



The
United
Reformed
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 16th April 2023

Call to Worship:

Arise, shine: for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will rise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

May God help us understand,
That we can only enter God's peace when we have released the tools of war.
May God, help us know,
that God's peace is a choice we must make through our actions,
May God, help us believe,
that God's peace for all is an attainable dream.
May God, help us speak,
that others may know God's promise of peace.
May God, help us hear,
that the truth of God's peace is told in many ways.

Prayer:

When Thomas touched the wounds
and set himself free
it was Easter day

When Peter's three "yes's" to Jesus
finished his three denials
it was Easter day

When Mary ready to embalm the dead
ran in fear from the empty tomb
it was Easter day

When the disciples looked from afar
at a breakfast of fish on the beach
it was Easter day

When Emmaus became synonymous with welcome
and the breaking of bread with strangers
it was Easter day

When Paul was blinded by the light
and recognised the voice niggling in his head
it was Easter day

When the hungry are fed at the table
the same table as the rich
it is Easter day

When weapons are beaten to ploughshares
and peace is a word to be shouted
it is Easter day

When the stranger is welcomed in community
and the lonely are restored to relationship
it is Easter day...

When our faith
stands at the grave,
grieving
for a stone that's rolled away,
forgive us.

When our faith
is short of
understanding
though the truth is there to see,
forgive us.

When our faith,
beset by doubt, sees
no further
than an empty tomb today,
forgive us.

Bring to mind
the cry of Mary,
'I have seen the Lord!'
and grant us faith to believe!

The Lord's Prayer:

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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: *John 20:19-25*

Hymn 192:

Thou didst leave thy throne
and thy kingly crown
when thou camest to earth for me,
but in Bethlehem's home
there was found no room
for thy holy nativity:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

Heaven's arches rang
when the angels sang,
to proclaim thy royal degree;
but of lowly birth
cam'st thou, Lord, on earth,
and in great humility:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

The foxes found rest,
and the bird its nest,
in the shade of the forest tree;
but thy rest was found
on the stony ground
in the deserts of Galilee:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

Thou camest, O Lord,
with the living word
that should set thy people free;
but, with mocking scorn,
and with crown of thorn,
they bore thee to Calvary:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
Thy cross is my only plea.

When heav'n's arches ring,
and her glad choirs sing,
at thy coming to victory,
let thy voice call me home,
saying, 'Yet there is room,
there is room at my side for thee!'
And my heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,
when thou comest and callest for me.

Reading: *John 20:26-31*

Reflection:

One of the greatest blessings we encounter as Christians is the freedom to admit when we have doubts. For some, doubt is a sign of having a *lack* of faith, but doubt and faith are surely two sides of the same coin.

According to the theologian Paul Tillich, doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. indeed it could be said that the opposite of faith is *certainty*. Rather than suppress our doubts, we should explore them and allow them to set us on a journey of discovery and a deepening of our beliefs and convictions.

Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That could be us. We didn't run to the empty tomb, didn't see the angels, didn't hear Jesus call us by name in the garden. We weren't in the upper room with the other disciples when they got to see Jesus. When we hear the gospel stories, we sometimes identify with the characters in them. Are we like Peter, overcome by fears when things get tough? Could we be strong like the women, who stayed with Jesus despite the cost? Maybe. But most of all, we're like Thomas. We have doubts. We want proof.

Most of us long for accuracy in the stories about Jesus so that we can feel that we have that proof—all the witnesses are in agreement, so we can say that this is exactly what happened.

But what we get from the gospel accounts are stories filled with conflicting accounts. Some people see only the empty tomb, some see an angel or two angels, some see Jesus, some talk with Jesus, some only recognize Jesus when he breaks the bread. Everyone seems to have been caught off guard by the resurrection. The disciples don't seem to be able to capture their experience with any accuracy. They always seem surprised by Jesus' appearances. They seem to struggle to deal with how resurrection works. Yet Jesus comes to them in their fear, their confusion, and their doubts and greets them with "Peace be with you." He even makes a return visit the next week so that Thomas can experience the resurrection first hand.

Thomas often gets criticised for doubting the resurrection of Jesus; but he was no more doubtful than the other disciples.

The other disciples didn't believe that Jesus had risen until he appeared to them, so why should we expect Thomas to be any different?

In fact, we applaud Thomas for his insistence on wanting tangible proof. After all, Thomas was well aware that Jesus wasn't the first messianic figure on the scene to be crucified by the Roman occupiers. Thomas showed great religious restraint and demonstrated the proper amount of rational doubt. But when Jesus appeared to him, Thomas proclaimed without reservation, "My Lord, and my God."

Doubt can be a tool that propels us into deeper learning, earnest soul searching, and spiritual revelation. Faith based on absolute certainty leads to fanaticism, but faith tempered with doubt is mature and stable.

Many believers struggle with their own doubts brought about by life's unpredictability and tempestuous nature. We have very real struggles in our lives that generate an uncertainty about where God is to be found in all the turmoil.

Sometimes we look to spiritual giants, the superstars of Christianity, and feel inferior in our own personal walk in comparison. However, the greatest in the Kingdom sometimes deal with the greatest doubt.

Mother Teresa's diary reveals a saintly person who struggled with a type of doubt that would crush the faint of heart. She wrote to her spiritual adviser in 1979, "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."

For the last nearly half-century of her life Mother Teresa felt no presence of God whatsoever – neither in her heart or in the Eucharist. That absence seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta and— except for a five-week break in 1959 – never went away.

Although perpetually cheerful in public, Mother Teresa lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. She bemoans the "dryness," "darkness," "loneliness" and "torture" she was undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. Nevertheless, she continued to love the least in God's creation and dedicate her life to Christ to the very end.

Mother Teresa isn't alone in her struggle with doubt. Many Christian writers say that doubt is part of all religion, that all the religious thinkers were doubters. An art critic says, "The greater the artist, the greater the doubt. Perfect confidence is granted to the less talented as a consolation prize."

A Catholic priest writes, "So I am praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting."

Faith is a daily, ongoing challenge. It is a risk. Doubts arise. We struggle with God. And hopefully, faith grounded in the goodness of God triumphs – even when we do not have all the answers and life doesn't make sense.

Will we believe in a God of love who wants to be near us and has our best interest at heart? Or will we believe in a God who plays games with us, and is ultimately cruel and uncaring? Will we believe in a God who stands beside us in our troubles, or one who is distant and difficult?

The author of Hebrews writes, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is not free of doubt, but requires a daily commitment to developing our spiritual walk despite life's uncertainties and sometimes cruelties.

Faith doesn't take away our doubts, but is strengthened by them. And faith doesn't deliver us from our problems and heartaches, but gives us the strength to persevere through them and lead others as well as they navigate around this dangerous, threatening world.

May his resurrection power be at work in our lives as we learn to allow our doubts to strengthen our faith.

Hymn 371:

Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days,
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move
at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet, and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing
always, only, for my King;
take my lips, and let them be
filled with messages from thee.

Take my silver and my gold,
not a mite would I withhold;
take my intellect, and use
every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine;
take my heart, it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure-store;
take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.

Prayer:

In these early days after the resurrection, we wonder what it all means.
We can relate to the women who fled the tomb with terror and amazement.

We understand Thomas and his need for proof that would come
only by touching the wounds and seeing the nail marks.

We understand the fear and confusion
that kept the disciples in the shadow cast by closed doors.

We also keep company with the travellers on the Emmaus road
who felt the strange burning of the truth and hope and love
weaving into the sadness that consumed them on their walk.

We find ourselves in the eternal movement
between fear and faith, doubt and conviction, wonder and worry,
and we trust that you are present with us, O God.

We trust that like the disciples we will be able to stand
and tell the whole message about this life that:

Love is stronger than hate

Life has the final word over death
Beyond what we can see with our eyes,
there is a bond of humanness that draws and keeps us together.

We watch with anxiety as war and conflict bring fear and death
and new tensions strain the lines between East and West
and the world wide community is beset by uncertainty once again.

In the midst there are also voices of reason and peace;
perhaps they speak in whispers, but they speak nonetheless.
May those whispers rise to shouts
that proclaim the way forward with words and not weapons.

As the machines of greed and war trample the world and its peoples,
we remember that there are seeds of justice and love and goodness and grace
that are planted and watered every moment of every day.

We give thanks for those who:

- rise early in the morning to prepare food
at countless soup kitchens around the world;
- search the night streets for lost children
and shepherd them to places of safety;
- keep watch amidst the sick and dying
in countless hospitals and in countless places;
- speak words of compassion in the face of hate.

It is a complicated and frightening world.
Strengthen us as we stand and bear witness to this whole life,
the life of the Risen One,
even Jesus Christ Our Lord.

I invite you now to spend a few moments with your own prayer, in words or in silence; or simply
in reflecting upon the stories we have read and the words we have heard in our worship today.

Hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 620:

For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us, Father, into freedom;

from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned:
pride of status, race or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.

You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Benediction:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Send us out to live lives that glorify you
Help us to be people of peace
Empower us to recognize your call
In our families
In our communities
In our work places and schools
In our churches and in our world.

And may the grace, mercy and peace of God, father, son and Spirit, be with each one of us and
with all those we love. today and for ever more. Amen