

A Service for Easter Day – 31st March, 2024 (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 begin with a hymn by a Methodist Minister, Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at that time a seventy-five-year-old, retired Methodist minister.. The melody may not be familiar to you, so we shall listen to the first verse, then sing the whole hymn. Look at the words: they are remarkable! Hymn number 186 / 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)

Let us pray.

God, our Saviour, we have come to worship you with joyful hearts, as we celebrate the day on which your Son Christ Jesus, was raised from the grave, triumphing over sin and death for our sakes. Throughout Lent we heard about his resolute journey through rejection by the Hebrew establishment, his betrayal, passion and awful death. He accepted his role as the Paschal Lamb, the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. His death broke Satan’s hold over us, while his broke open heaven’s gates, so everybody has the free offer of eternal life through his grace alone, not by our own merit or our works. Amazing God, may your Holy Name be praised for evermore.

Thank you, Lord, for this marvellous world in which we live, for all the blessings we receive from you, but most of all for Christ Jesus, without whom we are helpless and hopeless. Yet, as we celebrate Easter Day, we face our own sinfulness, faithlessness and selfishness which took Jesus to Calvary.

Therefore, merciful God, we humbly confess that we have not loved you wholeheartedly; nor have we loved our neighbours as we love ourselves. Heavenly Father, 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, as we turn to you and away from what we know is wrong.

Loving God, as Christ Jesus died and rose for our salvation, 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 honour your Holy Name through Christ 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 continue our worship with a hymn written in 1739 by Charles Wesley. My mother liked it, as she loved to sing 'Alleluia' and this hymn has 20 of them. Praise the Lord! Hymn number 193 / 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)

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs. When I say, 'Your kingdom come', your response is 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live as well as in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the world's brokenness, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, avarice or indifference. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part in heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that while our powers are limited, no situation is

beyond yours, so we ask you to intervene by warming the hearts of people who possess power and influence to act for the wellbeing of all people.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

We pray for our church, the churches in the area and, indeed, the World Church. In the name of the risen Lord, guide us how best to serve our communities and help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day; to be a light of hope in a self-centred, sin-darkened world. Grant us vision, faith and courage to face the future with confidence and to serve you steadfastly, following your Son's example.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done**

Heavenly Father, we pray for peace to be established in the world, for an end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza / Palestine, Haiti and Somalia and for peaceful resolutions to disputes between other countries before they escalate into warfare. Teach national leaders to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which lasting peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression, recalling the attack on the Crocus Concert Hall, Moscow last week. Grant them all the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives. Grant them healing in body, mind and spirit.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Lord of power and might, guide those who govern us and their advisors to adopt policies that will bring us safely through these challenging times while meeting the needs of vulnerable groups. Give them courage and wisdom to do what is right, whether or not it is popular, to set aside self-interest for the wellbeing of all.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are who are living with a dementia and those who care for them. We pray for everybody who faces unemployment, debt, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and bereavement. May they receive the care and support they need and may they also experience your presence in their need. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....

May we be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we offer friendship and practical support to them, but we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, hope, courage and enduring peace.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, fill the heart of everybody who is worshipping here with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we may nurture and support both friend and stranger, living out the Gospel message and bringing you glory in the name of the risen Lord. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 16 verses 1 to 20

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other,

"Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples

and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' " Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them,

"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. Amen.

Our next hymn was written 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, this hymn is a great statement of resurrection faith. Hymn number 196 / 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: The resurrection according to Mark

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. I find the differences

comforting, because if they had been the same in every detail there would be a suspicion of collusion. Instead, these are effectively witness statements.

Mark's gospel was probably the first of the gospels and was written in Rome, probably drawing directly upon the testimony of Peter. It has no nativity story and its original ending is abrupt, suggesting the original ending was damaged or lost. I included the last twelve verses in our reading, but they were added at a later date. It makes the resurrection account more difficult to preach, which is why I haven't used this text for far more than a decade.

Our reading began at twilight with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bearing spices to anoint Jesus' body in the tomb offered by Joseph of Arimathea. The Sabbath ended at daybreak and they may well have gone to determine whether or not they could gain entry to the tomb for Jesus had been buried in haste, just as the Sabbath began, so there was no time to anoint the body according to Hebrew custom. You may wonder why this task fell to the women and not the eleven disciples. It is clear that the disciples were so dispirited and afraid they hid during the crucifixion and would not have dared approach the tomb in case they were recognized and arrested. With apologies to females here, women were not considered important enough to be seized. Secondly, if somebody came into contact with a corpse, they became ceremonially unclean, so of course that task was left to the two Marys and Salome.

Imagine their surprise and horror when they found the sealing-stone rolled back and the body gone. Instead, there was a young man dressed in white, an angel and God's messenger. As frequently happened when angels appeared in the gospels, they were told not to be afraid. The angel continued, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Mark's original account ended with the women fleeing the tomb in bewilderment and telling no one which seems a blatant attempt to lay off the blame for the disciples' unbelief (**nobody told us!**)

Nevertheless, Mark's account is both important and remarkable, for he chose three 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, so the two Marys and Salome fulfilled that legal requirement. Secondly, women had no real status in Jewish society at that time, so what they said was often disregarded: 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 – a great honour.

Fortunately, the addition to the gospel redresses some of the injustices, for it told of the risen Christ meeting first Mary Magdalene and later Cleopas and his companion only for the eleven to reject their testimony until Jesus met and rebuked them in person, before commissioning them to take Good News to the world.

You may wonder why Mark 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, the resurrection brought God's kingdom to fruition, a kingdom where the status of women is elevated, 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 and resolute in our service of others, knowing that we serve the Living God who loves not just us, but everybody, to the uttermost. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia. Amen.

We close our Easter worship with a hymn written for Easter Day at Hockley Congregational Church, Essex by its Minister Revd. Brian Wren, who had particular concern for the needs of the Developing World. This hymn reminds us that Jesus belongs to today as well as the distant past. We shall close our Easter worship as we sing hymn number 190 / 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 peace of God rule in our world; may the light of his love fill our hearts and souls and dispel the encircling gloom of sin. May our faith and hope be revealed in our words and actions and may the grace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, the boundless love of God and the amazing power of the Holy Spirit live within us and those whom we love now and forever more. Amen.