

**A service for Low Sunday – 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2021 (StF)**

**Call to worship: 1 John chapter 4 verses 9 to 12**

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 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 to remind us that Jesus is for today and tomorrow, as well as yesterday. We shall 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)

**Let us pray.**

God our heavenly Father, we offer you all our praise and adoration, for you raised Jesus from the grave, reconciling us to you, breaking the power of death and offering us eternal life.

Lord Jesus Christ, we offer you all our praise and adoration, for you brought us salvation on the cross at Calvary, atoned for the sins of the world and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, Sacred Spirit, for you are our guide, our strength and inspiration in our discipleship. Come to us now and breathe new life into us.

Mighty Lord of life and love, you have overcome the old order of sin and death through the life, death and resurrection of your Son, Christ Jesus. Through him all things are made new and so we come to offer you our worship and adoration today. Amen.

**A prayer of confession. Let us pray.**

Almighty God, hear and accept our thanks for the many blessings we receive from you, for your undying love, despite our sinfulness and faithlessness. Forgive us when we

have yielded to hopelessness and fear, for surrendering to despair when the path of discipleship is challenging. Pardon us when our faith is weak and we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our selfishness, pride and loveless-ness. Breathe new life into us, renew and restore us so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Kindle the embers of our faith into a mighty flame, so we play our appointed part in your kingdom.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more. May we serve our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. 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.**

*I like John Mason Neale's translation of Jean Tisserand's hymn, 'O sons and daughters, let us sing', but I have found few congregations able to master its melody, so, when Revd. George Cloke asked me if I know of a suitable alternative tune, I adapted it to be sung to Philipp Bliss' "Gethsemane", which I am sure you all will recognise – and if you sing 'Alleluia! What a Saviour!' I shan't be offended! Let us sing the hymn on our sheets, 'Sons and daughters let us sing'....*

**1. Sons and daughters, let us sing!  
King of heav'n, most glorious King,  
Over death rose triumphing.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**2. When his foll'wers met in fear,  
To them came the Lord most dear;  
Saying, 'Peace be on all here.'  
Alleluia! Alleluia**

**3. Thomas first the tidings heard  
That they'd seen the risen Lord;  
But he doubted in their word.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**4. 'My pierced side, O Thomas, see;  
Look, my hands, my feet,' said he.  
'Doubt no more, but trust in me.'  
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**5. No more Thomas then denied,  
Seeing hands and feet and side.  
'You're my Lord and God!' he cried.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**6. Blest are they who have not seen,  
Yet whose faith has constant been.  
They eternal life shall win.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

*{Jean Tisserand, translated by John Mason Neale et al.} Adapted 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2002 by M. Rider*

***We come to our prayer of intercession. When I say, ‘Lord of life’, please answer, ‘Hear us in your love’. Let us pray.***

Remember, in your love, O Lord, the Church both locally and world-wide. Unite us in spirit, truth and love, so we know your power and bear the light of Good News to this sad and sin-darkened world. May our words and actions be a sign that Jesus is risen.

**Lord of life..... *Hear us in your love.***

Remember in your love this beautiful, but broken world which you created and declared good: we bring our concerns about our environment, pollution and diminishing resources and pray for people who are striving to keeping earth habitable; remember people who seek a fair and proper use of the world’s resources, including coronavirus vaccines and those who strive for justice and wellbeing, thinking especially of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers who are working so hard to bring us through this pandemic. Bless them and grant them success in their endeavours.

**Lord of life..... *Hear us in your love.***

Remember O Lord, those of us whose hearts are broken because of the COVID19 pandemic, those who have endured loneliness and those who are suffering from long-COVID. In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, enfold us with your love, comfort and strengthen us. Renew our flagging spirits and bring us through this darkness into the light of your salvation. ....

**Lord of life..... *Hear us in your love.***

Remember, too, people who suffer: the victims of prejudice, oppression, injustice, terrorism and conflict. We recall how Jesus Christ suffered persecution, injustice, torture and execution for our sake. Teach us and our leaders to act justly and to care for our neighbours. May the whole earth be transformed by mercy and rejoice in hope.

**Lord of life..... *Hear us in your love.***

Remember people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia, their families, friends and carers; have compassion on people who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in need or any kind of trouble; neighbours who live with depression, or who are lonely; people whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of people dear to them. Lord, in a time of reflection we bring you names of those for whom we are especially concerned .....

**Lord of life..... *Hear us in your love.***

Abba, Heavenly Father, we pray you to accept and answer our prayers, not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our sinfulness, but as you know and love us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***We shall praise God as we sing a hymn written for “Children Praising” in 1936 by Revd. William Hamilton, a former General Secretary of the World Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. Hymn number 316, ‘When Easter to the dark world came,’***

**1. When Easter to the dark world came,  
Fair flowers glowed like scarlet flame: *Chorus***

***At Eastertide, at Eastertide,  
O glad was the world at Eastertide.***

**2. When Mary in the garden walked,  
And with her risen Master talked: *Chorus***

**3. When John and Peter in their gloom**

**Met angels at the empty tomb: *Chorus***

**4. When Thomas' heart with grief was black,  
Then Jesus like a king came back: *Chorus***

**5. And friend to friend in wonder said;  
'The Lord is risen from the dead!' *Chorus***

**6. This Eastertide with joyful voice**

**We'll sing, 'The Lord is King! Rejoice!' *Chorus***

© W.H. Hamilton (1886 – 1958)

**Our New Testament reading is Acts chapter 4 verses 32 to 35**

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Amen.

**The Gospel reading is John chapter 20 verses 19 to 31**

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, 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 his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (called 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 it."

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."

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Amen.

***We shall sing a hymn by Revd. Samuel Medley, an Eighteenth Century Pastor at Byrom Street Baptist Church in Liverpool, though as a young man he had no time for God and served in the Royal Navy until he was seriously wounded. It was whilst he was being tended back to health by his pious grandfather that Samuel found Christ. This hymn makes one of the greatest statements of faith at Easter. We shall 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}

Sermon *'Stop doubting and believe!'* John 20:27

I often wonder why John wrote an embarrassing story about fellow disciple, Thomas, as a result of which Thomas has been known as 'Doubting Thomas' for two thousand years. I can only presume that Thomas was willing for the episode to be recorded – even though he realised the consequences, for the story makes an important point, for although we know the expression that **seeing is believing**, Jesus told Thomas, **'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'**

If you think Thomas was a weak, or half-hearted follower, please remember that it was Thomas, not Peter, who urged his fellow disciples to follow Jesus to Jerusalem even if they had to die with him, for the rest of them felt such a journey was unwise, to say the least. Although Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph with crowds strewing palms and clothing in his path, within a week the disciples' dreams were shattered. They had expected Jesus to lead a rebellion against the occupying Romans, but instead Judas betrayed the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, the remaining disciples fled. Even Peter lost his nerve after he was challenged at Caiphas' palace when he tried to find out what was happening and he denied even knowing Jesus three.

Try to imagine the feelings of the followers in that locked room in Jerusalem: their dreams had turned to dust and ashes; The man they believed was the Messiah was crucified like a common criminal and only some of the women and John went to watch, as women and boys were deemed too unimportant to be challenged. Imagine the guilt the eleven felt for having let Jesus down and for being too afraid to show their face at his execution. Even the retelling of the death scene would have added to their trauma, so the next two days must have been a nightmare for them. The great adventure seemed to be at an end and they were fugitives from the Sanhedrin and the Temple Guard. What had begun in glory seemed to have been reduced to a shambles with the one they had thought God's anointed sent to a cursed death on a cross.

Then, early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene caused an upset by first claiming that Jesus' body had been taken from the tomb and, later, that she'd met the risen Lord. Even though Peter and John had run to the tomb to determine what had happened, nobody seemed willing to accept Mary's claims, possibly because she was a

woman – women could not testify by themselves in a Jewish court of law – but probably because she had a troubled background before she met Christ.

It is uncertain why Thomas was not in that locked room but, while he was out, Jesus suddenly appeared inside as the others ate their supper. I suspect Thomas was running an errand, or trying to contact friendly Judeans who could smuggle the followers out of the city. Whatever the case, Jesus blessed the disciples and disappeared before Thomas returned. Naturally, the disciples were still ecstatic when Thomas returned, but when they told him Jesus was alive, he went berserk. He may have thought they were mocking Mary Magdalene, or that they were suffering from some kind of mass-hysteria, but most likely he felt snubbed: **“What is wrong with me that the Lord came while I was out and blessed the others, but not me?”**. I can understand his frustration on top of everything he had to take in that fortnight and his feeling that when you were dead, you were dead and that was the bitter end, hence his declaration, **‘Unless I see the wounds in his hand and side and feel them, I will not believe it!’** He’d had so much bad news that talk of resurrection seemed too good to be true.

I can well imagine that Thomas sulked all week, reasoning that if Jesus had risen, he would have appeared to everybody and not missed him out. However, a week to the day after he had appeared to the disciples, everyone was eating supper when Jesus appeared to them again. Thomas’ face must have been a picture, especially when the Lord invited him to put his fingers in his wounds. With the evidence before him, Thomas fell to his knees and exclaimed, **‘My Lord and my God!’** Jesus did not rebuke him, but simply remarked that those who believed the resurrection without seeing him would be blessed. Naturally, John, the gospel-writer, used these words to encourage his audience some fifty or more years after Christ was raised from the tomb. ‘We walk by faith and not by sight’, is John’s message; hence the importance of the Thomas narrative.

You may well ask how we can believe if we do not have physical proof? Read the gospels, then read Acts and ask yourself what made a small group of uncomprehending, insignificant weaklings become a band of unstoppable evangelists when the Holy Spirit filled them? It was the truth that Jesus had taken away their sins by dying at Calvary and that God had raised and exalted him. To declare Jesus was Lord and he had risen from the tomb would result in arrest by the Romans and almost certain death. If his followers had not witnessed the resurrection, or have been convinced by other witnesses, why else would so many have died for their beliefs? After all, while some people may live a lie, they will not give their lives for something they know is untrue.

The risen Lord challenges us all to answer his call, for he shows that God has the last word. Even when Jesus seemed weakest and most vulnerable, unable to brush away the flies that tormented him as he hung on the cross, his love was and is stronger than the hate and evil of this world. If you ask how we can see Christ at work in this world, look at the work done in critical care units during this pandemic, as I did; look at the work being done by food-banks and by groups who are ensuring that children of disadvantaged families are being fed during school holidays, or are providing them with lap-tops, so they don’t fall behind in their studies; consider key-workers who have put the needs of others before their own well-being.

Christ is alive and his Spirit can help us make a difference, if we will open up and let him. We are not being challenged to perform a Herculean task, just to play our part, however small it may be, in God’s kingdom. Set aside self-doubt, trust in the Risen

Lord, for nothing is impossible if we are united in prayer, love and action, guided by our Saviour and friend. As Jesus said, '**Stop doubting and believe!**' Amen.

*We close our worship with a hymn by Noel and Tricia Richards. Hymn number 293, 'All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;'*

**1. All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;**

**Who can compare with the beauty of the Lord?**

**For ever 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.**

**For ever you will be the Lamb upon the throne:**

**I gladly bow the knee and worship you alone. © Noel (b. 1955) & Trish Richards (b. 1960)**

***Benediction.***

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.**