

A service for Easter Day 12th April, 2020 (StF)

Notices

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, “Jesus is risen!” At once the people rose and answered, “He is risen indeed. Alleluia!” The atheist speaker had no answer. Let us respond to the priest’s call, ‘**Jesus is risen**’, by shouting, ‘**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**’ Let us echo their cry of faith:

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

We begin with a hymn by Charles Wesley: Hymn number 298, ‘Christ the Lord is risen today; Alleluia!’

Let us pray.

Glorious God, our Redeemer we have come to worship you with joyful hearts, for we celebrate the day on which your Son Christ Jesus, 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. He died a terrible and cursed death at Calvary to break Satan’s power and to atone for the sins of the whole world. When he rose again on the third day, Christ 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, O Lord, for this marvellous 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 love 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 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 may 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.

Offertory

“Christ is alive! No longer bound / To distant years in Palestine, / He comes to claim the here and now, / And conquer every place and time.” Lovely words of a hymn written for Easter 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 sing hymn number 297, ‘Christ is alive! Let Christians sing;’

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs. Let us pray.

Amazing heavenly Father, God most gracious and holy, as we celebrate our Saviour’s triumph over sin and death for our sakes, 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. May the perfect example of Jesus, our Redeemer, be our guide in serving our neighbours and playing our part in building a better world.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among the nations and peoples, for the governments of the nations, so mercy and justice may be established and prevail. We pray 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 remember the victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution throughout the earth: people whose lives have been changed by injuries to body, mind or spirit; others who have lost loved ones and refugees whose search for safety often leads to them being exploited, or put in the way of harm. Grant them courage and support, so they may rebuild their lives.

We pray for everybody who ministers to and cares for the suffering, the friendless and the needy, that they fulfil God’s purposes in their work and outreach. We remember victims of the coronavirus COVID 19 and pray for their deliverance. Help them and us remember that you are with us in this time of trial, so we all may face an uncertain, even threatening future, with grounded hope. We remember with gratitude all doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, care workers and kind-hearted volunteers in the United Kingdom who are putting themselves in harm’s way as they seek to help Coronavirus patients and vulnerable members of society. Lord, guide, protect and bless them in their work.

Loving Lord, hear our prayer for the NHS. May it receive the support it needs to heal its weaknesses and to grow to meet the changing needs of our society, especially with the challenge of Coronavirus. We offer our

thanks especially for the healing rendered at our local hospitals, New Cross, Russells Hall and The Corbett, for our GPs and health workers in the community. Help them to cope with the pressures they are facing and may they find blessing and safety in their work.

God our inspiration and guide, inspire and aid governments, scientists, researchers and authorities as they seek to deal with the effects of COVID 19 and to protect their populations by their policies. Hear our prayer for countries that lack welfare systems to combat this virus, and grant that international support will soon be forthcoming and let your blessing rest upon medical staff and scientists who are seeking to bring healing around the world.

We remember people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit, 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.

Gracious God, 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, but hold all for whom we pray in your loving arms so they may find comfort, courage, healing, hope and above all else your peace which passes all understanding.

Lord hear our prayer for 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. We pray for everybody who takes the gospel to the world that they are able to draw all-comers to Christ Jesus through their sincerity and boldness of spirit. And also to all who receive God's Word, that they may discover his holiness and glory.

We thank you and praise you for all your saints in this world and the next. Grant them the fullness of your eternal joy. Strengthen us by their fellowship, so we may follow their examples and guide other people to know and love Jesus the risen Lord..

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and may Jesus Christ our Lord inspire and guide us in all we do and say. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn I wrote for a service at East Park, Wolverhampton, eleven years ago. It is on our sheets, 'All glory to the risen Lord,'

**1. All glory to the risen Lord,
The Son of God, our Living Word:
The Perfect Sacrifice for sin,
Whose life he gave our souls to win.**

2. The stone's rolled back – access allowed;
The tomb lies empty, save his shroud;
A seated angel softly said
“The Lord is risen from the dead”.

3. Christ calls us from despair by name;
He strips away all hurt and shame
And things can never be the same
For all on whom he lays his claim.

4. He joins us where, afraid, we hide
And bids us touch his hands, his side:
He shares our food, dispels our fears
And brings us laughter for our tears.

5. We see the wounds of boundless grace,
Redeeming all our fallen race.
We can but rue the awful cost
That Jesus paid to save the lost.

6. Praise God from whom all blessings flow:
The Lord above, his Son below,
The Spirit sent as guide and friend,
Whose love and might shall know no end.

M. Rider 5th April, 2009 – {for East Park (Easter) – To “Fulda” HP 465}

The first reading is Acts chapter 10 verses 34 to 43

Then Peter began to speak:

"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Amen.

Short Address

This reading relates how a Gentile called Cornelius, who wished to follow Christ, was moved by an angel, to send a messenger to Joppa, where Peter was staying with Simon the tanner, to ask him if he would come to Caesarea and speak God's word to him and his household. We know that Cornelius was generous to the poor and of good character, but he was a Gentile. As someone brought up as a Jew, Peter would not have associated with a Gentile, let alone enter his house, for Gentiles were considered unclean and beyond God's grace. By entering Cornelius' house, Peter would have made himself ceremonially unclean – remember that the Centurion did not want Jesus to enter his house when the Lord healed his servant for the same reason.

However, Peter had received a vision in which God had shown him not to call any person unclean or impure. Indeed, he had been assured that the Kosher rules no longer applied, especially if they caused division within the Christian communities. Peter declared that, **'God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right'**. He then told them about Christ's death and resurrection through which all people may be saved, if they believe in him.

As a result of Peter's preaching, Cornelius and his household were filled with the Holy Spirit, praised God and some spoke in tongues, to the amazement of some of the Jews who'd accompanied Peter, for that was clear evidence that, through Jesus, God's salvation was for everybody, not just for the select group that Jews considered themselves to be. Peter saw his vision come to fruition and baptised them in Jesus' name.

The story breaks down barriers that caused great division in the early church. We must be careful to ensure that neither prejudice nor traditions should harm the body of Christ, the Church. We are being asked to consider human relationships and marriage concerning LGBT communities within or without the Church. The issue has already caused a bitter schism in the United Methodist Church in the USA. Whatever our opinions, may we have the grace and humility to discuss matters in respectful generosity of spirit, so such a division does not happen here. Pray for a way forward to be found. Think of Jesus on his cross. He is answering our questions, 'How much do you love us?' and 'How far does your love reach?' His arms are extended fully, ready to embrace all-comers, no matter how far away they have been, even to the last second time, for the redemptive love he offers knows no bounds. May we be as generous in our love. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn 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 303, 'I know that my Redeemer lives -'

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 28 verses 1 to 10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Amen.

Sermon 2

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. Matthew wrote for mainly Judeo-Christian followers, so there are some details aimed to explain the empty tomb and why the chief priests were claiming that the disciples had gone during the Sabbath night and had stolen Jesus' body whilst they slept. It is indeed quite possible that such rumours were spread, but anyone who thinks for a moment can see how absurd those claims were.

The disciples were so dispirited and afraid they hid during the crucifixion, leaving Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea to place Jesus in the tomb. It is extremely unlikely that they would have found the courage to brave armed guards, to push away the boulder that sealed the tomb and steal the body and – if we take into account John's description of the grave clothes being folded where Jesus lay – spend time undressing the Lord, then redressing him. Moreover, Sabbath night was holy and no Jew would remove a body from a tomb, adding desecration to the prohibition to work on the Sabbath. Finally, what would they have done with such a body, for the chief priests would have conducted a thorough search if they had thought such a theft had occurred after claims of the resurrection started being made. Indeed, if they had not witnessed the risen Lord, they would have been demoralized to form any plan, other than to escape from Jerusalem in case they were rounded up.

Matthew's account began at daybreak with two Marys, Magdalene and the mother of James and Joses, going to the tomb where they had seen their Master laid. They may well have gone to determine whether or not they could gain entry to anoint the body according to Hebrew custom, for Matthew did not say they were carrying spices. The earthquake was not intended to be literal, but the experience tells the listener that God had intervened in an earth-shaking way. The sealing boulder had been rolled back and an angel, God's messenger, was sitting on the stone. His appearance resembled Jesus at the transfiguration and left the guards petrified and unable to intervene.

The angel told the women not to be afraid, for he knew they were looking for the crucified Jesus. He then declared, 'He is not here; he has risen, just as he said', and he led them to witness the empty tomb. This is both important and remarkable, for Matthew chose two 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, to the two Marys fulfilled that legal requirement. Secondly, women had no real status in Jewish society at that time: 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 member of the Sanhedrin. Moreover, the angel gave them the task of being the first apostles, for he told them, "Go quickly and tell the disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'"

Understandably, they were both fearful and exultant, for they must have felt overwhelmed by what they had witnessed and would have been concerned about how the men would receive their news, yet they hurried back to that locked room. Their faith and obedience were rewarded when Jesus appeared to them and allowed them to grasp his feet to reassure them he was real and not an apparition. Then he repeated that they should not be afraid and should relay the message to his followers.

You may wonder why Matthew 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, Christ's resurrection brought God's kingdom to fruition, a kingdom where 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 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. Alleluia. Amen.

We close our Easter worship as we 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'.

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 dwell within us and those whom we love now and forever more. Amen.