



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

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2024

## 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.

We are called from the ends of the earth,  
we are called from the centre of our lives  
Men and women, young and old,  
rich and poor, strong and weak.  
We are called into God's love  
to yearn for justice and to pray for peace.

## Prayer/Meditation:

God of the resurrection,  
we gather this morning  
as a community of believers.  
We come with joy to greet one another  
and to tell again and again the amazing news:  
Christ is risen!  
Love is victorious over death!  
You have given us new life  
in the name of your Son!  
May our singing, praying, listening, and proclaiming  
be a testimony to the power of your love  
to make us a new creation  
as a community of faith.

Loving God,  
in your love you welcome us as your children,  
through your care you have shaped the universe,  
with your mercy you hear our prayers.  
Hear us, your people,  
as we come before you in worship.

Jesus, our risen Lord,  
in our weakness, you call us,

in our confusion, you teach us,  
in our troubles, you offer us peace.  
Meet us, your friends,  
as we come to hear your word.

Spirit, Living One,  
in the beginning, you breathed life,  
in chaos and darkness, you brought hope,  
in many tongues, you spread good news.  
Transform us, your people,  
as we open our minds and hearts to you.

God,  
Loving Father, Son and Spirit,  
we come.  
Yet we know we come with doubts and fears.  
We know we come in ignorance.  
We know we have failed you, your creation and your people,  
in many ways.  
Trusting in your love, we turn again to you.  
As we open our hearts to your mercy and forgiveness,  
grant us your peace.

Accept these prayers,  
accept our worship,  
accept us,  
through your love,

Reading: Acts 2:22-32

Hymn 274:

God is love, his the care  
tending each, everywhere.  
God is love-all is there!  
Jesus came to show him,  
that we all might know him:

Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
God is good,  
God is truth,  
God is beauty.. praise him!

Jesus came, lived and died  
for our sake, crucified,  
rose again, glorified:  
he was born to save us  
by the truth he gave us:

Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
God is good,  
God is truth,  
God is beauty.. praise him!

None can see God above;  
Jesus shows how to love;  
thus may we Godward move,  
joined as sisters, brothers,  
finding him in others:

Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
God is good,  
God is truth,  
God is beauty.. praise him!

To our Lord praise we sing  
light and life, friend and King  
coming down love to bring,  
pattern for our duty,  
showing God in beauty:

Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
Sing aloud, loud, loud,  
God is good,  
God is truth,  
God is beauty.. praise him!

Reading: John 20:24-31

Reflection:

Well, here we are again on Thomas Sunday. Good old doubting Thomas. Thomas could be the patron saint of modern people. He couldn't take the disciples' word about having seen Jesus alive; he needed proof; he needed to be sure. Thomas was reported to have been a twin. If so he would have known all about mistaken identity. He would have known how easy it is to be wrong about something, even when we see it with our own eyes.

Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That would be us. We didn't make it 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. And that's maybe no bad thing, because Thomas had two good qualities that we sometimes overlook. First of all he had the honesty to say that

he doubted. While the others were rejoicing and celebrating the good news of Jesus' return, Thomas was quite honest about his doubts, 'Unless I see his scars, I won't believe.' And secondly, once he became convinced, he was completely convinced.

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.

It is important for us to remember that Jesus does not come to the disciples in a blaze of glory, surrounded by angels or accompanied by trumpet flourishes. Rather he comes quietly; he seems to surprise the disciples. And he comes with his wounds—the wounded savior coming to his wounded disciples. He is not all neat and tidy, but still bears the marks of his suffering, the marks of his humanity. Even his resurrected body still shows the signs of his dwelling among us. As humans, we struggle to hide our woundedness as a sign of weakness, yet the risen Christ still bears his woundedness and comes to meet us and bring us his peace. His resurrection gives us hope that we will be healed and made whole.

When the risen Lord came to the disciples in the upper room, he brought them his peace, he breathed his spirit on them and commissioned them to live and preach his message of love, forgiveness, and peace.

In the creation story, God molded Adam out of the clay and breathed life into him. In the upper room, Jesus breathes the restoring life of God into the disciples, making them new people and, through them, offering new life to the world. The very fact that we are here this morning, continuing to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, is testimony to the power of the Spirit present in the disciples and in the church throughout the ages.

Imagine you are part of a Christian community several decades after Jesus' lifetime. Probably all those who knew him and talked to him are now dead... We never see him or meet him... John reassures us with this story... Whenever we practice forgiveness, whenever we overcome the power of death in its many forms—hatred, violence, indifference—the spirit of Christ is alive and well in believers, and resurrection life is expressed again in this time and place. We can't "prove" the resurrection, but we can be fingers pointing to it whenever we are signs that the life of Christ has not been extinguished, but is enfolded in us and in every Christian community.

Jesus' appearance to Thomas reminds us that doubts do not disqualify us from discipleship. Jesus says to Thomas and to us, "Do not doubt, but believe." The theologian Paul Tillich said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; rather it is an element of faith. Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian pastor and writer, puts it in more basic terms. He says that if we don't have any doubts, we're either kidding ourselves or asleep. Doubts, he says, don't weaken our faith, they keep it awake and moving! Doubts do not disqualify us from discipleship.

At the very beginning of the Gospel of John, the author proclaims that, through Jesus, God has brought life and light to the world. In the death of Jesus on the cross, it appeared that

the powers of darkness were stronger than the power of light, that darkness had overcome the light. Through the resurrection, we are shown that the light still shines. Jesus commissioned the disciples to continue his work, to spread his light throughout the world. Their future changed through Christ's gift of the Spirit. In our baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and made Christ's own forever. We, too, have a new future because of Christ's resurrection. We, too, have been commissioned to spread the light of Christ.

Thomas, without needing to touch, cries out the one declaration of belief that matters: "My Lord and my God." He is confronted not by the familiar Jesus, but by the Christ of God. He doesn't need to touch to know. He sees before him his beloved teacher who now bears the scars of human suffering unto eternity. We also, who have not seen, are blessed at this moment: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In this season of Easter, we, too, need to be reassured and energized by the presence of Christ. We are surrounded by scoffers. And our ease of communication today makes us aware of the suffering of people we will never see or know. We want to experience the joy of resurrection, not just for ourselves, but for the world.

On this April day, when the world outside our doors has put away the baskets and the bunnies of Easter and moved on, we continue to be challenged to live as though the resurrection really does illumine our lives. We are challenged to reach out and embrace the future in faith, believing that the light of the resurrection will enable us to make our way in the world. We are challenged to seek peace and reconciliation, knowing it is the work of Christ and the Church. And most of all, we are challenged to remember that while we may look at ourselves and see only doubting Thomases, God looks at us and sees the best: God sees beloved children, faithful friends, spirit-filled partners in the ongoing work of creation.

Hymn 116:

Praise the Lord, ye heavens adore him;  
praise him, angels in the height;  
sun and moon, bow down before him,  
praise him, all ye stars and light.

Praise the Lord, for he hath spoken,  
worlds his mighty voice obeyed;  
laws, that never shall be broken,  
for their guidance he hath made.

Praise the Lord, for he is glorious;  
never shall his promise fail;  
God hath made his saints victorious;  
sin and death shall not prevail.

Praise the God of our salvation;  
hosts on high, his power proclaim;  
heaven and earth, and all creation,  
laud and magnify his name.

Prayer:

For your world and your children,  
we bring our prayers to you,  
God of love.

For those creatures who are misunderstood,  
for those places which are abused,  
may there be loving care.

For those who have not known love,  
for those who struggle to care,  
may there always be another chance.

For those who live in fear,  
for those who bring fear to others,  
may there be justice and peace.

For those living with wounds,  
for those confounded by death and loss,  
may there be hope for new life.

For those who want to understand more,  
for those who are content,  
may minds and hearts remain open.

For your world and your children,  
we open our hearts. And for ourselves we pray.

When we are blinded by anger,  
you pour out your love  
for all to see;  
when we wonder  
what tomorrow will bring,  
you call us to trust in you;  
when sadness fills our lives,  
you plant gladness in our hearts.  
God of Easter:  
touch us with your grace.

You show us your hands,  
so we may reach out  
to mend the broken;  
you show us your feet,  
so we may walk with  
those the world passes by;  
you show us your face,  
so we may know what  
our sisters and brothers look like.  
Risen Christ:

touch us with your compassion.

You open our eyes,  
so we may see God's love;  
you open our minds,  
so we may welcome God's Word;  
you open our lips,  
so we may be God's witnesses.

Spirit of Hope:  
touch us with your peace.  
Hear our prayer, and lead us,  
through Jesus Christ, our risen 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 prayers, loving God, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 637:

The Day of the Lord shall come, as prophets have told,  
when Christ shall make all things new, no matter how old.  
And some at the stars may gaze, and some at God's word,  
in vain to predict the time, the Day of the Lord.

The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;  
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;  
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;  
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.

The Day of the Lord shall come-a thief in the night,  
a curse to those in the wrong who think themselves right,  
a pleasure for those in pain or with death at the door;  
a true liberation for the prisoners and poor.

The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;  
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;  
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;  
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.

The Day of the Lord shall come and judgement be known,  
as nations like sheep and goats come close to the throne.  
Then Christ shall himself reveal, asking all to draw near  
and see in his face all faces once ignored here.

The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;  
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;  
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;  
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.

The Day of the Lord shall come, but now is the time  
to subvert earth's wisdom with Christ's folly sublime  
by loving the loveless, turning the tide and the cheek,  
by walking beneath the cross in step with the weak.

The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;  
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;  
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;  
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.

Benediction

You, God, are the light of the minds that know you,  
the joy of the hearts that love you,  
and the strength of the wills that serve you;  
grant us so to know you, that we may truly love you,  
and so to love you, that we may fully serve you,  
whom to serve is perfect freedom,  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with each of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more. Amen