

**A service for 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2023 (Low Sunday)**

**Call to worship: Psalm 118 vs. 24, 28 & 29**

This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Amen.

*We give thanks to God as we sing a hymn written in 1987 by Noel and Trish Richards, contemporary British hymn-writers. Noel is from Llantrisant, Wales and attended his first Christian music concert at the Colston Hall, Bristol. One of the performers at the event was Graham Kendrick. While watching Kendrick perform at the event, Richards thought to himself that that was what he wanted to do and the rest is history. We shall sing 'All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord', number 293.*

**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 Richards (born 1955) & Trish Richards (born 1960)

**Let us pray.**

Glorious, Redeemer God, we have come to worship you with joyful hearts as we celebrate the resurrection of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who has triumphed over sin and death for our sakes. For love of sinners like us, Jesus came into the world to share our lives and to bring Good News in both words and deeds. More than that, he came to atone for the sins of the world. Jesus offers us eternal life through his grace alone, by faith in him, not by anything we can do, nor deserve. Amazing God, may your Holy Name be praised for evermore.

Thank you, O Lord, for this beautiful, self-sustaining world in which we live, for all the good things that we enjoy: for experiences and challenges that have enriched our lives; for people who have guided us, inspired us and loved us. Yet, as we praise and adore you for your loving-kindness and faithfulness, we feel ashamed of how far short we have fallen from what you would have us be, for we know the terrible price Christ Jesus paid for our sinfulness.

Therefore, merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you wholeheartedly; nor have we loved others as we would like to be loved by them. Dear Lord, for the sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do, forgive us for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus, who said that all who repent in his name will be pardoned by you.

Loving God, we believe you hear our prayers and have already forgiven us. May your Holy Spirit help us to serve you and our neighbours joyfully and faithfully day-by-day, in the beautiful name of Jesus, our risen Lord. 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 sing a modified version of a hymn written in the Nineteenth Century by Revd. John Mason Neale, but based on a poem by a Fifteenth Century Franciscan monk, Friar Jean Tisserand, who founded an order for penitent women in Paris. The set tune is very difficult to pick up, so when a minister in the old Stourbridge and Brierley Hill asked me if I could find a better melody, I modified Revd. Neale's words, so it can be sung to Philipp Bliss' 'Gethsemane', used for "Man of Sorrows! What a name". The words are on the sheets provided. If you sing 'Alleluia! What a Saviour!' I shall sigh, but shan't be offended! '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. Let us pray***

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you for giving us this remarkable, beautiful and self-sustaining world and for blessing our lives in so many ways. 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, but sometimes the situations we face are far beyond our powers, but not your, for nothing is impossible to you. 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, but when the best we can offer is inadequate, warm the hearts of people who possess wisdom and power, so they may bring about positive changes.

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. We remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, prejudice and persecution, asking that they find justice and healing, so they can rebuild their lives in security. 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 that the leaders of wealthy nations will 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.

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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 this church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed 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. May we be bold as we bear the Gospel light to a world that needs to emerge from the shadow of materialism, spiritual blindness and indifference to the needs of others.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care, give us the confidence to share your abundant love with friends and strangers alike and may Jesus Christ our risen Lord inspire us in all we do and say. 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, who as a young man 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}

**Address – ‘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 Caiaphas' palace when he tried to find out what was happening and he denied even knowing Jesus three times.

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 areas where natural disasters have taken place; 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 warm spaces for people who can't afford to eat and heat their homes; consider the good things that occur here daily.

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 Herculean tasks, just to play our part, however small it may be, in building up 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 Easter worship as we sing a hymn written for Easter Day, 1968 at Hockley Congregational Church, Essex by its Minister Revd. Brian Wren, who had particular concern for the needs of the Developing World. The hymn points out that Christ is not just a historical figure, but alive amongst us as we bring Good News to the world. 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 risen Lord Jesus fill our hearts to overflowing with joy; may the power of the Holy Spirit be our guide and strength and may the love of God the Father be ours in abundance so our doubts and fears are stilled, our hearts are warmed, so we may take his blessing to a world that dearly needs it, in Jesus' name. Amen.**