

Worship for 17th April 2022 - Easter Sunday

Call to worship

Coming out of the tomb, Jesus lifts his hands in greeting, not only to the women who were first at the grave, but to Peter, who on occasion claimed not to know him, and to the disciples, who found it impossible to watch and wait during the darkest hours.

And if Judas is looking, he of thwarted expectations and confounded hopes, he too will receive blessing: forgiveness, mercy, and the invitation to start afresh.

And down through two millennia, countless women and men of every description, race and inclination have stood on Easter Day, and marvelled, and rejoiced.

And now we, in our time, gather on this Easter Sunday, and discover: the tomb is empty.

Then we hear our name called and, turning, find Jesus, risen, conqueror of death, and lover of humankind, looking at us, and raising his hands in blessing.

Hymn 427: Alleluia! Alleluia!

1 Alleluia! Alleluia!
hearts to heaven and voices raise;
sing to God a hymn of gladness,
sing to God a hymn of praise:
he who on the Cross a victim
for the world's salvation bled,
Jesus Christ, the King of glory,
now is risen from the dead.

2 Christ is risen, Christ the firstfruits
of the holy harvest field,
which will all its full abundance
at his second coming yield;
then the golden ears of harvest
will their heads before him wave,
ripened by his glorious sunshine,
from the furrows of the grave.

Christopher Wordsworth (1807–1885)

3 Christ is risen, we are risen;
shed upon us heavenly grace,
rain, and dew, and gleams of glory
from the brightness of thy face;
so that we, with hearts in heaven,
here on earth may fruitful be,
and by angel hands be gathered,
and be ever, Lord, with thee.

4 Alleluia! Alleluia!
Glory be to God on high;
Alleluia to the Saviour,
who has gained the victory;
Alleluia to the Spirit,
fount of love and sanctity:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
to the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

Christ is risen! Living God, down through countless ages his followers have lifted their voices in surprise, in wonder, in doubt and even, frankly, in disbelief. How can it be that a man nailed to a Roman cross before a curious crowd has escaped his sealed

tomb? In truth, we do not know. We cannot fathom it, far less explain it. Against logic, against biology and physics and all the laws of nature that we know, he stands before us, arms extended, hands held out, then lifted. It is beyond us!

The tomb is empty! If only you had left Jesus where he was, almighty, miracle working, ever creating God, it would have been easier! We would not have had to change, nothing would have changed. Life would have gone on, giving way to death, eventually, in all its finality. Sin would have held sway, cruelty, deception and cunning would have won out. We could have folded our hands, turned away, gone back to our lives as they were. But no! Jesus had to come stepping out into the light of a chilly spring middle eastern day, and show himself alive. And now, therefore, we have a choice: stay with the old, believe in the inevitable power of death, and continue as we ever did... or embrace your radical, challenging, life-changing, even frightening newness.

We are alive! You know it and we know it! Jesus is not the only one! Because of him, we too live. In the light of your resurrection power we live anew, hopeful, at peace, persuaded. Nothing need ever be the same again, and because of that, we praise you. The living Christ has raised his hands in greeting and blessing upon us. We are yours. We offer praise, thanksgiving, glory and honour on this Easter Day, and know nothing need ever, could ever, be the same again.

Amen.

Reading: John 20 verses 1 – 18

Hymn 429: Alleluia! Jesus is risen!

Herbert F. Brokering (b. 1926)

1 Alleluia! Jesus is risen!
Trumpets resounding in glorious light!
Splendour, the Lamb, heaven forever!
Oh, what a miracle God has in sight!
*Jesus is risen and we shall arise:
Give God the glory! Alleluia!*

*Jesus is risen and we shall arise:
Give God the glory! Alleluia!*

2 Weeping, be gone; sorrow, be silent:
death is defeated, and Easter is bright.
Angels announce, 'Jesus is risen!'
Clothe us in wonder, adorn us in light.

3 Walking the way, Christ walking with us,
telling the story to open our eyes;
breaking the bread, showing his glory;
Jesus our blessing, our constant surprise.

*Jesus is risen and we shall arise:
Give God the glory! Alleluia!*

Sermon:

John 20 verse 18: Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news, "I have seen the Lord!"

Ten days ago I stood in the graveyard that surrounds the other church for which I am currently responsible, Old Kilpatrick Bowling. It was a typical Scottish spring day: bright but not sunny, cold and with a fresh breeze blowing. I paused for a few moments beside the grave in which I had interred Carl-Goran Nilsson the previous week. I looked at the withering flowers, read the names of family members on an adjacent headstone, and thought the scene was as it always is when you visit a graveyard alone after a funeral: still (despite the breeze), oddly peaceful, and ever so slightly eerie. The only other person within sight was a man working on the roof of a nearby house, his hammer making a rhythmic sound, exaggerated by the quietness of the place in which I stood.

After a few moments, I walked the long way round back to the church gate, and thought of Michael Dornan, husband of the Session Clerk, and my friend, Joyce. I had conducted his funeral some years back. I noticed that the grass had been cut and any rubbish tidied and I was glad because, as I left, three women were coming in the gate. They were looking for an uncle's grave, and one of them thought she had a good enough idea of where it was to enable them to find it again. I wished them well and left them to it. And didn't immediately think of Mary...

... Mary, friend of Jesus, going to the grave perhaps in the same chill of a spring day, going looking, with purpose, though that only emerges in John's record of her conversation with the man she initially believes to be the gardener. She goes with intent, all right, looking for a body, a dead thing. She doesn't get what she bargained for. If you're serious about him, you'll find you never do with Jesus.

Mary is centre stage in this story, at least until the man she believes to be the gardener appears. If you thumb back to Mark's gospel, sometimes considered the most reliable, you'll find a different take on the same story. Mary, accompanied by two other women, enters the tomb and encounters **a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side**. He engages them in conversation, tells them Jesus has risen (he makes no claim to *be* Jesus!), indicates the empty tomb, and gives them an instruction to pass on the news to Peter and the other disciples. And then, nothing. Mark ends his gospel starkly: **Trembling and bewildered, the women went out**

and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (Other writers have made additions in an attempt to compensate).

So already we see the problem. Two accounts, and significant differences. But pretty well what usually happens. Two individuals or groups of people observe an accident, or recount a conversation, and two divergent accounts emerge. If one of them has an agenda – say, to do one of the actors in the story down – anything might be said. (The truth of the matter won't necessarily be their motivation). In respect of the Easter story, we have four different accounts. Matthew adds the details of the placing of a guard by the tomb, a pre-emptive strike against the stealing of Jesus' body, giving rise to speculation that Jesus had risen. (A bit of an irony there, for sure!), but Matthew also has Mary Magdalene, first on the scene, this time accompanied by someone referred to as **the other Mary**. He continues with a record, like Mark, of a figure in white, but also of the occurrence of a violent earthquake. Then on their way to tell the disciples, having been instructed in a similar way to that given in Mark's gospel, they suddenly, abruptly, meet Jesus, whose feet they clasp as they worship him.

Which leaves Luke, to whom we turned last week for the story of Palm Sunday. At first we hear only that **the women** went to the tomb. They encounter *two* men this time who appear like angels and ask this question which echoes down the centuries of the church's history: **Why do you look for the living among the dead?** Then the figures remind them of what Jesus himself told them to expect and, even without being instructed – there was no need! – they told everything to the male disciples and everyone else. Again, Mary Magdalene is the key player, mentioned first. Then something happens: the women are not believed, because the disciples thought their words were nonsense....

So, if you really want to dismiss the Easter story, you have grounds to. It's unlikely, irrational, impossible, and four writers give four different accounts of what really happened. Mary, Mary and the other Mary, or a group of women.... One angel at the tomb, or two, or none.... Instructions to pass the news on, or no instructions. Or maybe even the theft of the body. But here's the thing: four gospel writers, all coming at this in their own time, with their own backgrounds and emphasis, tell the *same* story, in this respect: on Easter Day, one or more witnesses go to the sealed tomb in which Jesus's body had been placed on the Friday, following absolutely certain

death by the favoured Roman method of nailing to a cross, and find it... empty!! No, the details don't exactly square. But if I asked four or more of you to write an account of what happened at church this morning, I'd get four different stories. One person might not have been able to hear... One might have drifted off to sleep right after I'd given the text.... One might have arrived sad, pre-occupied, fearful, or even struggling with memory loss.... And one might have been able to give it their best attention.

So yes, if the mind stretching, imagination boggling, reason offending, intellect insulting nature of the stories of Jesus rising from the tomb trouble you, you'll probably have to continue to be troubled. But probably not as much as those of us who actually believe it. Explain the story away if you like. Millions upon millions do. But if you actually choose to believe, you've made a hard, life-altering decision. Because if it's true, and you believe, nothing is ever going to be the same again. If Jesus, whom we more happily pay attention to, it seems, when he is telling vivid stories, issuing challenges that apply more to others than to us, and dealing cutely with children, actually rose from the grave and came walking out of the tomb into the faint light of an early spring morning, then maybe all the things he said matter, and matter both eternally and personally, and, yes, also politically. Here's the reason: *eternally*, because this is just the start. Over the next weeks, we'll hear how, once again, there are at-odds accounts of the risen Jesus' encounters with various folk, and the choice will be either to believe that Jesus met folk, or that all the stories are fabrications (and why would you?). And *personally*, because if we invested in the before-his-death Jesus and hung on to his words and said he would be our example and our inspiration, we will certainly, for consistency's sake if nothing more, have to continue to reckon with him after his death and resurrection. And *politically*, all the things he said matter, because what the resurrection signals, besides the very personal fact that it has power to change our lives, always and forever, is a political victory. If the resurrection is God's "yes" to mercy on our failings, "yes" to new opportunities to start over once we've made a hash of life, and "yes", loudest and best of all, to love in all its beautiful majesty, then it's also "no" to the attempts of the religious and political establishments to thwart goodness and truth and honour and justice and compassion by doing to death the nobody from Galilee who came to be known as the Son of God. Those who held the power in Jesus' day found him such a mighty threat and his following so restless and volatile that their only solution was

death. And then death turned out not to be the solution, after all. He was life, and not even nailed hammered into wood could deny him.

I hope the three women at Old Kilpatrick graveyard found their uncle, resting in peace. I didn't hang about to find out. Graveyards are the place to find the dead, but not the place to find Jesus. Maybe the word of other gospel writers is the one to note: **He has gone ahead of you.** And maybe our word is Mary's word: **We have seen the Lord!** If we can't say that, maybe better just keep our mouths shut...

Hymn: Easter glory fills the heavens

1 Easter glory fills the heaven,
Easter light pervades the earth,
now the son, his triumph given;
brings his promise of new birth,
by his awesome act of giving
sin and death are put to flight,
hope and life invade our living,
new created by his light.

2 On that wondrous Easter morning,
To the women at the tomb,
Just as day was at its dawning,
Lord you came and banished gloom,

Open now our hearts for hearing,
your own living world of peace,
peace that conquers all our fearing,
our renewal our release.

3 Lord of loving, Lord of glory,
through your giving, through your pain,
this the fullness of your story,
earth herself is born again.
Serving you through all your creatures,
Great or small, high or low,
We will then discern your features:
Know your Resurrection, now.

Words by Leith Fisher

Offering

Prayer

On this first day of the week, when, forever, we remember Jesus, once dead but now alive, we come in prayer to you, the God of all possibility. Where there was sadness, you bring reassurance, where despair, hope. When illness reigns and takes control, we turn to you for healing, remembering that this was Jesus' inclination and his work. When there is discord, a climate of blame, a readiness to think badly of others, you infuse mercy into any heart that makes room for you. With all this in mind, we come in prayer in the name of the risen Christ.

So on this first day of the week, we remember that the friends and family of Jesus knew the indescribable pain of loss, sadness and bereavement, and realise: you too have experienced it, so we need not describe it, but simply believe that you know it and feel it and would comfort us and lead us through it.

And on this first day of the week, we remember that no problem was too small, too long-standing, too taxing for Jesus to confront, so, in the gladness of this Easter Day, we offer all our anxieties, frustrations, misgivings and disappointments to you..... and expect and know that, if we make room and space for you, you will draw alongside us, walk beside us, and steady us, guiding and enabling us to cope.

And on this first day of the week, we remember that Jesus had great expectations of his followers and encouraged them always to care for one another and for all. So we pray for open minds, to know what you would have us do for one another, and open hearts, that we might receive love enough to share, for our own needs and for all.

Living God, on that amazing Easter Day everything changed, but we have been so slow. Caution, apathy, frailty, lack of self-esteem or a too generous estimation of our own capabilities have caused us to stumble and fall. Lift us up! Set us right! And lead us on to all you have yet in store for us to be and to do.

Amen.

Hymn 419: Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son

1 Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast
won;
angels in bright raiment rolled the stone
away,
kept the folded grave-clothes, where thy
body lay.
*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast
won.*

2 Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and
gloom;
let the Church with gladness hymns of
triumph sing,
for her Lord now liveth; death hath lost its
sting.

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast
won.*

3 No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince
of Life;
life is naught without thee: aid us in our
strife;
make us more than conquerors, through
thy deathless love:
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home
above.

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast
won*

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.

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