



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

Sunday 31st March 2024

Call to Worship:

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!
Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!
Exult, all creation, around God's throne.
Jesus Christ, High King of heaven, is risen!
Sound the trumpet of salvation! Alleluia!
Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour;
Radiant in the brightness of your King!
Let this place resound with joy, echoing the
mighty song of all God's people! Alleluia!

Prayer/Meditation:

Loving God we give thanks once more for the Good News of Easter, the triumphant message of resurrection - new hope, new joy, new life! **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!**

We praise you for what we see in the Easter stories - your love that could not be kept down, your purpose that could not be defeated, your goodness that could not be destroyed. **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!**

Teach us that what was true then is true now - that resurrection is not just about life after death but about constant new beginnings, the way you are able to transform every part of our lives, the way you are always bringing renewal - and may that truth inspire us to keep on following you not only through the good but through the bad. **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!** When life seems hard, when we feel overwhelmed by trials and temptations, when faith seems to fly in the face of reason, assure us once more that your love will not be overcome. **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!**

When our work seems to bear no fruit, when our efforts go unrewarded, when our hopes remain unrealised, teach us that your purpose will ultimately be fulfilled. **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!**

When the innocent suffer, when goodness is rejected, when evil appears victorious, teach us that right will finally emerge victorious. **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!**

Loving God, grant to us the deep inner assurance which only Easter can bring - that whatever life brings, whatever we face, however things may seem, your will shall be done and your kingdom come. **Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!**

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: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Hymn 232:

Christ the Lord is risen today,

Alleluia!

let creation join to say:

Alleluia!

raise your joys and triumphs high,

Alleluia!

sing, ye heavens; thou earth, reply:

Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done,

Alleluia!

fought the fight, the battle won;

Alleluia!

lo! our sun's eclipse is o'er;

Alleluia!

lo! he sets in blood no more.

Alleluia!

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal;

Alleluia!

Christ hath burst the gates of hell:

Alleluia!

death in vain forbids his rise;

Alleluia!

Christ hath opened paradise.

Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King;

Alleluia!

where, O death, is now thy sting?

Alleluia!

Dying once, he all doth save;

Alleluia!

where's thy vict'ry, boasting grave?

Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ hath led,

Alleluia!

following our exalted Head;

Alleluia!

made like him, like him we rise:

Alleluia!

ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

Alleluia!

Reading: John 20:1-18

Reflection:

The Resurrection stories are very familiar to us, and although each of the gospel writers tells the story in his own way with his own cast of characters and his own version of the details of that resurrection morning, the basic elements of the story are the same: that someone went to the place where Jesus had been buried and discovered that he had been raised.

In Mark's gospel three women go to the tomb and meet a young man there who tells them that Jesus has been raised. The women are scared and confused, so they ran away and told no-one. Mark's is the earliest version of the gospel versions of the story, and also the shortest and simplest.

Luke, in his version, expands the story a little. He also has three women going to the tomb where they meet two men in bright shining clothes who tell them that Jesus has been raised. The women then go straight back and tell the rest of the disciples what they had seen. The men, however, don't believe them until Peter goes and checks for himself.

Matthew has a very spectacular version of the story, with a violent earthquake and an angel with an appearance as bright as lightning and clothing as white as snow who appeared to the two women who went to the tomb. They left the tomb to go and tell the disciples but were met by Jesus himself who tells them to go with the disciples to Galilee, where he will meet them.

Finally, and a few years later, John wrote his version of the gospel and told the story of Mary Magdalene going alone to the tomb, finding that the stone had been removed and going to fetch Peter and another of the disciples, who come to confirm that the tomb is empty, and then leave again; after they are gone, Jesus appears and has a conversation with Mary, who first all mistakes him for a gardener.

So we have in the Bible four gospel versions of the resurrection story, the oldest being the simplest and getting longer and more elaborate through to the latest.

Probably earlier than any of the gospel versions of the story is the simple verse we find in Paul's letter to the Corinthians: *'he was buried and he was raised to life three days later'*.

Sometimes the simpler the better. There is no doubt that the different angles and emphases we find in the four gospels, along with the one or two irreconcilable contradictions in the detail (like how many women went to the tomb or how many men they met there, or what they did next)... There is no doubt that these details have led to a great deal of argument and debate about what really happened. But the argument and debate is really no more than a red herring that diverts us from the statement of faith that the story of Jesus' resurrection basically is.

All the detail needed is what Paul gives us *'he was buried and he was raised to life three days later.'* The impact of the story as reported in the gospels is not so much about what happened to Jesus, but what happened to the disciples. As far as the resurrection of Jesus is concerned, all we need say is, *'he was buried and was raised to life three days later.'* But that is not all there is to be said about resurrection, because what the gospels tell us is that, in some way, the disciples underwent a resurrection experience too.

It is very clear that this resurrection story is about much more than just the reviving of a dead Jesus. Stories of the dead coming back to life were not unknown at the time, indeed the gospels between them tell of no fewer than three times when Jesus was able to bring people miraculously back to life: the daughter of an official, the son of a widow, and of course Lazarus. None of these people, by virtue of the fact that they had been dead and were now alive, seemed to have been viewed as anything particularly praiseworthy, so why should it be that Jesus, maybe the fourth raising from the dead that his followers had seen, became the centre of a new faith. Why are there still today followers of Jesus, but not followers of Lazarus? Obviously there is more to resurrection than coming back from the dead.

No - a significant part of the resurrection story is to do with the response of the disciples. It is in order to describe and emphasise this response that the gospel stories become increasingly elaborate, and why the writers of the felt that it was not enough simply to say, as Paul had said *he was buried and he was raised to life three days later*.

The immediate response of the disciples was confusion and fear, and the story of how that confusion and fear turned to faith and commitment is, in many ways, the real resurrection story. It is a bit unfortunate, really, that because of the church's calendar, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on this Sunday separately from the stories of the resurrection appearances to the disciples, which the church remembers over the coming few weeks. They are all part of the same story, and it could be argued that it isn't possible to understand resurrection in its fulness without also telling the story of the disciples' response to the risen Lord. Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that resurrection was something that happened as much to Jesus' followers as to Jesus himself.

And there certainly is a case for claiming that they were first of all dead, but then came alive. We read in Mark of the women running away terrified on that first Easter morning. We read also in the gospels that, subsequently, the disciples hid themselves away. We read of their fear, their desolation and despair, their sense of loss. We read of their intention to go back to their lives as fisherfolk, to take up where they had left off three years before. It seems that, as far as they were concerned, it was all over. Whatever faith they had acquired as they followed Jesus had now evaporated. And they cannot be blamed for that. The great mission had turned out badly; it had been a failure; the one who had led them, had inspired them was dead; there was nothing to do but pick themselves up and try to go back to the lives they had left.

But something miraculous happened to them. They came to realise, to understand, that the great mission was *not* over, that it had only just begun; the leadership and inspiration of Jesus were still available to them; his call to follow him had not expired simply because he was gone from them. They, whose spirits had died with Jesus, who were dead and demoralised, underwent a resurrection too. They awakened to a new life, to new challenges and new adventures, they came to life again and finally gave up their old lives for good, living instead in their revived and reinvigorated faith in Jesus.

And the final question of course is to ask if and how we, two thousand years later, are part of that resurrection experience. For us, the resurrection experience of the disciples is a constant reminder that there is always hope. Not only hope for ourselves, that life, even in its darkest moments, can involve renewal and enrichment, can be unexpectedly and miraculously changed from hopelessness to faith - but hope for all the world. That a group of despairing distraught people who have lost the one they held most dear can be transformed into a people of faith with the spiritual power ultimately to change the world, gives hope to all those many groups and individuals who are today in despair, in distress, suffering pain and loss, that they too can be transformed. And there is hope for us - for the church - the successors and inheritors of faith as those hopeless confused disciples. Hope that we like them can be constantly renewing and reviving our faith, constantly experiencing resurrection so that the spiritual power may continue - and the world may go on being changed.

HYMN 243:

Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

In the grave they laid him, Love whom we had slain,
thinking that he never would awake again,
laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
he that for the three days in the grave had lain,
quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
then your touch can call us back to life again,
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, we remember the trauma which you suffering and death brought to your friends, a grief which went beyond words and which seemed beyond healing. We remember how Peter wept bitterly when he realised he had denied you as you predicted; how women sobbed on the way to the cross, and as they watched you die; how Mary broke down in the garden, overwhelmed with grief - each one a symbol of the desolation and despair so many felt at your death.

But we remember also how Peter rejoiced as, three times, you repeated your call, how your followers celebrated as you stood among them, risen and victorious - a symbol of new life and continuing hope.

We pray for those who suffer today - all who endure constant pain, who wrestle with illness, who are victims of violence or whose bodies are broken by accident or injury. Loving God, where there is sorrow, grant your joy.

We pray for those who feel betrayed today, cheated by loved ones, deceived by those they trusted, hurt by those they counted as friends, or let down by society. Loving God, where there is sorrow, grant your joy.

We pray for those who grieve today, their hearts broken by tragedy and bereavement, their lives torn apart - many for whom tears are a constant companion, laughter and happiness like some distant memory. Loving God, where there is sorrow, grant your joy.

Lord Jesus Christ, reach out into our world of so much pain, heartache and sadness. May your light scatter the shadows, your love lift the burdens, and your grace bring life in all its fullness. Loving God, where there is sorrow, grant your joy.

Amen

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 prayers, loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 247:

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.

Chorus

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:

Chorus

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

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:

Chorus

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

Benediction

Christ's peace be with us,
Christ's peace within us,
Christ's peace behind us,
Christ's peace before us,
Christ's peace beside us,
Christ's peace to win us,
Christ's peace to comfort and restore us.

And may the grace of the Risen Christ, the love of God, and the blessing of the Holy Spirit be
with each one of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen

