the encircling gloom of selfishness and sin. May the Lord's rule be established throughout the land so mercy and justice prevail. May we reveal our faith and hope in our words and actions and may the grace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, the boundless love of God and the awesome power of the Holy Spirit dwell within us and in those whom we love, now and forever more. **Amen.**