

Worship for Sunday 24th April 2022

Call to worship

In the Easter season, which speaks of hope and peace and proclaims life and newness, we come to worship God. In this sacred hour, we offer ourselves and our children to God. May we be surprised by love, enveloped in compassion, made new by kindness, and surprised by joy.

Hymn 413: the day of resurrection!

1 The day of resurrection!
Earth, tell it out abroad;
the passover of gladness,
the passover of God!
From death to life eternal,
from sin's dominion free,
our Christ has brought us over
with hymns of victory.

2 Our hearts be pure from evil,
that we may see aright
the Lord in rays eternal
of resurrection light;

and, listening to his accents,
may hear, so calm and plain,
his own 'All hail!' and, hearing,
may raise the victor strain.

3 Now let the heavens be joyful
and earth her song begin,
the round world keep high triumph
and all that is therein;
let all things seen and unseen
their notes of gladness blend,
for Christ the Lord has risen,
our Joy that has no end.

St John of Damascus (c. 675–c. 750)
translated John Mason Neale (1818–1866) (*alt.*)

Sacrament of baptism

Hymn 637: Now through the grace of God we claim

1 Now through the grace of God we claim
this life to be his own,
baptized with water in the name
of Father, Spirit, Son.

2 For Jesus Christ the crucified,
who broke the power of sin,
now lives to plead for those baptized
in unity with him.

3 So let us take him at his word,
rejoicing in our faith,
until we rise with Christ our Lord
and triumph over death!

Michael Arnold Perry (1942 – 1996)

Reading: John 20 verses 19 – 29

Sermonette

John 20 verse 25: Thomas... said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Easter is just the strangest time! Suddenly everything is made of chocolate, bunny shaped, and wrapped in yellow. I've no objection to any of these things but to me they represent a coming together that has, well, not much to do with the festival we celebrated last week here in the church, celebrate today, and, if we're wise and faithful, will keep celebrating right through the year. In the church, there are certain things we do – well, some of us do. We start early, at the beginning of Lent, and try to become a bit more thoughtful about our faith: which is to say, not only what we believe and stand for, but what we do as a consequence. Then we get to Palm Sunday and Jesus steps up, centre stage, doing that odd donkey thing, coming clip-clopping into a capital city, Jerusalem, to be welcomed by a screaming crowd. Then it gets tough. By the Thursday, any number of bad things are coming together. The dismayed – those whose feathers Jesus seems to have made it his business to ruffle – are coming together as friends of one another, while his real friends are starting to become disaffected. Before the Thursday was out, Judas had turned Jesus in, so that soldiers came to arrest him, prepared to use violence if need be, and the next day Peter, his most obvious friend, said clearly and with increasing vehemence that he'd never even set eyes on Jesus.

The next bit, the Friday, is maybe not so strange. A man reckoned to be a troublemaker in an already very fragile state, who didn't seem able or willing to heed a warning or take a telling, who just kept on reminding those in charge how out of line with God's rules their behaviour was, eventually took himself over the line and was the victim of state-sponsored killing. Maybe so wrong, yes, of course, but not so unusual.

It's the Sunday bit that's truly weird. All that talk of empty graves, and a crucified man, walking and talking. So weird that maybe only an already eccentric bunch of mostly elderly church goers, clinging on to hope, would believe it.

Easter's been an especially bad advert for the life of faith this year in its home, the Middle East, though for once, Christianity itself can't be blamed. Instead, violence reigned in Israel Palestine, in Jerusalem (where, remember, Christ was crucified), specifically, and at the Al-Aqsa mosque in particular, holy site for Muslims, in the middle of Ramadan, also called the Temple Mount, holy site for Jews, at the time of Passover. Light the touch paper and stand back. Some people of faith are just so very, very bad at living with any kind of difference. And last Sunday, while the Holy Father in Rome was getting applause for speaking out for peace, in England the Archbishop of Canterbury was lambasting the UK government for its plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, only to get it in the neck from Boris Johnson, later in the week. (Our Moderator was doing it too, but, being Scottish, wasn't quoted). It couldn't get any stranger...

.... At least not until you open the Bible. OK, if you're not a religious person you perhaps think of the Bible in that way anyway. But what we are offered today in the twentieth chapter of John's gospel is, well, as weird as it gets. Ten of Jesus' original twelve disciples are gathered in a room. Suddenly, without the sound of approaching footsteps, a ring on the door-bell or even so much as a rattle of the letterbox, someone else is right there, in the room, and talking! **Peace be with you** it says. Aye, right! A very strange thing happens. Strangeness. It's a theme. You're getting the hang of it now, I guess. The man holds out his hands, which have big, ragged, angry looking holes in them, then hitches up his shirt and uses the same wrecked hands to point to his side, where there is another gaping wound. Strange, but so far, so good.

But someone is absent. One of the friends, called Thomas, was somewhere else when all this was going on. Naturally, the ten told him. "You'll never guess! **We have seen the Lord!**" But Thomas has what sounds like a strop. Maybe he's annoyed he missed out. Maybe he thinks they're all mad. Maybe he's desperate to be part of it. "I won't believe," he tells them. "I won't believe until I see for myself!" You and I might not have, either.

They must have made up, Thomas and the other ten, because he was there with them the next week, in the same room. It must have been a bad, tense, fearful week, because the door was still locked. Suddenly, without preamble, warning, or even a by-your-leave, Jesus was there, right there, in the room. **Put your finger here** he says, looking Thomas right in the eye. **See my hands**, he says, holding them out. **Reach**

out your hand and put it into my side. What an invitation! It doesn't get any weirder.

Jesus' invitations come in so many guises, sizes, formats, to such an infinite variety of people (to everyone, in fact), and in such a multitude of circumstances that there would never have been any point in him going up to Purple Edge at Bearsden Cross and asking them to print them. He doesn't seem to worry too much about the suitability of the people to whom he issues them. There's no line drawn separating close friends and family from acquaintances, no criteria such as liking, finding worthy, or the hope of payback. Jesus doesn't even bother whether or not he knows people. The bible tells a story that well illustrates this, I think. It's about a man who gave a feast, invited the influential folk he knew, and was entirely miffed when, instead of readily accepting, they all turned him down. The host probably heard more excuses than a Church of Scotland minister – through which, by the way, we can see like a plate glass window. (Always). Feeling more than a little aggrieved, he sent his workers out and told them just to invite the poor and the disabled. Once they'd all been seated, the host noticed there were still a few empty seats round the banquet tables, so he sent the workers out again, with instructions this time to insist, simply insist, that folk come to the feast. He also mentioned, by the way, that those who'd originally been invited, but had spurned the invitation, shouldn't expect to get a call next time round.

How many ways can the invitation of Jesus come, asking us to sign up, not to a set of beliefs or doctrines or even churchy ways, but to a relationship with the man himself? They may come when we meet someone for whom faith just seems to work. I had a conversation recently with a young man who called to test me for Covid 19, as part of the Office of National Statistics survey that I've been taking part in since it was set up. "I remember you," he said, then delighted me by following up with the statement that he'd recalled, when he turned his car into the manse driveway, that we'd had a good conversation. Matters turned to faith again. "Why do you do the job," he asked. In my reply, I hope he heard an assurance that Jesus is interested in everyone. Invitations may come, as they did last Sunday, through big figures in the church when they speak about the issues of the day and remind us that faith is not practised in a vacuum, but connects with real challenges and problems, and always has something to say about peace, humanity, dignity, and justice. And sometimes, just sometimes, invitations come through two little boys. In another story, the Bible reminds us that, unless we get what children are about, we'll never get close to God. (We heard an

echo is this in the baptismal service itself). Today, an invitation to come close to God goes out to everyone in church – not just the family and friends of Louise and Barry – but to us all. It's signalled by the baptisms of these wee ones, Archie and Cameron. In the service itself, we heard these words: *The promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are far away, to everyone whom the Lord our God may call.*

Easter really is the weirdest time! On the one hand, yellow chocolate bunnies skipping off the supermarket shelves. On the other, a man being put to death on a cross and then appearing in a locked room, not once but twice. But only the latter has an invitation attached. **Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand, and put it in my side.** It might be the strangest one you'll ever hear. But it sure could change your life.....

Hymn 432: How often we like Thomas

1 How often we, like Thomas,
need proof before we trust.
Lord Jesus, friend of doubters,
come, speak your truth to us.
We long to feel your presence,
and gain new faith from you,
to find, without our seeing,
the blessing Thomas knew.

Edith Sinclair Downing (*b.* 1922)

2 You always stand among us,
no doors can lock you out.
Your presence reassures us
though we still live with doubt.
As present-day disciples,
whose lives by sin are flawed,
we want to come believing,
and cry: 'My Lord, my God!'

Offering

Prayer

Lord God, we come in the Easter season and give thanks for all that is good. We are free to worship you, to be ourselves, to seek the best for those we love: our older ones, our younger ones, our children, and for ourselves. You have given us opportunities and invitations and lots of possibilities to live life well and to the full. We praise you! We are glad!

We pray that you would help those most in need: our ill and frail ones, the lonely and the lost, the fearful and those who regret their past and find it difficult to face the future. Draw near to them and us and show us Jesus' way of love, compassion and selflessness.

We pray about our own needs. Help us to draw on your wisdom to know what is right and worth pursuing, and the courage to change and leave behind the unwholesome things that hinder us. Encourage us to reach out to others and to ask for help when we need it. Prevent us from making life more difficult by being too proud to admit our mistakes, sins and shortcomings. Give us enough humility to enable us to take a new, different path when the ones in which we walk prove to be dead ends.

Living God, we praise you for Jesus, risen, alive and in our midst, issuing invitations. Give us boldness to accept them and enter into, or continue in, a relationship with you that will change our lives. Above all, let us remember that we are loved, wholly, unconditionally, always. And, as we think of what has been done today, in the baptism of these little boys, let us believe that you are the best thing, and that your love is the thing we can trust above all else.

Amen.

Hymn 415: This joyful Eastertide

1 This joyful Eastertide,
away with sin and sorrow.
My Love, the Crucified,
has sprung to life this morrow :

*Had Christ, who once was slain,
not burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain :
but Christ has now arisen !*

2 My flesh in hope shall rest,
and for a season slumber :
till trump from east to west
shall wake the dead in number :

*Had Christ, who once was slain,
not burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain :
but Christ has now arisen !*

3. Death's flood has lost its chill,
since Jesus crossed the river :
Lover of souls, from ill
my passing soul deliver :

*Had Christ, who once was slain,
not burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain :
but Christ has now arisen !*

George Ratcliffe Woodward (1848–1934)

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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