

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit
Worship at Home: Sunday 31st March
(Easter Sunday)

Prepared by Ken Richardson and Patricia Soares

Preparation

If it is a fine day and you are able, you may wish to follow the first part of this service outside. In which case, as preparation, place a cross and a cloth hidden by a stone or a piece of wood in a convenient location in your garden (or, if remaining indoors, do the same near a pot plant or a vase of flowers). This arrangement symbolises the tomb. After the opening prayer, remove the stone and keep the cross in your hand during the following reflection.

Call to Worship

“Christ is risen!”

“He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

Listen, read, pray or sing:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwwO_WEnVwU

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 Prayer

He has risen! Heavenly Father, you have given your son for us. He has been crucified. By his resurrection, you have demonstrated your power, you have demonstrated you are the only God. Jesus came back from the dead to teach the last part of your Word and to give your instructions to his disciples. He asked them to go around the world to spread the faith. And without Jesus's sacrifice and resurrection, we wouldn't know anything about your love. Amen.

Short Reflection

Jesus came back on the Earth for forty days. He used that time to carry on his teaching and to give his disciples the skills, knowledge, and tools to go around the world to spread God's Word, God's Love and to save humankind. During that last part of his time on the earth, he demonstrated that he is truly the son of God.

My grandma used to say: “You're like Thomas, you believe what you see.” Of course, it was hard for the apostles to believe Jesus was alive, back with them. When the women found the tomb empty, as they were already crushed with sorrow, they were devastated and scared. Like the apostles, we can be doubtful, but God is always on our side, in the best and the worst times of our lives. God is always on our side, to comfort us and to give us the strength, we need, to carry on and to gather to praise him, to adore him and to love each other as he loves us.

Prayer of Confession

Lord, there are times when we fail to recognise your risen presence amongst us ...
Resurrection God, Forgive Us.

Lord, there are times when we doubt you, and fail to accept the true power of your resurrection and transforming love ...
Resurrection God, Forgive Us.

Lord, there are times when we remain silent and fail to share our story of faith with others ...
Resurrection God, Forgive Us.

Resurrection God, we pray that the joy of this day may transform us, make us new, and embolden us to share the good news of Christ's victory over the cross with all. Amen.

You may now wish to return indoors!

Read: Mark 16 v1-8 and Acts 10 v38-43

Reflection – Witnesses to the Resurrection

'They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid' (Mark 16 v8b) ...

This is how the earliest surviving manuscripts of Mark's gospel end; rather abruptly, too abruptly for some Biblical Scholars who argue that the final section of the original text is missing. Indeed, some of the first Christians must have felt the same way since there are two alternative endings which were written and added later; a short ending (consisting of the equivalent of just 2 verses) and a longer ending (consisting of 12 verses).

These are both attempts to provide a more 'satisfactory' ending to Mark's gospel. In particular, the longer one summarises Jesus's post resurrection appearances to the disciples and others, emphasising the importance of these to the early Christians, an essential part of the New Testament evidence for the resurrection. Unlike the version of Mark's gospel which ends at 16 v8, the other three gospels all describe several post-resurrection appearances. It seems to me entirely plausible that there was a desire for Mark to have some too! In the Acts reading, Peter also speaks of Jesus's post-resurrection appearances in his sermon to a group of Gentiles, explaining that as well as raising Jesus from the dead, God also '*caused him to be seen*' (v40b).

The Two Marys and Salome

To the very end of Mark's gospel, expectations continue to be turned upside down. Here, it is the fact that *women* are the first witnesses to the resurrection. In the culture of 1st century Palestine they would not be accepted as reliable witnesses although, oddly, this adds credibility to the resurrection story; for if events didn't occur as they have been recorded why would women be chosen to be the first witnesses?

The bare facts of Mark's account of that first Easter Day are as follows:

- The three women go to the tomb early in the morning to perform the customary ritual of anointing Jesus's body with spices;

- They discuss who might move the stone that is blocking the entrance to the tomb but when they arrive see that it has already been rolled away;
- On entering the tomb, they observe that Jesus's body is no longer there and encounter an 'angel' who tells them:
 - not to be afraid;
 - that Jesus has risen; and
 - to go and tell Peter and the disciples the Good News.

The angel's words contain a threefold injunction to '*see*', '*go*' and '*tell*'. As witnesses to the resurrection the three women are instructed to share with others what they have seen and experienced. However, they are so in shock at what they have witnessed that they fail to carry out the angel's instruction immediately. Yet, despite verse 8 telling us that they said nothing to anyone, they must obviously have shared their story with others at some point!

Peter and the First Christians

Peter was also a witness to the resurrection. In the Acts reading, he reveals that he was present when Jesus appeared to his disciples in bodily form after his resurrection, one of those with whom Jesus '*ate and drank*' (Acts 10 v41b). Like the two Marys and Salome, he was instructed, in his case by Jesus himself, to be a witness to the resurrection, to '*preach to the people and testify*' (v42a). Despite his blunders and failures, notably his three denials in the High Priest's courtyard (Mark 14 v66-72), Peter is entrusted with the leadership of the early church. What a contrast between the Peter who denied Jesus three times, and this Peter. He has been transformed by the resurrection experience into someone who is willing and capable of speaking with conviction and authority. His sermon comes shortly after he has seen a vision of a large sheet descending from heaven containing all kinds of animals and birds (those that were considered unclean to eat by the Jews) with the instruction to '*kill and eat*', interpreted to mean that Gentile Christians were not required to adopt the Jewish food laws, a position confirmed by the Council of Jerusalem (as recorded in Chapter 15 of Acts). Peter's message is bold and to the point; '*Jesus Christ ... is Lord of all*' (v36b), and the source

of salvation through the *'forgiveness of sins'* (v43b.)

Us

We too are called by God to be witnesses to the resurrection, not because we have seen the empty tomb like the two Marys and Salome, or been a witness to one or more of Jesus's post resurrection appearances like Peter, but because we have the testimony of those who did and acknowledge how their lives were transformed by the experience, and because we meet with the risen Christ in our daily lives, and see him at work in the lives of others.

We meet with the risen Christ in prayer, in the bread and wine at Holy Communion, in scripture and in our experience of the Holy Spirit. We also observe the risen Christ in the love and sacrifice shown by those who care tirelessly for others, either in a professional capacity or as a relative or friend. I have been captivated by the latest BBC television series of *Ambulance* which has been broadcast on a Wednesday evening. The care and dedication shown by the ambulance crews, paramedics and those in the control room taking calls from the general public is truly amazing, especially given the current context of an NHS 'in crisis' – as the programme's strapline says, *'From the front line to the picket line ... during some of the darkest days in the history of the NHS.'* Surely in the selfless dedication of everyone working in the Ambulance service, always putting their patients first, comforting people when they are at their most vulnerable, often going the extra mile to help those who are struggling to cope navigate the NHS to access the services they need, we see glimpses of the risen Christ in the world today.

Returning to that abrupt ending of Mark's gospel at Chapter 16 verse 8, perhaps Mark did intend to finish here, as a way of inviting the reader to make the connections with what has happened earlier in Jesus's ministry and to continue the story themselves. It is an intriguing thought ...

The reader is reminded of Jesus's promise that after his resurrection he would go ahead of the disciples to Galilee and meet with them there (Mark 14 v28) and the reader is invited to go too, so to speak, and continue the story by becoming a follower of Jesus themselves. Throughout his gospel Mark makes great use of irony. The gospel

opens with the declaration *'The Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God'* (1 v1) yet there are numerous occasions when those who have witnessed Jesus's healings and miracles are told by him to keep quiet. Here at the very end of Mark's Gospel, following the supreme miracle of Jesus's resurrection and the instruction given by the angel to the three women to 'go and tell' they also remain silent!

Conclusion

We are all witness to the resurrection, or more specifically the revelation of God at work in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in our lives today and those of others. As the angel says, the message must be passed on, as it was (eventually) by the three women, and then by Peter, and must also be by us. In his sermon, Peter is simply sharing his story of encountering and journeying with Jesus – and we are called to do the same by sharing our story of such encounters too, and be witnesses to the resurrection today. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

Where might we encounter the risen Christ in the world today?

How might we share our stories of these encounters with the risen Christ with others?

Listen, read, pray or sing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sT1dFvQqAM>

This joyful Eastertide,
what need is there for grieving?
Cast all your cares aside
and be not unbelieving:

*Come, share our Easter joy
that death could not imprison,
nor any power destroy,
our Christ, who is arisen!*

No work for him is vain,
no faith in him mistaken,
for Easter makes it plain
his kingdom is not shaken:

Then put your trust in Christ,
in waking and in sleeping.
His grace on earth sufficed;
he'll never quit his keeping:

Prayers of Intercession

Bidding: Loving Lord, may your risen presence ...

Response: Strengthen and transform lives.

As we celebrate the new life of resurrection on this Easter Day let us pray to the one true God, who promises the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all.

Lord God, we pray that your church across the world may be constantly ready to share the Good News of Jesus with all people, and be willing to serve and care for those most in need of your love.

**Loving Lord, may your risen presence ...
Strengthen and transform lives.**

Lord God, we pray for the peoples of the world ... for those suffering from the consequences of conflict between nations or civil unrest, human or natural disasters, those who have been forced to flee their homes, those who are living in fear of their lives, those who are unable to feed themselves or their families.

**Loving Lord, may your risen presence ...
Strengthen and transform lives.**

Lord God, we pray for our own country ... for those struggling to make ends meet, those who feel betrayed following the breakdown of a relationship, those selflessly caring for a loved one who feel isolated and lacking the necessary support, those who have been bereaved.

**Loving Lord, may your risen presence ...
Strengthen and transform lives.**

Lord God, we pray for ourselves ... may we be aware of your presence in our lives and learn to share the story of our Christian journey more faithfully with others.

**Loving Lord, may your risen presence ...
Strengthen and transform lives.**

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

Risen Lord, you go ahead of us. May we faithfully follow you with your love in our hearts and your praises on our lips, and be witnesses to your resurrection, in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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