

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit
Worship at Home: Sunday 17th April
(Easter Sunday)

Prepared by Ken Richardson

Preparation

Prepare a place for worship, perhaps with a cross, a folded handkerchief to represent Jesus' grave-clothes, and a stone to represent that which had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb.

Call to Worship

"Christ is risen!"

"He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

Listen, read, pray or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzy7jFNuc3w>

Christ the Lord is risen today; *Alleluia!*
All creation joins to say: *Alleluia!*
Raise your joys and triumphs high; *Alleluia!*
Sing, you heavens; let earth, reply: *Alleluia!*

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!*

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!*

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!*

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), Reproduced from Singing the Faith
Electronic Words Edition, number 298

Opening Prayers

Eternal God, our heavenly Father,
with gladness in our hearts,
and hymns of praise on our lips,
we come on this Easter Day
to joyfully celebrate the raising of Jesus Christ
from the dead to be our Saviour.

Lord Jesus Christ,
we rejoice that death could not bind you,
that you rose again triumphant,
and appeared to those who knew you,
changing their sorrow into joy,
giving them new life and new hope.

We rejoice that today,
we too can share their joy and their hope.
Reveal yourself to us now,
in your power and glory,
as we worship and pray,
for your name's sake. Amen.

*Take a moment or two to reflect upon the words
of this opening prayer, or on the symbols that you
gathered together in preparation for worship.*

Let us now take time to confess our sins to God:

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that we are
not worthy of the love that you have shown to us
through your Son, Jesus Christ.

We remember the times when we have allowed
despair to overtake us.

The times when we have permitted the power of
sin to master our lives.

The times when we have lacked trust in you and
preferred to go our own way.

Silence

Father, forgive us for we are truly sorry.
We ask that the joy of this day may transform us,
making us new in your image and helping us to
share in Christ's victory. Amen.

Read: John 20 v 1-18

Reflection

The Easter narratives may differ across the four Gospels in the details but all testify to the impact that the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection had on his friends and followers. Of all the women identified as having gone to the tomb early on the first Easter morning, only Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name in John's Gospel ⁽¹⁾ although her use of the word 'we' when speaking to Peter

and the other disciple (John 20 v2) confirms that she wasn't alone. However, it is Mary who takes precedence in this account rather than the male protagonists, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved (who may be John himself, the author of the Gospel). It is Mary who first sees that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. It is Mary who runs to Peter and the other disciple with this shocking news. It is Mary who later stays behind in the garden and is the first to meet with the Risen Christ and it is Mary who tells the others that she has '*seen the Lord*'.

Seeing is Believing?

It was the custom for the relatives and friends of the deceased to visit the site of burial on each of the following three days but because the intervening day had been the Sabbath it was only 'on the third day', the Sunday morning, that Mary had the first opportunity to do so. On seeing that the stone has been rolled away and Jesus' body is missing, Mary's immediate thought is that it must have been stolen by the authorities. One cannot imagine the horror she felt. Already raw from her grief at the death of Jesus, and the manner of his death, she now thinks that his body may have been defiled in some way – a double loss – just as one cannot imagine the horror felt by people in Ukraine whose grief for the loss of a loved one is compounded by being prevented from giving their body a respectful burial.

Mary hurries to tell Peter and John that the stone has been rolled away and Jesus' body is missing, and they all run back to the tomb, John getting there first, then Peter with, one suspects, Mary a little way behind. John, however, hesitated and it was Peter who entered the tomb and saw that it contained only the empty grave-clothes with no sign of Jesus' body. He is followed into the tomb by John who, we're told, '*saw and believed*' (v 8). For John it seems that 'seeing is believing' although what he saw wasn't the Risen Christ but the empty grave-clothes and exactly what he believed is unclear. The next verse, interestingly set in brackets, tells us that he and his companion '*did not [yet] understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead,*' (v 9) and their response is another puzzle – for they simply go back to their lodgings (v 10), and back to bed? In fact, verse 8 seems out of place, and from verse 9 we get the sense that there is more of the story to be told. But isn't this the experience of us all?

Believing in the Risen Christ is a step of faith and his resurrection something that we can never fully comprehend or expect to fully comprehend. To believe or not to believe is a binary choice, seeking to understand and live in response to that belief a lifetime's vocation.

One of the recurring themes in John's Gospel is that of 'seeing and believing' – as the author, writing many decades later, wrestled with the fact that after Jesus' ascension his readership no longer had the opportunity to *physically* see the Risen Christ for themselves. Perhaps here he is emphasising the point, for their (and our) sake, that believing does not depend upon seeing the Risen Christ with our own eyes but accepting him as our Lord and Saviour on the evidence of the testimony and difference he has made in the lives of his followers ever since.

Seeing IS Believing!

Mary, unlike the two male disciples, chooses to stay in the garden, where she weeps for Jesus' death and the loss of his body. She repeats her concern that Jesus' body has been stolen, firstly to two angels and then to someone whom she thinks is the gardener, asking him if he has carried the body away and, if he has, imploring him to tell her where he has put it. It is only when the 'gardener' says her name that she recognises that he is the Risen Christ and is overcome with joy. It is hearing Jesus' voice that triggers this recognition, reminding us of the Emmaus story where two travellers who are accompanied on the road by Jesus only recognise him by his action of breaking bread at the meal they invite him to share. In the garden, Jesus is recognised through a word he speaks, at Emmaus by an action he performs – a familiar voice, a familiar action provide the moment of recognition and belief.

Then there is another puzzle, for Jesus tells Mary '*Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.*' (v 17) Again, it seems that there is more of the story to be told. In some translations, verse 17 begins '*Do not cling to me*' and we use the phrase '*clinging to the past*' in everyday speech. Jesus is making it clear that there can be no returning to the past or the way things were. His resurrection has opened up an entirely new and different future in which the world's relationship with him is transformed forever. As Sydney Carter puts it in the final verse of his hymn 'Lord of the Dance'; '*They cut me down and*

I leapt up high. I am the life that'll never, never die. I'll live in you if you'll live in me.' On a recent walk I passed by a church graveyard, a short distance from the church itself, self-contained with its own lych-gate. Written on the lych-gate were the Latin words '*DORS JANUA VITAE*' (and rather helpfully the English translation '*Death is the Gateway to Life*'). Jesus' death and resurrection is the gateway by which all may inherit eternal life and participate in a new, transformed way of living in relationship with him and God our Father in heaven.

Mary's response is emphatic. The shocking news of the missing body is replaced by the joyful news of Christ's resurrection. She hurries, for a second time that day, to the disciples and tells them '*I have seen the Lord!*' (v 18). Mary has seen and believed, and responded by sharing the news of the Risen Christ with others.

Read 20 v 19-29 (Optional!)

This is actually next week's reading but the events it describes are split between the evening of Easter Day and the following Sunday and it helps us to reflect upon some of the puzzles raised by today's reading.

Believing is Seeing

On the evening of the first Easter Day Jesus appears to the disciples in the locked room (except of course, for Thomas, who famously isn't present). This is the occasion when Jesus breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit, the 'Advocate', whom he had previously explained to them would open their minds and enable them to understand all that he had told them (see John 14 v 16-20, 25-29, John 15 v 26 and John 16 v 5-7). This, if you like, is the follow-up to that verse 9 and when the disciples begin to make sense of what they have witnessed and to understand the implications for their new life of discipleship after Jesus' death and resurrection. Crucial also, for John's purpose in writing his Gospel, are Jesus' words a week later spoken after Thomas has seen Jesus' wounds and declared him to be his Lord and Saviour; '*blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*' (v 29b) This speaks to the reality for all post-ascension Christians who are not blessed with the opportunity and privilege of being able to physically see the Risen Christ like Mary and

the disciples. Those who come later have been blessed with the New Testament's accounts of what took place and its record of the impact it had on those who were witnesses, and the gift of the Holy Spirit which opens our minds to the scriptures and helps us to recognise Christ in the words and actions of his followers in the world today. Accepting him as *our* Lord and Saviour gives us a new perspective and meaning to life; we see and live life differently in consequence. Our belief in the Risen Christ is not without its puzzles, but like Mary we can emphatically declare to others that we have '*seen the Lord*'. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

Who or what enabled you to recognise that Jesus is alive and declare 'I have seen the Lord!'

Are others able to recognise that Jesus is alive by your words and actions?

Listen, read, pray or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Qlc0UIRkBk>

See, what a morning, gloriously bright,
with the dawning of hope in Jerusalem;
folded the graveclothes, tomb filled with light,
as the angels announce Christ is risen!

See God's salvation plan,
wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice,
fulfilled in Christ, the Man,
for he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

See Mary weeping, 'Where is he laid?'
as in sorrow she turns from the empty tomb;
hears a voice speaking, calling her name;
it's the Master, the Lord raised to life again!
The voice that spans the years,
speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us,
will sound till he appears,
for he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

One with the Father, Ancient of Days,
through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty;
honour and blessing, glory and praise
to the King crowned with power and authority!
And we are raised with him,
death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered;
and we shall reign with him,
for he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

Prayers of Intercession

Bidding: Life-giving God:

Response: *Transform our lives.*

As we celebrate the new life of Resurrection
let us pray to the one true God,
who brings us all to life.

Lord God, we pray that the Church
may proclaim with joy your message of hope
for the world;
may our lives, as well as our worship,
testify to the truth of the Resurrection
and broaden our vision of what is possible
through new life in you.

Life-giving God:
Transform our lives.

Lord God, we pray for the world we inhabit
and its people,
for those who suffer at the hands of others,
those who work tirelessly to relieve their suffering,
those who lead and take decisions
that affect the lives of others.
We pray for mercy and justice,
compassion and integrity.
for protection against evil
and a strengthening of goodness.

Life-giving God:
Transform our lives.

Lord God, we thank you for lives well lived,
and commend to your safe keeping those who
have died.
Through the resurrection hope,
May they know the joy of heaven.

Life-giving God:
Transform our lives.

Lord God, we thank you
for the precious gift of new life;
may we never take it for granted
but live each moment in the fullness of life
that Jesus has gained for us.

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Listen, read, pray or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPjTfw4a2ZE>

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.*

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:

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:

Edmond Budry (1854-1932), Reproduced from Singing the Faith
Electronic Words Edition, number 313

Blessing

God calls those who have seen the Lord to
share with the world the news that He is risen, in
the light of his love and in the name of God the
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁽¹⁾ *Matthew records Mary Magdalene and 'the other' Mary; Mark records Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome; Luke records Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women.*