

Easter Sunday – Year B

Sunday 31 March 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Donald MacEwan, Chaplain, University of St Andrews, for his thoughts on Easter Sunday.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

Easter. It is the most joyful day in the Christian year. This is the day when the story of the resurrection is told, the empty tomb and the appearance of the risen Christ (or according to Mark, the promise of that appearance). This is the day when Christians proclaim that death is not the end, that all the powers that confront God in hostility – human self-centredness, the self-preservation and evasions of sin, and death itself – are overcome in the loving, creative power of God. It is the day of profoundest hope – for the individual and all creation before and beyond death.

Some worshippers will have reflected on the events of Holy Week culminating in Jesus' crucifixion in special services, or in reading, or attending Lent groups, or services on radio, TV or the internet. Others will have been at church a week before on Palm Sunday. Others may last have been in a service at Christmas – or the previous Easter. It is helpful not to hold Easter in isolation from Good Friday, and from the whole story of God's involvement with the world. The risen Christ is the crucified Jesus, is the teacher, healer and revealer of God's love, is the one promised to Israel, and born in a specific time and place, is the one whose love is from eternity. It is the most joyful day in the Christian year not in spite of the pain and loss exemplified on Good Friday, but because of those realities.

Of all days in the year, the guiding scripture for me at Easter is always the Gospel, those astonishing records of the first, bewildering experience of one or more women with the empty tomb, meeting one or more angels, that gut-wrenching, life-changing encounter with Jesus risen from the dead, and the sharing of this barely credible news with the other disciples. Other lectionary readings – prophecy, psalm, reflections by Peter and Paul – are helpful in focusing our lens on the Gospel. I endeavour to find new ways of expressing the Easter gospel, which are relatable to those who gather in person and online in the service. But fundamentally these new ways express the same central hope from that first astonishing Sunday morning. Christ is alive: the suffering and death of God's Son has confronted all that is hostile in the embraced that world in unconditional love, overcome death, continues in love for this fragile, fickle world, and offers hope of new creation.

[Acts 10:34-43](#)

A Roman Centurion called Cornelius, sympathetic to Jewish belief and practice, received a vision to send for Peter. Peter too received a vision in which he learned, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Messengers came and fetched Peter from Joppa. Peter spoke to Cornelius, his relatives and close friends. Then the Holy Spirit "fell upon all who heard the word", who began to speak in tongues, extolling God, and they were

baptised. It is clear that Peter's address proclaims the Gospel to Gentiles, and itself shows that salvation is extended to Gentiles. The address includes the resurrection of Jesus within an account of the Gospel as a whole.

In a little more detail, Peter explores the following:

Verses 34-35: God is not partial, God's acceptance goes beyond Israel to people of all nations: those who fear God and do what is right. There is a strong sense here that in different cultures and traditions, people can live moral lives, even lives of faith, without conventional Christian expression.

Verse 36: Jesus came preaching peace to the people of Israel, as Lord of all. This focus on peace may recall the promise of the angel to the shepherds in fields near Bethlehem (Luke 2:14), or Paul's belief that Christ is our peace, breaking down the walls dividing Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14).

Verse 37: Jesus' message began in Galilee (from Jesus' baptism by John) then spread throughout Judaea.

Verse 38: Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit in baptism; He then did much good, including healing people especially those possessed – because God was with Him.

Verse 39: We are witnesses to all Jesus did – including in Jerusalem, where He was put death by hanging on a tree. It is intriguing that Peter does not use the word for cross (*stauros*) but tree (*xulos*). Is this a kindness to the Roman centurion Cornelius, slightly soft-peddalling the Roman method of executing Jesus?

Verses 40-41: Jesus was raised on the third day, and appeared to us, chosen as witnesses – and we ate and drank with Him – perhaps cited by Peter as proof of Jesus' bodily resurrection, and as a foretaste of the anticipated heavenly banquet.

Verse 42: Our mission is to preach, and testify that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead.

Verse 43: And this is a fulfilment of the prophets' testimony: belief in Jesus brings forgiveness of sins.

So much is there, and this passage could helpfully illuminate many Gospel passages or service themes, as well as Easter. But it may be worth asking: what is not there?

I notice the absence of Jesus' nativity, the temptation and His teaching (aside from peace). Nevertheless, according to Acts, the Holy Spirit worked through Peter's message to bring faith to Cornelius and those gathered there with him.

[Isaiah 25:6-9](#)

The Hebrew Bible has little hope for life beyond death, seeing at best a shadowy half-existence in a place called Sheol. Prosperity, peace and the praise of God happens in this world, and many prophecies envisage the coming of God to this world. There are few passages in the Old Testament which seem to prefigure the resurrection of Jesus. This passage is a prophecy of hope for the end of disgrace of all nations, for salvation from God to this world. But Christians find in it also hope for God's salvation beyond death, bringing comfort for those in sorrow and grief. I remember a reader at a Christmas service introducing the Old Testament passage as *The Gospel according to Isaiah...* The mistake was also profoundly true. Writing these notes during Advent, I have been struck how similar the central theme of this passage is to a significant emphasis leading up to Christmas: waiting for salvation. Incarnation and resurrection are two sides of same whole: Emmanuel, God is with us.

In detail:

Verse 6: The prophecy lays out the positive shape of the vision. Where does it take place? This mountain, Zion/Jerusalem. Who will act? The Lord of hosts – a way of referring to God in his heavenly court. Who will receive the fruits of God's action? All peoples (see also Acts 10:34-35 above – the universality of God's relationship with the world). What will take place? A feast of rich food (as the risen Christ ate and drank – see Acts 10:41 above).

Verses 7-8: The Lord will remove the shroud over all nations, swallowing up death, wiping away tears, removing disgrace. It is hard to think of an individual or community which has not experienced death, disgrace or grief – this vision can offer comfort in so many different ways. The wiping away of tears is echoed in one of the most beautiful visions of the new heaven and earth, in Revelation 21:4.

Verse 9: Here is God – we waited, and now we are saved – and gladness and thanksgiving follow.

[Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#)

Where I usually lead worship, in St Salvator's Chapel in the University of St Andrews, psalms are typically sung by the choir, and rarely read by readers. But preachers (including me) do occasionally draw on them in sermons. These verses include some significant insights which illuminate New Testament themes, not least for Easter.

Verse 1-2: The psalmist extols God's steadfast love, which leads to thanksgiving.

Verse 14: As our reading from Acts and Isaiah have already touched on, the psalm too declares that the Lord has become my salvation.

Verse 15-16: A vision of songs of victory by the right hand of God – similarly God's raising of Jesus is a victory over death.

Verse 17: The psalmist declares they shall not die but live and recount the Lord's deeds. In Hebrew understanding, the dead can't praise God, which is one of the worst things about death. Christians find here a positive statement of faith in life beyond death, but we should be sensitive to the likely sense when first written and sung, that of being spared from death now for further earthly life and praise of God.

Verse 18: The Lord punished but did not give over to death, which implies the overall sense is of being spared this time from death. In passing we can note that the psalmist and countless people before and since have seen in negative life circumstances a sign of God's displeasure or lack of favour. There is no all-or-nothing theology to help here – we cannot say they are definitely right or wrong. But pastorally, I often reassure people that I do not see a straight line to their suffering from anything they have done, and that I do not associate their pain with punishment.

Verse 19: Entering through gates of righteousness – again an image of salvation. And again, a response of thanksgiving.

Verse 21: The Lord has answered and become the psalmist's salvation.

Verse 22: The rejected stone has become the cornerstone. This is much quoted in the New Testament to refer to Jesus – rejected, betrayed, arrested, tried, scourged and crucified – but raised from death, ascended to reign with God. See Matthew 21:42, Acts 4:11 (another sermon by Peter), Ephesians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:7.

Verse 23: This is the Lord's doing: let us give thanks.

Verse 24: This is the day – inspiring a song I remember singing frequently in childhood. Easter: the raising of Jesus is the beginning of a new creation, a new day in God's creative, loving interaction with this world.

[1 Corinthians 15:1-11](#)

This is the great chapter in which Paul explores the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for our life beyond death, including such significant and elusive terms as “spiritual body”. But our passage today focuses on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and can helpfully augment the Gospel account of the empty tomb and appearances (or promise of appearances, in Mark).

Verses 1-2: Paul reminds the readers of the Gospel, the good news, through which they are being saved. What is this good news? Paul goes on to answer...

Verse 3: Christ died, and for Paul it is important that this was in fulfilment of scripture.

Verse 4: Christ was buried (and so truly dead); raised on the third day (again, in fulfilment of scripture, though it is not clear which scriptures Paul had in mind),

Verse 5: and appeared: to Cephas (another way of saying Peter), the twelve (a shorthand for the apostles),

Verse 6: then to more than 500 at one time. Intriguingly this is not in the Gospels. It may be a witness which is only preserved here.

Verse 7: Then the risen Christ appeared to James, and apostles. Again there is no reference to an appearance to James, the brother of Jesus, in the Gospels. It may be a witness which is only preserved here in the New Testament.

Verse 8: Finally, the risen Christ appeared to me, Paul (recorded in Acts 9, and recounted by Paul in Acts 22 and 26), as one “untimely born”. There are multiple possible meanings of this phrase. My sense is that it refers to Paul’s not being with Jesus during His earthly ministry, and then persecuting Jesus’ followers. Paul’s untimely birth is then a late birth, a delayed acceptance of forgiveness, and his mission to share the Gospel, which has now come.

Verses 9-11: Paul explores further what it means for him to be an apostle and the relationship between grace and his work.

[John 20:1-18](#)

All four gospels recount the discovery of the empty tomb; all differ in certain details. John’s account has a particular focus on Mary Magdalene, on Peter and the beloved disciple.

Verse 1: Mary Magdalene came to the tomb but found the stone closing the entrance already removed.

Verse 2: She fetched Peter and the beloved disciple – Mary Magdalene assumed that Jesus’ body had been taken away.

Verse 5: The beloved disciple saw the wrappings from Jesus’ body, but did not go into the tomb.

Verse 6: Peter went in,

Verse 7: saw the cloth for Jesus’ head.

Verse 8: The beloved disciple saw and believed – but believed what? That Jesus was risen. The empty tomb is enough for him. And yet:

Verse 9: his understanding was not complete, as they still didn’t understand the scripture that Jesus must rise – it is not clear which scripture this is.

Verse 10: They returned home – but did they have a home in Jerusalem? Perhaps it was temporary lodgings.

Verse 11: Back at the tomb, Mary Magdalene was weeping – she must have returned to the tomb with Peter and the beloved disciple.

Verse 12: She saw two angels.

Verse 13: They asked, “Why are you weeping?” She replies using the same words she said to the disciples: at this point, Mary hasn’t moved on in understanding.

Verse 14: This is the first resurrection appearance of Jesus in John – to Mary – but she doesn't initially recognise Him, taking Him to be a gardener. While the risen Jesus was in continuity from the crucified one, He was also somehow different physically. This has led some to think He was wearing a hat, as a gardener would under the hot sun.

Verse 15: Jesus repeats the angels' question, "Why are you weeping?" And adds another, with deep irony, "for whom are you looking?" Mary continues in natural vein, asking Him, as the gardener, where He has taken the body.

Verse 16: The risen Jesus reveals Himself, in calling Mary by her name. It is the moment of recognition, and she calls Him *Rabbouni*, which John explains as Teacher.

Verse 17: Then the mysterious instruction from the risen Christ, "Do not hold on to me," as there is still His ascension to come. Jesus tells Mary to share with the disciples that He is to ascend to my and your Father, my and your God. Why the instruction not to hold on to Him? Perhaps a sense that though Christ is raised bodily, those who accept His risen life do so by faith and not by sight – or touch.

Verse 18: Mary declares to the disciples that she has seen the Lord before indeed sharing what the risen Christ asked her to.

[Mark 16:1-8](#)

Mark's account of the resurrection is only of the empty tomb. Manuscripts which include appearances appear to be later additions.

Verse 1: Mark has three women come to the tomb including Mary Magdalene, while John has only her.

Verse 2: The sun had risen; for John it was still dark.

Verse 3-4: As in John, the stone was already rolled back.

Verse 5: The women entered the tomb, and met one young man – but we are meant to take him for an angel.

Verse 6: The man gives the wonderful news that Jesus is raised, alongside the physical evidence – Jesus' body is not there.

Verse 7: But there is a promise – you will see Him in Galilee. As in John, the women are charged with sharing the news with the disciples.

Verse 8: But according to Mark, they said nothing because they were afraid. It is a strangely abrupt ending, lacking a sense of conclusion. This has led some to think the original ending has been lost, which the additional material in some manuscripts was intended to replace. See below for a sermon prompted by this abruptness.

Sermon ideas

It would be unusual for a sermon on Easter Day not to explore the resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament, traditions of the empty tomb and appearances of the risen Christ, and the experience of Mary Magdalene (and other women). Further questions to which I have returned year by year are: Why did Jesus die? What does it mean that He rose again? What are the implications for our dying? What does resurrection imply for life beyond death? For life before death? For the circumstances of our social, political and environmental contexts. In every Easter Day sermon, the mood is one of joy: this is the day in which our hope in the faithfulness of God to creation is grounded. The empty tomb, hewn out of rock, is the bedrock of our Christian life.

Possible lenses to focus our exploration of the resurrection:

- *Witness statements* – what does it mean for us to be witnesses *of* the resurrection, and witnesses *to* the resurrection in our life and world?
- *Do not be afraid* – comparing the fears which affect our personal life, churches, society and planet with the assurance from angels and the risen Christ that we should not be afraid. Faith in place of fear.
- *Mary wept* – the sorrows of life, including death and bereavement, finding their ultimate context in the faithful love of God, and the promise of resurrection.
- *The wounded healer* – the resurrection of the crucified one, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, and descended into hell. These wounds, found physically in hands, feet and side, remain, yet transfigured in Jesus' resurrection. What healing flows from His not being held by death?
- *A resurrection faith without appearances* (Mark) – Blessed are those who believe without having seen. Is that not our position today, 2,000 years on, and in a post-Christian Western world? Is Mark's abrupt ending the resurrection Gospel for our day, without the reassurance of sight?
- *Every morning is Easter morning from now on* – see musical choices below. Exploring the centrality of the resurrection not for merely for Easter but for the whole year and for all our Christian life and living.

Prayers

Call to worship

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Hallelujah!

Gathering prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
we greet You.

You knew the prison of fear,
the pain of humiliation,
the loneliness of rejection.
But You also found that love was stronger than fear.
Just as You came,
risen and unexpected
to those first friends of Yours
who went to the garden, anxious and fearful,
be with us now,
and touch us with Your peace.
Amen.

Thanksgiving

God of power and love,
we give You thanks that You raised Your Son Jesus Christ from the grave,
that You caused His tomb to be empty,
that You gave hope by Your presence.
We thank You that the powers of evil
which seemed to overcome all light and goodness and love on Friday
were overcome on this day,
defeated in Your Son's rising.
We thank You that in Christ's rising,
we have hope for life before and beyond death,
inspiration for our lives as witnesses to Your grace,
comfort for pain,
and faith in place of fear.

We thank You for every sign of resurrection we sense by Your Spirit,

in nature as the seasons, slowly, turn,
in society, as Your kingdom makes its way,
in our lives, as anxieties give way to peace.
Amen.

Confession / Repentance

Gracious God,
we pray in sorrow for the ways we go wrong in our lives,
the ways we fail in our witness to Your love.
We have journeyed through Lent,
attempting to shape our lives around the compassion and courage of Christ,
yet we have heard in our hearts
the impulses of those who denied Jesus, betrayed Him and mocked Him.

Forgive us for the ways we have abandoned the path of love and justice.

Yet we trust in Your grace, Your forgiveness,
and Your acceptance flowing from the cross;
Your joy shared in resurrection life.
Help us to live lives liberated from guilt,
and inspired to follow Your risen Son.
Amen.

Prayer for others / Intercession

Response:

Lord, in Your mercy

Hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ,
in this troubled and divided world where fear runs so deep,
hopes are so often dashed and dreams so often broken,
we remember today the faith in the future You brought to so many,
both through Your coming and through Your resurrection from the dead.

Lord, in Your mercy

Hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, a world is waiting, hurting, longing, searching for hope,
crying out for meaning, hungry for some reason to believe in the future.

Come again in Your living power, and bring new life to all.
We remember especially those places where there are real fears for people's safety,
and for those places where people may have forgotten a time before fear,
such as

Help them and us come nearer a place and time without pain and mourning,
where there will be no more tears.

Lord, in Your mercy
Hear our prayer.

On this Easter Day,
we think of our families, perhaps far from here,
who are celebrating as we do but many miles apart.
Comfort all who miss family and friends at this time,
and help us feel united in faith and love.

Lord, in Your mercy
Hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ,
we now name before You those people and situations
we are particularly conscious of:
friends and family members whose life seems to be running out,
all who are struggling with mental health,
anyone who seems imprisoned by the past,
who is fearful of rejection, or missing out, or what the future may hold;
all who are anxious over work undone, or not having enough to do:
come to them with the joy of your presence...

Silence

Lord, in Your mercy
Hear our prayer.

Eternal God,
before Your face the generations rise and pass away.
We praise Your name for all Your servants departed this life in Your faith and love,
and all whose wisdom and courage have led to the flourishing of our community.

Encourage us by the example of Your saints
that we may run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us,
our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith;
till we come at last, with all whom we have loved,
to the joy and peace of Your eternal presence;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And now in Jesus name we further pray:

The Lord's Prayer ...

Blessing

Go in the risen life of God.

And the blessing...

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

A suggested playlist of [songs from CH4 for use during Easter](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

Any from CH4 406-435 Christ Risen – Resurrection and Exaltation

In particular, for Easter Day:

- CH4 408 – “At dawn the women made their way” – reflecting on the early morning experience
- CH4 409 – “Jesus is risen, Alleluia!” – a lovely Tanzanian song with joyful refrain
- CH4 410 – “Jesus Christ is risen today” – ideal as the opening hymn

- CH4 411 – “Christ the Lord is risen today” – marvellous statement of Easter faith by Charles Wesley
- CH4 412 – “The strife is o’er, the battle done” – strong account of victory over death, with threefold Alleluia after each verse
- CH4 413 – “The day of resurrection!” – the cheerful tune Ellacombe strikes a joyful note
- CH4 415 – “This joyful Eastertide” – not merely a choir-piece, eminently suitable for a congregation with wonderful threefold arisen at the end of the refrain
- CH4 417 – “Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain” – a personal favourite drawing on connections between Easter and spring
- CH4 419 – “Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son” – if there is an essential Easter Day hymn, this is it: confident, joyful, and perfect for any brass-players you have available
- CH4 427 – “Alleluia! Alleluia!” – A fine tune by Sullivan
- CH4 430 – “Christ has risen while earth slumbers” – also works well to Scarlet Ribbons

And one favourite not in CH4:

- “Every morning is Easter morning from now on” – available free online from Hope Publishing. I learned this as a Camp Counsellor in Ohio one summer. It has the wonderful lines:
“Goodbye guilt, goodbye fear, good riddance!
Hello Lord, Hello sun!
I am one of the Easter People!
My new life has begun!”
- There is wonderful choral music for Easter, not least in Handel’s Messiah – “I know that my Redeemer liveth”

Instrumental music which seems to me to be rooted in Easter hope of returning to life, and intensely moving, includes:

- “Spiegel im Spiegel” (Arvo Pärt)
- “Hymn of Thanksgiving” (Beethoven) – the third movement of String Quartet op. 132
- “Miserable Strangers” (King Creosote, *From Scotland with Love*) – a song I find intensely hopeful

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and
download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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