

**A Service intended for Wesley Methodist Church (StF)**

**10.30 a.m. 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 (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.*

*We shall sing ‘All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord’, number 293.*

**Let us pray.**

Glorious, Redeemer God, we have come to worship you with joy as we celebrate how 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 world. When he was raised 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 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 brought us joy. 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 confess that we have not loved you wholeheartedly; nor have we loved others as we would like to be loved by them. For the sins we have committed and for the good we have failed 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, as you hear our prayers, we believe you have already forgiven us and offer us a fresh start. May your Holy Spirit help us to serve you and our neighbours joyfully and faithfully from now onward, 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 the first hymn on our sheets, ‘Before dawn, a group of women ventured from a bolted room,’*

1. Before dawn, a group of women ventured from a bolted room,  
Bearing myrrh and other spices for the Master in his tomb;  
In their grief they walked in silence as they mourned the one who'd died –  
For they thought he was the Son of God – but he'd been crucified.

2. As the first rays lit the east, the women reached where Jesus lay,  
But they saw to their amazement that the stone was rolled away:  
And inside the tomb an angel sat where Jesus had been laid,  
Saying that the Lord was risen, so they should not be afraid.

3. Jesus came to greet the women as they came out from the tomb:  
He appeared before his startled friends at supper in their room;  
Thus the sting of death is weaker than the grace of God to save,  
For he raised his Son and broke the power of Satan and the grave.

4. Now when Thomas heard that Jesus had appeared whilst he was out,  
He rejected claims of resurrection with an angry shout:  
But next week the Lord came to him, showed his friend his hands and side,  
So the doubter knelt in homage to the Risen Crucified.

5. Over sin and death the victor, we salute the Risen Lord:  
For the love that took him to the cross – by Jewish law abhorred –  
For the love of God that raised him and redeems the human race,  
Which now offers everlasting life through Christ's amazing grace.

*M. Rider 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2005. {To HP246 / StF188 'There's a light upon the mountain'} Written for Easter Day at Wordsley Methodist Church and extended on 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2006 for Brierley Hill.*

## **Offertory**

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others.***

Living Lord, through whose loving-kindness we have been blessed in so many ways, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to you, the sustainer of life and our Saviour. As we celebrate the beauty of the world, we recognize its brokenness, much of which stems from human pride, foolishness, greed, spite and cruelty. Help us to serve our neighbours as your earthly hands by granting us the necessary wisdom, courage, steadfastness, insight and compassion, so we may reflect what Jesus did in his earthly ministry.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among the nations and peoples We pray for the governments of the nations, that through them 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 harm's way. Grant them hope, 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. Take away our doubts and reassure us that you are with us throughout 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 everybody 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, 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.

*A Supernumerary Minister in the old Stourbridge & Brierley Hill Circuit liked John Mason Neale's translation of Jean Tisserand's hymn, 'O sons and daughters, let us sing', but found few congregations able to master its melody, so I adapted it for him, 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, '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*

### **Our Epistle is Peter's first Letter chapter 1 verses 3 to 9**

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 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 –'*

**Address – 'Stop doubting and believe!' John 20:27**

Shalom chaverim! May the fullness of the Lord's blessing be yours today! Let me introduce myself. I am Toam, Thomas, sometimes called Didymus the twin, but, most importantly, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. I am here to explain why I asked John to write that embarrassing story about me, as a result of which I've been ridiculed as '**Doubting Thomas**' for two thousand years. I want to make it clear here and now, John would not have written down anything defamatory, except I insisted – even though I guessed the consequences. Now, I'm sure you know the expression that **seeing is believing**, but my Lord Jesus told me, '**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**'

The amazing fortnight began when we heard about our friend, Lazarus lying ill at Bethany. Please note it was I who urged us to follow Jesus to Jerusalem even if we had to die with him, not Peter, for the rest of us felt such a journey was unwise, to say the least; we entered Jerusalem in triumph with crowds strewing palms and clothing in our path – even though Jesus had chosen to ride a young donkey, like a humble prophet, rather than the Messiah who we thought would rid us once and for all of the Romans, would reunite Israel and Judah into the supreme economic and political power, before making us Jews observe every detail of a new covenant. We chose to ignore **Zechariah's image of a peace-loving Messiah** at the time, for like most Jews we were expecting the blood-soaked avenger from **Isaiah 63**.

Within a week our dreams were shattered. That zealot Judas betrayed the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. We all fled. Even Peter lost his nerve after he was challenged at Caiaphas' palace as he tried to find out what was happening. He admitted later that he had denied even knowing Jesus three times – little wonder he kept himself to himself for the next three days.

We heard of the so-called trial, Pilate's death sentence, even though our Lord was an innocent man. Next morning some of the women and young John went to watch – women and youths were deemed too unimportant to be challenged, unlike the rest of us, who hid in a barred room. They saw Jesus staggering under the weight of his crossbeam, the effects of the brutal scourging being evident from the bloodstains on his back. John said when he was nailed to the cross, Jesus did not shout and swear: instead, he prayed, '**Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing**'. I ask you, he forgave the very people who were killing him in a hideous manner! Then as he died, he cried out, "It is finished!" The word he used is 'Tetelestai' which is used at the end of bills, meaning, 'Paid in full', in other words, the Master had paid the full price to redeem the world of its sins. It was a cry of triumph, not despair. Finally, a soldier made sure he was dead by stabbing him with his spear. There was just enough time to put him in Joseph's tomb before the Passover Sabbath began.

The next two days were a nightmare for us. We wept and prayed – mainly for ourselves, not the Master. The great adventure seemed at an end – our dreams were dust before us. We were fugitives from that old vulture, Caiaphas. Our doors were bolted, so that we would not be taken and suffer the same fate as Jesus. What had begun in glory seemed to have been reduced to a shambles with the one we had thought God's anointed sent to a cursed death like a common criminal.

Then, early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene upset everyone first by claiming that Jesus' body had been taken from the tomb and, later, that she'd met the risen Lord. Everyone except Peter and John raged at her for being foolish, because Jesus had transformed her very disturbed life and it seemed likely that she had hallucinated because she wanted to see him alive so much. John remarked that when he had gone to the tomb, the burial clothes had been folded neatly – which was not the usual thing that Caiaphas' agents or grave-robbers would spend time doing – but the rest of us shouted him down, whilst Peter said nothing, but looked haunted and grey-faced. The atmosphere became so poisonous during the afternoon that I volunteered to fetch some extra supplies for the next day and, while I was out, Jesus suddenly appeared in that locked room as the others ate their supper. He blessed them and disappeared before I returned. I found them still ecstatic when I knocked at the door, but when they told me Jesus was alive, I went berserk. At first, I thought they were mocking Mary Magdalene, then that they were suffering from some kind of mass-hysteria. I shouted that when you were dead, you were dead and that was the bitter end. When John tried to pacify me, I declared, **'Unless I see the wounds in his hand and side and feel them, I will not believe your claims!'**

I must confess I sulked all week – I reasoned that if Jesus had risen, he would have appeared to us all and not missed me out. Then a week to the day after he had appeared to us, we were eating supper when I saw the Lord before us – in the locked room! I could hardly breathe, especially when my Lord invited him to put my fingers in his wounds. I needed proof no longer, but fell to my knees and exclaimed, **'My Lord and my God!'** Jesus did not rebuke me, but told us that those who believed the resurrection without seeing him would be blessed.

You ask how can we believe if we do not have physical proof? Read the gospels, then Acts. 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 our sins by dying and that God had raised and exalted him. Why else would so many followers have died for their beliefs? After all, while some people may live a lie, they will not give their lives for a known untruth.

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 is stronger than the hate and evil that this world produces. You ask how we can see Christ in this world, or whether or not we can make a difference to where we live, let alone to some of the problems our world faces: the grinding poverty of debtor nations; AIDs / HIV in Africa; terrorism; Militarism in North Korea and Middle Eastern dictatorships? Look at the way that an 'impossible' peace was forged in Ireland; consider how the Iron Curtain collapsed and South Africa became a rainbow nation. Nothing is impossible if we are united in prayer, love and action, guided by my Master and my friend. As Christ Jesus said, **'Stop doubting and believe!'** Shabbat shalom. Amen.

***"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 by Brian Wren to remind us that Jesus is for today and tomorrow, as well as yesterday. We sing hymn number 297, 'Christ is alive! Let Christians sing;'***

### **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.