

A service for Easter Sunday – 20th April, 2025 (StF)

Call to Worship: Alleluia! Christ is risen! – He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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 open our worship as we sing a hymn written by Charles Wesley in 1739. My late mother would have loved it, as she loved alleluias in hymns. We sing hymn number 298, “Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!”

1. Christ the Lord is risen today: Alleluia!

All creation joins to say: Alleluia!

Raise your joys and triumphs high: Alleluia!

Sing, you heavens; you earth, reply: Alleluia!

2. Love’s redeeming work is done: Alleluia!

Fought the fight, the battle won: Alleluia!

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal: Alleluia!

Christ has burst the gates of hell: Alleluia!

3. Lives again our glorious King: Alleluia!

Where, O death, is now your sting? Alleluia!

Once he died our souls to save: Alleluia!

Where’s your victory, boasting grave? Alleluia!

4. Soar we now where Christ has led: Alleluia!

Following our exalted Head: Alleluia!

Made like him, like him we rise: Alleluia!

Ours the cross, the grave, the skies: Alleluia!

5. King of Glory! Soul of bliss! Alleluia!

Everlasting life is this: Alleluia!

You to know, your power to prove: Alleluia!

Thus to sing, and thus to love: Alleluia!

© Charles Wesley (1707 - 1788)

Let us pray.

Amazing God, Creator and maintainer 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. Most of all, thank you for coming as Jesus Christ and for loving us, even when we are 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. Help us change from self-centred to Christ-centred living.

In sure confidence that you have heard our prayer and have restored us in your sight, we thank you, Lord. May we serve you in Spirit, truth and love, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, so we may bring light and goodness to a sin darkened world. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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 shall continue with a hymn by the wonderful Revd. Fred Pratt Green. Hymn number 292, 'After darkness, light'.

**1. After darkness, light;
After winter, spring;
After dying, life:
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**2. Take his body down;
Lay it in the tomb;
Love has overcome:
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**3. Turn away in grief;
Turn away in faith;
Celebrate his death:
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**4. Come whatever may,
God will have his way;
Welcome, Easter Day!
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

We come now to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far away

Heavenly Father, although we have been blessed by living on this achingly beautiful planet, we grieve about the brokenness we see here and abroad, much of which is the result of human greed, spite, foolishness and indifference to our neighbours' needs. In response to your love for us, we want to play what part we can in making the world a better place, but we recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that often many complex issues threaten to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with more ability, power and influence than we possess; people who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord of the world, we bring to you our anxieties and grief about the wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land and civil conflicts in Syria, Congo, Sudan and Somalia, for the destruction, suffering and death that result from mankind's inability to love our neighbours. Lord, we pray for President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine in their

peril and distress, particularly after the meeting with President Trump and the withdrawal of American support. Remember the people in Gaza and Lebanon, following the resumption of hostilities with Israel. Lord, we ask for a swift, just end to and for a humane resolution to all these conflicts. Guide the leaders of the nations to govern with compassion and justice, to learn to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, so that lasting peace is established on earth.

Remember, in your mercy our neighbours in Myanmar, Thailand and China, who were stricken by a powerful earthquake a fortnight ago and for victims of global warming. Forgive us for our failure to be good stewards of the world and teach us to help play our part in reducing the harm we are doing the planet, so we may pass on a healthier world to forthcoming generations.

Jesus came as Lord of wholeness and wellbeing, so we ask you to hear our prayer for people in our community who are struggling with bodily, mental or spiritual health issues, for those who are brought low by loneliness, trouble, or need and for everybody who is mourning the loss of somebody dear to them. In a time of silence, we bring to mind those 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: Lord, help us to offer them practical support as well as sympathy, but may the warmth of your love enfold them to grant them healing, courage, comfort, hope and transcending peace.

Holy God, we pray for our church, other churches in our Circuit and the World Church, too. Help us learn new, effective ways of meeting the needs of our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts in words and deeds of love.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, both friends and strangers, so that our lives bring you honour through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is St. John chapter 20 verses 1 to 18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said,

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said,

"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her,

"Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic,

"Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said,

"Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn loved by Ira Sankey. It was written in 1874 by Robert Lowry, a Nineteenth Century Baptist Pastor in Pennsylvania and New York. He also wrote the melody which was apparently improved by the editors of the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book"! Hymn number 305, 'Low in the grave he lay'.

1. Low in the grave he lay,

Jesus, my Saviour,

Waiting the coming day,

Jesus, my Lord: *Chorus*

Up from the grave he arose,

With a mighty triumph o'er his foes;

He arose a victor from the dark domain,

And he lives for ever with his saints to reign:

He arose! He arose!

Alleluia! Christ arose!

2. Vainly they watch his bed,

Jesus, my Saviour;

Vainly they seal the dead,

Jesus, my Lord: *Chorus*

3. Death cannot keep his prey,

Jesus, my Saviour;

He tore the bars away,

Jesus, my Lord: *Chorus*

© Robert Lowry {1826 – 1899}

Sermon: *The Resurrection according to John.*

Of all the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, I confess that John's is my favourite, though it was certainly the last of the gospels to be written. Just as with his description of home of Lazarus being filled with the scent of spikenard when Lazarus' sister, Mary, poured that expensive oil over Jesus' feet, so this account contains details that point to his presence during these events. But let us begin with the events in a house in Jerusalem as the Passover Sabbath ended. Jesus' followers were in hiding,

behind bolted doors, terrified that they would be arrested and put them to death, just as he had been crucified on the eve of the Sabbath.

For them everything they had hoped for had crumbled to dust. Jesus had not led a revolt that overthrew the occupying Romans and they hadn't shared his glory. The expected salvation seemed to have stalled with their Master put to death as a common criminal – on a cross which carried God's curse in Deuteronomy. When Jesus was arrested and they had all fled, except for Peter, who went to Caiaphas' palace to see what was happening. Even his courage had failed when challenged as a follower of Christ and he'd fulfilled the Lord's prediction by denying him three times before dawn. Their spirits must have been at rock bottom, because only John had been brave enough to join Mary, Jesus' mother, Mary's sister, Cleopas' wife, Mary and Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross. None of them helped lay Jesus in the tomb offered by Joseph of Arimathea, though the womenfolk noted where he was laid. It's little wonder the men felt hopeless failures.

As Jesus had been taken from the cross just before sunset, he would have been hurriedly wrapped in a burial cloth with cloths over his face, because there was no time for the usual burial rituals of anointing with herbs and the rest of that alabaster jar of spikenard. As soon as the first star was seen in the sky Shabbat, the Sabbath would have begun and nothing that constituted work was allowed – even when dealing with the dead. Therefore, as soon as dawn began to break and Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and some other women ventured from that locked room to walk to Jesus' tomb, in order to perform the burial rites. Notice how Mary is clearly identified, because she became the first witness of the risen Christ. You may well ask why the disciples did not join them. To begin with, even if the women were known to the authorities, they would have had no status, so they'd have been left alone, whereas the disciples might well have been challenged and arrested. However, there was another reason: anybody who came into contact with a dead body, including dead animals, was considered ceremonially unclean and right-thinking Jews would not be defiled voluntarily, so they'd have thought why not just leave it to the women?

Jesus' tomb had been sealed with a large stone, not so much to frustrate tomb robbers as to prevent the disciples from taking the body, hiding it and then claiming Jesus had risen from the dead. However, as the women approached, they saw that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty, so Mary Magdalene rushed back to the locked room to tell Peter and John, **“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”** John wrote that both he and Peter raced to the tomb, all fear of being apprehended driven away by anxiety about Christ's disappearance. I love John's claim to have outrun Peter – I bet Peter didn't – and that, whilst he hesitated at the entrance to the tomb for fear of being defiled, Peter had pushed past him and gasped at what he saw: Jesus' grave clothes and face cloth were neatly-folded. Clearly, Peter was puzzled by this, but when John also entered the tomb he immediately saw the significance. No grave robber would have taken time to fold the clothes, especially if the tomb was being guarded. The same would have applied if Caiaphas had decided send men to remove Jesus' body, so that if anybody claimed he had risen the corpse could be presented as evidence that he hadn't. Indeed, they would have taken Jesus and his burial clothes. John perceived that Jesus'

declaration that he would be raised on the third day had happened, but Peter and the other disciples did not understand that Christ was fulfilling the scriptures, despite Jesus' teaching. It is also possible that Peter might have been too afraid to accept the resurrection, for how could he explain his public denial of his Master, face-to-face?

As the two men returned to the house, Mary Magdalene stood outside the tomb, utterly bereft. She owed everything to Jesus, for he'd cured her of seven demons, restored her and accepted her. The 'demons' suggest she had mental health issues, in which case she would have been an outcast, so you can imagine how indebted she felt. As Mary peered into the tomb, she saw two angels sitting where Christ's body had lain. They asked her why she was crying and she replied, **"They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him."** At that, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was him. He, too, asked, **"Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"**

Either the Lord was silhouetted against the morning sky, or her tears affected her vision, but Mary mistook him for a gardener and pleaded with him to say where Jesus lay, so she could collect him. John's skill as a story-teller is breath-taking, for Jesus simply said, **'Mary'** and she recognized him – the sheep responding to the voice of the Good Shepherd. She responded with **'Rabbooni' – 'my Teacher'** and probably embraced him, clinging to him with joy – and fear of losing him again. Jesus told her not to hold onto him because he had not yet returned to his Father and told her to return with a message to **'his brothers'**. In effect, Jesus was telling her that his physical being was not his real presence for the Church and that a new relationship would be forged through his Ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus Mary Magdalene was the first apostle to proclaim the risen Lord Jesus.

The fact that God chose a woman at all, let alone one with a troubled past, as the first witness to the resurrection, is breath-taking, because no ancient Jewish author would have considered inventing a story with a woman as a witness. Indeed, women were unable to testify in a Jewish court unless there was a man present to corroborate her story. God so honoured Mary Magdalene because not only had she been with him at his death, but had gone to his tomb early in the morning and had earnestly sought Jesus. So what do we take away from John's account? If we seek Christ earnestly, we'll find him. Despite misogyny in some sectors of the Church, women are co-partners in faith and should not be undervalued or left to do jobs men consider demeaning. People with a troubled past, or mental health issues are welcome at the banquet in God's kingdom, whereas the proud and unbending exclude themselves. A note of hope for us all: despite their manifold failures, Jesus was prepared to call his disciples **'brothers and sisters'**, not servants. We, too, are his **brothers and sisters**, despite our failings, if we seek to follow him. **But, best of all, Christ is alive, Satan's power is broken and death has lost its sting! Alleluia! What a Saviour. Amen.**

"Christ is alive! No longer bound / To distant years in Palestine, / But saving, healing, here and now, / And touching every place and time." Lovely words by Brian Wren that remind us that Jesus belongs to today as well as the distant past. We shall close our worship as 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

May the light of your love that lit the empty tomb to proclaim that Christ had risen shine brightly in our hearts. May the warmth of your love that proclaims the power of sin and death has been broken inspire us in all good works and may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us now and forever more. Amen.