

## Easter Day – Year C

**Sunday 20 April 2025**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Jock Stein, retired minister, 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.

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.

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Isaiah 65:17-25.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Luke 24:1-12 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>John 20:1-18 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Acts 10:34-43 .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1 Corinthians 15:19-26 .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Sermon ideas .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Prayers .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Musical suggestions .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Reflecting on our worship practice .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Useful links .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Introduction

Easter! While I'll go where the passages take me when I read them, this central theme could focus on the individual, on the world, on the whole creation or all three; on the big picture and our little place in it; on past, present and/or future. And immediately I think of how Jesus is placed in Scripture, as cornerstone and keystone (below and above), as first and last, as fully divine and fully human; as someone said, 'There is a man in heaven.'

While like many ministers I have big books about resurrection, I want to help people consult the book of their own lives, and what God wants to write in it. I want to help people rejoice on Easter Day, but I remember that people bring sorrows which must be soothed with grace and not swamped by rhetoric. As a poet I will naturally go to my database and see if any of almost a thousand poems I have written might help, but I must also accept that none of them may be suitable – and lots of other poets have written fine poems about Easter. At least there are umpteen good hymns on the theme.

There is probably a bigger spread of worship styles in the Church today than ever before. When I lead worship, I pray that people may be taken up into heaven, and out into the world – and insofar as their feelings are affected (as of course they will be), the worship may leave them God-focused, healed, wondering, motivated. Should worship leave people happy? That depends – I recall the saying that Christ came to comfort the disturbed, and disturb the comfortable. But this in turn, reminds me that Christ is the one who conducts our worship, and that the Holy Spirit is at work. And so, like those of you who may be leading worship on Easter day, I want to go to my preparation, trusting God.

There are six passages offered by the lectionary, and you will want to select, with the option of having the psalm as a hymn.

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

If you were reading the psalm, I'd be tempted to expand verses 1-2 to 1-4 as they focus in turn on the people, then the leaders, then those who fear the Lord – that 'bad word', *fear*, which needs to be rescued somehow for the lexicon of faith, as we are fast losing that deep awe in the presence of God which changes lives and fast-tracks mission. See 2 Corinthians 5:10-11. (Remember, the lectionary 'sanitises' scripture and – for understandable reasons – leaves out the awkward passages which have so much to teach us when handled well.) That said, the psalm is chosen for Easter because of verses 20-24. I wonder if Paul had this in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, including the Gentile as well as Jewish reasons for rejecting the good news?

Verse 20 is a common idea in the Bible – and picked up in a striking way by C S Lewis in his picture of the Last Judgment in his Narnia book *The Last Battle*, when everyone has to look at Jesus before passing through the gates into light, or swerving aside into the darkness. Jewish, Pagan and Christian ideas of ‘righteous’ are brought together by a focus on Jesus Himself as the single righteous person, whether Jew or Gentile.

You may choose verse 24 as a worship song, or as a prompt for worship. The Hebrew really means ‘this is the day the Lord has done something’ (following verse 23), and the popular worship song covers this nicely with the verse ‘This is the day when he rose again.’

### [Isaiah 65:17-25](#)

When you think how much the Old Testament prophets were involved in the nitty gritty of disobedient Israel, it is extraordinary that they soar above all that and speak of new creation, and Jerusalem as a transformed city.

Generally, Jewish writers mean what we mean by ‘the universe’ when they speak of ‘heaven and earth’. Some thought of ‘an upper storey and a lower storey’, perhaps with Sheol (the place of the dead) somewhere below that – just as we still today speak of sky above and earth below, even though today we know a bit more about the wonders and mysteries of outer space. But we are no wiser than Solomon, who knew that no one part of the universe could possibly contain God (1 Kings 8:27), or the Psalmist who found God’s presence everywhere (Psalm 139:7-10).

The tension between ‘now’ and ‘not yet’, between foretaste and consummation, is clearly expressed by the NRSV translation of verse 18, rejoice “in what I am creating”, and “I am about to create”. God is already at work birthing a new creation, but it is still ahead of us. At Easter we rejoice in both of these, just as during Advent we thought of our Lord’s first and second coming.

This part of Isaiah is addressed to God’s people in exile, and verses 21 and 22 were poignant for those who had lost their homes; they speak sharply to refugees today.

At the end of this passage there is a reference to God’s holy mountain. The Kikuyu people in Kenya used to imagine God sitting on top of Mt Kenya, Kĩrĩnyaga – but again, some would think of that literally and others symbolically. God’s “holy mountain” (v25) is fruitfully ambiguous, like the word ‘Zion’, which can mean both the small hill where the Temple stood, or the greater mountain which symbolized the dwelling place of God. But the over-

arching wonder was and is that the God of all there is, listens to human beings and talks to us (v24) and indeed, that God is readier to listen than we are to pray.

### **Luke 24:1-12**

This is an alternative to the reading from John (which according to the lectionary, you are more likely to choose). The accounts of the Resurrection are different, which is not at all sinister, remembering how it must have impacted different people and been reported in different ways. Were they very similar, one would suspect co-ordination of testimony. The really extraordinary thing is that there was a Resurrection for anyone to experience and report! The common testimony is that the tomb was empty – something not denied by any of those who opposed Christians in the first two centuries.

In verse 4, we meet angels, described as two men in dazzling clothes. In Matthew we have a great scary angel in white clothes. In Mark we have a young man in a white robe. Angels – who are experienced today by many people – are unpredictable and in the Bible (as today) come in different ways and different guises – what they have in common is to be messengers, and the message in verse 5 helps them to make sense of what has happened and relate it to what Jesus said earlier. It will be reinforced later in the chapter, when Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (vv26-27).

The first witnesses are women. To us, that is nothing to wonder at, but to those in a culture where the testimony of men was given far more weight, it was revolutionary and helps to explain verses 10 and 11 of this passage.

Verse 12 is not found in some manuscripts. This kind of difference is not uncommon, but in spite of this, translators and editors have been able to agree on a common text of scripture, with different translations offering us different language styles. This is an amazing testimony to how God has chosen to be revealed over a long period, to Israel and to the world. Like the resurrection, the Bible has different kinds of testimony, different angles on human life, but again, the extraordinary thing is people have listened to God and given us this wonderful witness to who God is and what God has done.

### **John 20:1-18**

All four gospels preface the story by telling us it was the first day of the week. In the creation story of Genesis, God's work is finished in six days and God rests on the seventh,

the Sabbath. Now we have the first day of a new creation. But it is still dark, the new happening is still to be discovered. In the other gospels, Mary from Magdala is one of the women who has done the practical work of attending burial, who are told by angels that the Lord has risen; here Mary is by herself, finds the stone rolled away, and rushes off to find Peter and “the other disciple” (probably the gospel writer). The sequel from verse 11 is unique to this gospel.

The testimony of Peter and John is striking in its detail – it’s not the sort of thing you would make up, unless you were writing a modern novel – ancient stories were very different. John’s gospel, which is often called a ‘spiritual’ gospel, is very material in some things, like noticing that when Jesus feeds the 5,000 it was in a place with a lot of grass, and of course in its preface where “the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

At first, there is no angel here – but in the sequel, Mary does see two angels in white (as in Luke’s gospel). The context seems different – in Luke, Mary has come with the women to anoint the body, but here she comes back, one presumes still somehow hoping to find the body, and sits by it to mourn – a custom still found today in some cultures.

What John’s gospel adds to our knowledge of our Lord’s resurrection is first the bit about the graveclothes – another bit of detail which makes Mary’s original thought that the tomb had been robbed impossible. Lesslie Newbigin in his commentary *The Light Has Come* emphasises how simple and factual John is: incarnation and resurrection are not nice theological ideas; they are real events in history. He goes on to point out that only when ‘history’ has a source and goal other than Jesus Christ can resurrection be excluded.

Second, we have Mary’s meeting with the risen Lord, again containing graphic detail. Verse 17 is a little mysterious, though often interpreted spiritually as meaning that Mary (and we ourselves) must let Jesus meet us by the Spirit in a way possible for all believers then and since.

Malcolm Guite’s poem ‘Easter Dawn’ [from *Sounding the Seasons*, Canterbury Press] would be a good sequel to this reading.

## [Acts 10:34-43](#)

The book of Acts presents the way the gospel would spread from Jerusalem (Acts 1:8, 6:7) to the ends of the earth, and this passage is right on message. Peter is addressing a ‘righteous Gentile’, the centurion Cornelius, described as a ‘God-fearer’ (10:1-2). With this Roman officer are his relatives and close friends, and Peter has had clear direction from God

to start making friends with these people, beyond what he would have been able to cope with as a good Jew.

In his sermon we can hear Peter preaching to himself as well as to Cornelius and his household: “every nation” (v35), “Lord of all” (v36), “judge” of all (v42), “everyone” who believes (v43). The one “not to all” (v41) is interesting – Peter is reminding us that the risen Jesus appeared only to those who would be His witnesses. Notice the wisdom and justice of the God who “shows no partiality” (v34). God does not bludgeon people into belief. The ground is level – there is no advantage to being clever, there is no advantage to being of one culture rather than another, there is no advantage to living in the time of Jesus over any other time. And we have the words of Jesus in John 20:29, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Another thing to notice is the balance of testimony: even though the gospels give large place to the events surrounding the death of Jesus, His life is also important (v38). Interesting perhaps to remember also that centurions play a part both in the life and death of Jesus (Luke 7:1-10 and Luke 23:47).

While John’s gospel is particularly interested in simple detail, here also we find Peter speaking saying that they “ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.” While for us, this kind of experience is limited to communion (if ‘limited’ is the right word), for the disciples, it was a simple witness to meeting a real Jesus alive again after He had been executed.

## [1 Corinthians 15:19-26](#)

Moving on from Peter’s sermon in Acts 10, we find Paul also teaching that Christ’s resurrection is for everyone, since death (“in Adam”) is for all. But there is a question mark, which motivates Paul as an apostle and evangelist. All will be made alive in Christ – but this happens in an open-ended order: Christ, then those who belong to Him, then the end, when all things are subject to Christ. Will there be people who do not belong to Christ? Paul’s passion was for all, Jew and Gentile, to hear the good news, so that Christ’s triumphal procession is complete (2 Cor 2:14).

Note the phrase “first fruits”, which not only links the early believers with us today, but links new life in Christ with the earth and its renewal, yet in a way quite different from the pagan idea that resurrection is an annual ritual. Christ is *the* first fruit, He is a human being raised from death (v21). This is a key part of the idea that Christ ‘leads us to salvation’ (John 10:3, Hebrews 2:10), first taking our shape in Mary’s womb, then living before God as a



faithful human being, then rising in our place, and taking our human nature safely into heaven, from where He leads us forward through life and death by His Spirit. To balance this, however, Paul says that Christ *was* raised – God’s act.

Verses 23 and 24 are difficult, but perhaps best understood in terms of the unseen conflict with the powers of darkness, between good and evil – which Paul brings down to earth in Ephesians 10:6-17.

Paul affirms something important about the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ – Christ is Lord, yet we don’t see Him ruling over all things. There is more to come. Just as Christ is the “first fruit” of a new humanity, so the Holy Spirit is the ‘first fruit’ or ‘down payment’ on the full life to come (2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:14) – the Greek word *arrabon* is similar to words in both Hebrew and Arabic, a nice illustration of the fact that God is concerned with the whole world, Jew and Gentile as Paul would have understood it.

## Sermon ideas

One of the common themes from all readings set for today is ‘Testimony’ or ‘Witness’ –

- Witness to God hearing and answering (Psalm 118:21)
- Witness to God’s wonderful plans for His people and for creation (Isaiah 65:17-18)
- Witness to the empty tomb (Luke and John readings) Witness to the risen Lord (Mary in John 20:18, Paul following on from the start of 1 Corinthians 15)
- Witness to God’s character and to Jesus, by apostles and by prophets (Acts 10:39, 43)
- Witness to Christ’s resurrection and to our resurrection in him (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

While it’s not hard to plan a sermon with, say, witness by prophets, apostles and the church today, how about involving people more directly? Here are just a few possibilities:

- Meet over a meal (perhaps communion too) with people invited to give their own witness. ‘Testimony’ can be stereotyped – you need to stress that testimony is just a simple and honest witness to how God has helped you, though it is good to set it in the context of Easter, when it would be natural to speak about when you came to realise that Jesus was living and faith a real matter. In some congregations you could leave this open, in others you would be wise to find a few people to start things off.
- Find several people prepared to say what Easter means to them during the service.
- Do a bit of research on times in the past when the congregation, or someone in it, has needed to take a stand on something.



- Take a project the church is involved with, speak to those concerned, and find someone with something to say about ‘witness’ through that project.

Another possibility is to preach on the Acts passage, outlining first how Peter is responding to a specific challenge and how God has opened the way for him to have attentive hearers. Then discuss situations which cause people to become ‘attentive hearers’ today – e.g. after a death, when people get married, after a public crisis, at some kind of ‘change of life’, when something wonderful happens to you, etc. Take a few of these, and how you would (like Peter) respond with good news about Jesus.

You may well have a file of people who have borne brave witness to Jesus, and a Google search is easy if you don’t. But it’s hard to decide if ‘dramatic but far away’ should trump ‘modest but close at hand’.

## Prayers

### Gathering

A traditional way is for the leader to say, ‘Christ is risen’ and for people to respond, ‘He is risen indeed’. If you usually have a written order of service, that’s easy, but if not, it might be artificial if you suddenly told people to do it.

Alternatively, if you as a leader can do this naturally, the leader can walk in to the front, and as they go (or when they arrive), start singing: ‘This is the day’ and people can join in. Then the leader can invite people to worship, or continue in worship.

### Confession

Practice differs – some believe confession should have a similar place in every service (we all fall short, and some come to worship with particular sins on their conscience); others fear this becoming a dead letter, and at Easter in particular would stress the other meaning of ‘confession’ – confessing Christ as Lord. Anyhow, here is one prayer which is a compromise between the two:

Lord Jesus Christ,  
today we have come to rejoice with You in Your risen life.  
The Spirit bears witness that we are children of God, heirs of eternal life,  
and this day we confess You as the way, the truth and the life,  
risen from death and leading our worship gloriously in heaven.

Today we confess also that we have no claim on You other than Your love for us.

You died for us to deal with all our sins, which we freely acknowledge before You.  
You rose for us that we might know You as Saviour and Lord, and live new lives,  
turning our back on sin and pressing forward in Your good purpose for us.  
Therefore, we bless You and honour You as our living and reigning Lord.

### **Thanksgiving**

Let us bring our thanks to God,  
for the witness of apostles and prophets in Scripture,  
for the witness of those who have been apostles and prophets in our own lives –  
pointing us to Jesus,  
for the witness of those who are today laying down their lives for Your kingdom and Your  
Son,  
for the church family which holds us, nurtures us, guides us, supports us, and may at times,  
irritate us,  
for the freedoms which allow us to celebrate and share the Easter message,  
for the times in our own lives when we have been conscious of the presence of a risen Lord.  
For all of this, we give You our thanks and praise.

### **Intercession**

Let us bring our prayers to God:

- For our families, our neighbours, our friends,
- For people in trouble of mind and body, that the risen Jesus meet and heal them,
- For those whose circumstances dull their belief in a risen Saviour,
- For those in situations of violence and disaster,
- For Christians who backslide and neglect the Good News,
- For children who have never heard lovely things about Jesus,
- For grown-ups whose knowledge of Jesus is distorted,
- For people who attack the gospel by their words and attitude,
- For church leaders, that their words and acts may honour Jesus and His people,
- For leaders of State and Council, that God will give them wisdom and diligence,
- For King Charles and his family, and those who advise them,
- For the right future – for us, for our church, for our nation.

I normally end prayers for others with the Lord's Prayer.

It is also possible to use the Lord's Prayer clause by clause, as a lead-in for further prayers.

Close

Rejoice in a life with the risen Christ . . . and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

*Or:*

Now may the God of peace,  
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the Sheep,  
through the blood of the everlasting covenant,  
make you perfect in every good work to do God's will, through Jesus Christ,  
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

## Musical suggestions

*God Welcomes All* (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music and words-only versions are now available; and digital resources including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

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.

- GWA 123 – “Listen to the words of the risen Christ” – the first section of the song can be sung together, or as a call and response.
- GWA 125 – “See, what a morning, gloriously bright” – a well-written account of the event and its significance.

Opening Praise – three options which are not of course mutually exclusive, but which suit different styles of worship:

- CH4 78 – “Oh set ye unto me” – based on Psalm 118.
- CH4 194 – “This is the day” – perhaps segueing into CH4 426 “All heaven declares” (but if so, get musicians to play 194 in Eb not E, or if they are determined to up the pitch of the resurrection verse, they can start in D).
- CH4 415 – “This joyful Eastertide” – celebrates Easter’s Resurrection message.

After the sermon – the first is a hymn which can be sung any Sunday, but has special relevance to those facing or preoccupied with death, and would work well after the theme of testimony. The tune is natural, so don’t be afraid of teaching it, however you are accustomed to help people learn new songs – or just doing it, with someone primed to lead. The second possibility is a better-known song, with a closing reference to life after death:

- CH4 527 – “Lord, make us servants of your peace”
- CH4 726 – “When we are living, we are in the Lord”

Other possibles during the service:

- CH4 241 – “Isaiah the prophet has written of old” – based on the Isaiah reading.
- CH4 403 – “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” – well known, no need to sing all the verses.
- CH4 407 – “Comes Mary to the grave” – a moving hymn for two singers (woman, man, verse 3 both together, or with the congregation).
- CH4 417 – “Now the green blade riseth” – picks up on 1 Corinthians 15:20.
- CH4 433 – “Haven’t you heard that Jesus is risen?” – John Bell’s latest book, *And then she said* includes some fine words about the author of this hymn.

Closing Praise - just a small choice of many:

- CH4 411 – “Christ the Lord is risen today” – good Wesley hymn which could also be an opener (note that its language is very traditional).
- CH4 416 – “Christ is alive!” – great modern hymn which is outward and forward-looking.
- CH4 419 – “Thine be the glory” – unless you have sung it too often.
- CH4 421 – “Our Lord Christ hath risen” – but only if the congregation know the tune.
- A suggested playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Easter can be found on the Church of Scotland website <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/easter>

## 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

*God Welcomes All* can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

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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