

A service for 27th April, 2025 – Low Sunday (StF)

Psalm 150

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD. Amen.

We shall worship our risen Lord as we sing a hymn written by Noel and Tricia Richards in 1987. Hymn number 293, 'All heaven declares'

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 man to God.

Forever You will be

The Lamb upon the throne.

I gladly bow the knee

And worship You alone.

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Let us pray.

Glorious heavenly Father, we have come here, celebrating the triumph of our Saviour Jesus Christ over sin and death for all humankind. Lord of creation, whose Word created our universe and whose compassion sustains life, for love of sinful human beings like us you came to our world as Jesus, who shared our lives and experiences, bringing Good News in words and deeds. Our risen Lord offers us everlasting life through his grace, not by anything we deserve or can do to earn it. Like Christians everywhere, we joyfully proclaim, 'Christ is risen! Alleluia!'

We ask you to accept our wholehearted thanks for this beautiful, amazing world over which you have given us stewardship. Thank you for all the good things that we enjoy, but most of all we thank you for redeeming us at such a cost. We offer you all honour, glory, power and praise in our worship, for you are the one true God, Almighty, yet accessible through our risen Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Let us set ourselves right with our Lord by confessing our sins. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

Hear us, merciful God, as we confess our sinfulness and failure to live as you want us to. We know that we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly. Indeed, we sometime disregard your call to serve others in your name and we bring to mind occasions when we have failed to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, by acting and speaking in a way that shames us.

Lord, in your mercy **Hear our prayer.**

We know that, whilst you love us sinners, sin itself angers and grieves you, so we ask you to help us turn away from sin and back to the path you call us to tread. Bring us into the light of your love as we seek your forgiveness for the sins we have committed and the good we have failed to do.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that in your loving-kindness you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow you as Christ Jesus called his disciples to follow him. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide and perfect our service, so our lives may provide evidence of our faith and be a beacon to draw others to know and love our risen Saviour. Amen.

We shall say 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.

We continue our worship with Revd. Fred Pratt Green's 1969 version of a hymn written by Revd. George Woodward in 1894. Revd. Fred's words invite to sing joyfully as we proclaim the risen Lord. Hymn number 314, 'This joyful Eastertide,'

**1. This joyful Eastertide,
What need is there for grieving?
Cast all your cares aside
And be not unbelieving: *Chorus:*
*Come, share our Easter joy
That death could not imprison,
Nor any power destroy,
Our Christ, who is arisen!***

**2. No work for him is vain,
No faith in him mistaken,
For Easter makes it plain
His Kingdom is not Shaken: *Chorus***

**3. Then put your trust in Christ,
In waking and in sleeping.
His grace on earth sufficed;
He'll never quit his keeping: *Chorus***

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

We come now to our prayers of intercession. As the horrors of the fighting in Ukraine we begin with a prayer for that country. Let us pray.

Lord of all nations, you made us, you love us all and understand everything about us. Christ died for all people at Calvary to effect the new eternal covenant and to draw us close as your earthly children, but our failure to live in peace with our neighbours is heart-breaking, especially as we witness the suffering of Ukraine as the country faces attacks by Russia.

We pray that a peace treaty can soon be negotiated to end the conflict, that the Kremlin's plans are frustrated and those who have committed war-crimes will face justice. We ask that Ukraine will remain a free, democracy after hostilities have ceased

and that other nations continue to provide practical support and hospitality not only during the conflict, but as long as help is needed.

In your mercy Lord, be with the Ukrainian people. Grant President Zelenskyy and his advisors the wisdom and judgment needed to lead the people throughout and beyond the conflict. We pray the armed forces and militia will be given the means to resist Russia's might. Loving God, enfold Ukrainian civilians, who have to shelter from bombardment in appalling need and conditions, as a hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings. Grant them steadfast courage and look on them with compassion. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. May they be made welcome and receive all the support they need. Above all, Lord, restore peace to Ukraine and help it rebuild what war has destroyed. We offer our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

We continue with prayers about our concerns for the world.

Loving God, Jesus' passion, death and resurrection remind us that you care for us with love that knows neither boundaries nor imposes conditions. Teach us to share your love with our neighbours, nearby and far away. Grant us faith, wisdom, compassion and steadfastness to serve you as you desire. Do not let us not close our eyes and hearts to injustice, prejudice or neglect, but instead bid us strive courageously for the wellbeing of everyone we meet.

Lord of all nations, besides praying for an end to the conflict in Ukraine, we pray for peace across the world. Guide national leaders to resolve disputes with neighbours by negotiation rather than resorting to military action. Instead, may they learn to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace be established and prevail. In your mercy, hear our prayer for all victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the resources and encouragement they need to rebuild their lives and to be healed in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where serious famines may lead to catastrophic loss of life. May the situation in Ukraine not divert the attention of governments and relief agencies from providing much-needed aid.

Lord of healing, reach out to people who are sick, infirm, troubled or lonely and particularly all who live with a dementia, their friends, families and carers. We remember those whose conditions have deteriorated because of the pandemic preventing them from being treated. Reach out to them in mercy, offering comfort, renewed strength, hope, healing and peace. We remember, too, people who have lost loved-ones during the past two years, both because of COVID19 and for other reasons, but who have been unable either to mark their passing or to mourn because of restrictions at funerals. We pray for neighbours who are suffering from the physical, mental, social and economic effects of the pandemic and, not least of all, for children whose education and general wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the pandemic.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness: Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and we ask you to embrace everybody for whom we pray with the warmth of your love, offering them healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray not only for our church and other churches in our district, but the World Church. As we emerge from the dark shadow of coronavirus, help us learn

new, effective ways of meeting the needs of our communities, ways that reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus as we serve him with united, faithful hearts.

Abba, Father God, may the news that neither sin nor death has the final word inspire us in our discipleship. Keep our hearts warm and teach us to reveal the light of your love in all we do and say, in the name of Christ Jesus, our risen Lord, to whom be honour, praise, glory and power now and forevermore. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 24 verses 13 to 35

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him.

He asked them,

"What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him,

"Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

He said to them,

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly,

"Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other,

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn by Revd. Samuel Medley, an Eighteenth Century Pastor at Byrom Street Baptist Church in Liverpool, who like John Newton, had been an unbelieving sailor, but who was brought to faith by his grandfather, who nursed him back to health when Samuel had been wounded in battle. This hymn makes one of the greatest statements of faith at Easter.

Interestingly, as most of his congregations were illiterate, Samuel taught his hymns line by line. Let us sing hymn number 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.

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.

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.

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!

© Samuel Medley {1738 – 1799}

Address: “.. and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.” **Luke 24:35**

I am sometimes tempted not to watch the news on television, because so much of it is woeful and we are largely unable to do much about it. For the past six weeks we have watched the intense suffering of Ukrainians following the invasion by President Putin’s forces. We have seen inflation rise to levels unseen for decades: the cost of fuel and gas threatens to push many into poverty. Food banks are struggling; the NHS is struggling with the COVID omicron XE strain and, just in case we have forgotten, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sudan are all experiencing famines that threaten the lives of millions! Even though Easter reminds us that God is in control, it would be very easy to echo Jesus’ cry at Calvary: ‘My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Before you do, remember that the words begin Psalm 22 which ends in victory and restoration for the suffering servant. His cry may have been of despair, but Jesus still believed he’d be raised and glorified.

In many ways Cleopas and his friend – most likely his wife, Mary – would have been even more despairing as they left Jerusalem at the end of Passover 2000 years ago. They were certainly followers of Jesus, who’d regarded him as the Messiah and had gone with him into Holy City a week earlier amid the massed crowd’s adulation. Both had probably expected a revolution to destroy the power of occupying Romans’, reunite Israel and Judea, restore the country to the level of wealth and political power it had enjoyed when David was King. They’d anticipated the Messiah would have made Jews honour a new covenant with God, but for many Jews at that time salvation meant freedom from occupation, gaining power and wealth more than personal holiness.

What actually occurred had left them inconsolable. To his friends’ surprise, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a young donkey, like the King in **Zechariah chapter 9**, rather than on a war horse. Within a week, Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his friends and those cries of ‘**Hosanna!**’ changed to ‘**Crucify him!**’ Certainly they had never envisaged Jesus submitting to his enemies like a lamb to

slaughter. They probably hid in the same barred room with the other disciples, terrified of being discovered and sharing their Master's fate.

Imagine their feelings on the morning of the third day, after the Sabbath ended, when women went to finish anointing Jesus' body according to Hebrew customs. First, Mary Magdalene returned, crying that Jesus' body had been taken from tomb. Next Peter and John investigated, but had returned none the wiser, then Mary had reappeared shouting, **'The Lord is risen!'** And the other women had affirmed this report. Luke recorded the disciples didn't believe the women's news of Christ's resurrection, so we can imagine how poisonous the atmosphere must have grown in that room, unbearable enough for **Cleopas and Mary** to want to leave for home, whatever the risk.

So they were plodding along, despondent that what had begun as a great adventure had ended in ashes of hopelessness: the Messiah killed as a common criminal; neither revolution nor salvation had happened and, to cap it all, his body had disappeared from the tomb! Now Emmaus was 160 stadia, or 20 miles north west of Jerusalem, so they'd considerable time to try to make sense of events, but as they walked, they were overtaken by a figure who asked what they were discussing. They were amazed, for Jesus' crucifixion had been the talk of Jerusalem for the past three days.

The stranger gently rebuked them: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" This man went on to explain how prophets had pointed to how God's salvation would come through Jesus. By the time they reached their home, it was nearly sunset, but Cleopas and companion had clearly so enjoyed the stranger's conversation they offered him hospitality at their house. Even then they clearly didn't recognise he was the risen Christ until he broke bread and blessed it – as well a learned guest might have been asked to do. The way in which he did it revealed the stranger as the risen Lord, yet before they could embrace or question him, Jesus had gone, leaving them to reflect upon what had happened. Notice how, like John Wesley at Aldersgate, their hearts were said to have been warmed as the mystery of the cross was revealed to them. God's salvation had come through sacrificial love, not through brute force, for when Jesus had appeared weakest, nailed to his cross, unable even to brush away flies that tortured him as they fed on his blood, his love was still strong enough to break Satan's power. **God's generous love invites us to follow him; it does not coerce us.**

What message does this encounter on the Emmaus Road hold for us? Just as Mary Magdalene recognised the risen Christ when she was called by name, so Cleopas and his wife realised his identity when Jesus performed a familiar action – probably reminding them of his eucharistic command. **In other words, we can encounter Jesus in mundane situations – they don't need to be mountain-top meetings, or Damascus Road experiences.** We can meet the Lord in other people, too, when we give or receive help, share communion, or pray. Remember, when we see Christ in strangers, like Cleopas, our hearts will be warmed with his love. Thus the apparent defeat of Jesus at Calvary became his great victory over evil's power in the world. **It means that, even when situations seem hopeless, they're not beyond God's reach in Jesus, for resurrection means Jesus has triumphed over sin and the Last Enemy, death.** God has the last word: he's triumphed and will continue to do so; Jesus' blood has united us with God.

By God's grace we've been freed from the burden of sin to serve God as our loving response, not because we have to earn salvation like offenders doing community service in their orange coveralls. When Cleopas and Mary realised the significance of

Jesus' resurrection, they returned at once, though it was dark, to joyfully share their Good News with the other disciples. Do we recognise risen the Lord in our daily life? Do we answer Christ's call to share Good News in both deeds and words? **May we have the faith to persevere, even when all seems lost, for as with Cleopas, the risen Christ walks with us on our life journey and he won't let us down. Alleluia! What a Saviour! Amen.**

We shall close our worship as we sing a hymn by Brian Wren, a Minister in the Congregational Church before it became the URC. It was first sung at Hockley Congregational Church, Essex, on Easter Day 1968 and is as relevant now as it was more than half a century ago. We sing hymn number 297, 'Christ is alive! Let Christians sing;'

**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.**

**2. Christ is alive! No longer bound
To distant years in Palestine,
But saving, healing, here and now,
And touching every place and time.**

**3. In every insult, rift and war,
Where colour, scorn or wealth divide,
He suffers still, yet loves the more,
And lives, where even hope has died.**

**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.**

**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.**

© Brian A Wren (Born 1936)

Benediction

Heavenly Father, in whose power our Saviour Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen us to walk with him in his risen life and to bring you honour by sharing the love you shower upon us with everybody we meet. And the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. **Amen.**