

Easter Sunday – Year A

Easter Sunday – 9 April 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Professor Charlotte Methuen, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Glasgow, for her thoughts on Easter Sunday. Rev Professor Methuen is Assistant Priest at St Margaret Newlands Scottish Episcopal Church and Convener of the SEC Inter-Church Relations Committee.

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](#).

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 Day is the culmination of Holy Week, of Passiontide, of Lent, and indeed of our Christian faith. Whilst every Sunday is a day on which we remember and celebrate the resurrection, on Easter Day that celebration is our entire focus. In my experience, it can be hard at such a major festival to know what to say that has not been said so many times before. I tend to look for ways to help the congregation to recognise moments of transforming grace not only in the scripture readings, but also in their own lives.

In my own tradition, the service on Easter Day is the final stage of a liturgical event that will have begun on Maundy Thursday, with the marking of the Last Supper and perhaps a foot washing, and continued on Good Friday with a reflection on the crucifixion. Holy Saturday is a day of pausing, to hold the pain of the cross and of the world. Easter Day celebrates the resurrection and the transformation of pain into new life. Importantly, this is not a negation of pain, not a pretending that it has never been, but a moving through pain and loss to an entirely unexpected new beginning. The unexpectedness is a key point.

It will be seen that the choice of gospel offers two rather different experiences of the resurrection story. There is also considerable choice amongst the other readings. At the main service on Easter Day, the reading from Acts should always be one of those used, combined either with the reading from Jeremiah or with that from Colossians. My own tradition envisages an Easter vigil either late on Holy Saturday evening or early on Easter Sunday morning. This uses between three and eight Old Testament readings to reflect on salvation history. At a well-timed vigil on a fine Easter morning, the sun will come up at about the time that the Gloria is sung and the resurrection gospel is read, a vivid illustration of the transformative power of God's love. The Church of England website offers several options for selecting vigil readings according to different themes, and these might be of interest even to those who do not have an Easter vigil.[1]

[Jeremiah 31:1-6](#)

Jeremiah 31 and 32 are often known as the "Book of Consolation", an interlude or "a refuge amid the storm of divine wrath that blows through the rest of the book of Jeremiah," pointing to future salvation.[2] Robert Carroll similarly identifies this particular passage as one of a series of passages in Jeremiah that testify that despite deportations and exile, "Hope has not entirely died out in ancient Judah or Jerusalem, nor are grounds for hope completely banished from the tradition. Life in the community could not be lived without hope and, for all its negativity and focus on destruction, the book of Jeremiah reaffirms hope." [3] This is a vision of moving through suffering to a new situation of hope-filled grace:

“The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness” (Jer 31:2). Jeremiah’s focus on hope in adversity might offer a powerful message in our current unsettled context.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 is also set for the Liturgy of the Palms on Palm Sunday. We might understand Palm Sunday as a worldly celebration of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, which we know ends in disaster. On Easter Day we return to the same psalm to celebrate the true victory of Jesus’ triumph over death. We might ponder: how do we tell the difference between the hollow triumph of worldly success and the true victory? Colin Cornell writes of this psalm that it reminds us that “Blessing and thanking our Lord not just simply and shallowly but richly and truly is not something we can accomplish on our own. We need a prescription from God.”[4] Perhaps we might think of that prescription as the resurrection. This psalm includes the verse: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps 118: 24): this is a motto for this Easter Day, but also for every day of our lives.

Acts 10:34-43

This passage is taken from Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, who is a God-fearer but not (yet) a convert. The words of Peter’s sermon remind us that the community of the resurrection has to be read through the incarnation and the crucifixion. The resurrection is not a negation of what has gone before, but a fulfilment of it. We will come to the resurrection through our own experiences of the presence of the incarnate Christ in our lives, and also of the crucified Christ.

Susan Bond argues that this sermon challenges both Peter and Cornelius to broaden their vision of what it means to believe: “What is at stake for Cornelius is his self-identity as a member of an elite power group and his loyalty to that community. At stake for Peter is his self-identity as a member of the religious elect and his loyalty to that community.”[5] In the community of those who follow Christ, there are going to be no insiders and outsiders. Moreover, the elites are not going to have the deepest understanding. Indeed, Bond writes: “God not only vindicates losers, God establishes social losers as the ones with proper theological insight. ... The cross calls us to empty ourselves of superiority schemes and to imagine our mission through the experience of those whom our own society (and our religious communities) would prefer to silence or exclude.”[6] Peter’s affirmation, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10: 34), might challenge us to consider our own partialities and prejudices.

[Colossians 3:1-4](#)

Paul's short exhortation to the Colossians to focus on the things above, on Christ who is our life, confronts us with the question, as Charles R. Swindoll puts it: "What's our focus? Are we looking backward, downward, and inward—fixated on things below, obsessing over things on this horizontal plane, and surrendering to the world's values and loves? Or are we setting our gaze on things above, where Christ, 'who is our life' (3:4), sits victorious, ready to return from heaven and rescue us from this wicked world?"[7] I wouldn't want such a stark dichotomy between the "wicked world" and the love of Christ, but there is an important reminder here that faith in the resurrected Christ should indeed inspire and uplift us, should give us vision, should offer a completely new perspective. This is the opposite of the mentality that warns "Gaze at the moon; fall in the gutter." Rather, "Set your minds on things that are above" (Col 3:2).

[Matthew 28:1-10](#)

Mary Magdalene and other Mary come to the tomb where Jesus had been laid and find it empty. One curious aspect of Matthew's account is the description of the earthquake, which ruptures the tomb and terrifies the guards but to which the women seem not to react at all. Kenneth Waters suggests that this is an instance of "temporal collapse" in which "a past event is pulled forward and wedged between two events of the literary present. The effect is to create a flashback to a scene that occurred before the women's arrival. The effect is also to speed up action in the narrative storyline in order to quickly arrive at the angelic announcement that Jesus has been raised from the dead (28:6)."[8] The women are not alarmed by the earthquake because they were not there when it happened. Nonetheless, fear is a theme in Matthew's account. Both the angel and the risen Christ tell the women, "Do not be afraid" (Mt 28: 5,10), and Matthew depicts the women as consumed with "fear and great joy" (Mt 28: 8). Their joy does not entirely conquer their fear, and they hold both emotions as they bear the news of Christ's resurrection.

As in all four gospels, Matthew presents women as the first witnesses to the resurrection: it is perhaps worth remembering that without these women, Peter's sermon to Cornelius could not have been preached. For Matthew the first encounter is with angels, who send the two women to take the news to the other disciples. It is as they are obeying the angel that they encounter the risen Christ on the way, and Christ tells them that the other disciples will encounter Him in Galilee. There is something to tease out here about the ways that we receive our own calling and how it may be in following that calling – and not at the moment of calling – that we encounter Christ.

[John 20:1-18](#)

John's account of the resurrection is the only one to bring Peter and other male companions to the empty tomb. Mary calls them to come to see that the Lord's body has gone, and they see, and they even believe, but they do not stay, because they have not understood. It is Mary, remaining at the place of her loss, who meets the risen Christ and who comes to understand the good news of the resurrection. Who in the gospel accounts of the resurrection sees, believes and understands? Who sees and does not believe, or who sees and believes but does not understand? Who believes without seeing (for instance in Luke's gospel, not read today)?

Geoff Brammall points out that John's narrative is held together by Mary's use of the title *kyrios* [9]; in her response to the angel, "They have taken away my Lord [*kyrios*]"; in her address to Jesus when she thinks He is the gardener, "Sir! [*kyrios*]"; in her proclamation of the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord [*kyrios*]." She goes from not quite grasping the implication of this title to the full realisation that she has encountered the risen Christ. Sam Wells describes the transformation of this encounter: "Mary was crying because she'd seen how ghastly humankind can be, she'd witnessed brutality and horror and duplicity and killing and betrayal." In her tears, Wells suggests, she realises who Jesus Christ really is: "He's the one who dismantles sin, deflates enmity, heals cruelty, absorbs malice, forgives treachery." And so when she realises whom she has actually met in the garden, Wells suggests, she weeps again, but this time her tears are tears of deep joy: "if Jesus has emerged from the tomb, that means he's not been destroyed by the grave, and she's blinded by the wonder of imagining what it's like to live beyond death, to enjoy life forever, to put aside fear and loss and grief and sorrow." [10]

Sermon ideas

Barbara Brown Taylor makes the point that Easter is not the kind of natural transformation of a seed or a bulb to a flower:

Resurrection ... is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground, that is that. You do not wait around for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off—not this side of the grave, anyhow. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them. [11]

One of the main challenges of preaching at Easter is to give that sense of the unnatural whilst helping people to identify resurrection moments in within own lives. It is unnatural, but it does happen.

We might reflect on where resurrection happens for us, or for those we know: where in our lives is grief, and where in that grief does hope or joy break through? This needs to be preached sensitively; people need to be able to say that they are deep in a Good Friday or Holy Saturday experience and not yet ready for Easter Sunday.

One of the deepest questions raised by resurrection faith is: what does it mean to say that death is conquered when people continue to die? Perhaps one way to tackle this question is to reflect on that language: should we affirm rather that the power of death has been conquered, rather than suggesting that death itself is no more? It may be helpful to think of Easter as an on-going process, or a series of moments in which new life breaks through into what had seemed hopeless situations.

Prayers

In my Anglican/Episcopalian tradition we are not required to write prayers for the Sunday service, apart from intercessions, and for me this aspect of the brief is always challenging. The prayers below are drawn from resources available elsewhere.

Approach to God

Rejoice!

The stone is rolled away,
grave clothes neatly folded,
no more the smell of death,
behold the empty tomb!
Halleluia! (He is risen!)

Rejoice!

Scripture has been fulfilled,
the sting of death is gone,
the victory has been won,
behold the risen Christ!
Halleluia! (He is risen!)

Rejoice!

The curtain's torn in two,

our God invites us in,
Christ's sacrifice enough
to wash away our sins!
Halleluia! (He is risen!) [12]

Prayer of preparation

When everything was dark
and it seemed that the sun would never shine again,
your love broke through.

Your love was too strong,
too wide,
too deep
for death to hold.

The sparks cast by your love
dance and spread
and burst forth
with resurrection light.

Gracious God,
We praise you for the light of new life
made possible through Jesus.
We praise you for the light of new life
that shone on the first witnesses of resurrection.
We praise you for the light of new life
that continues to shine in our hearts today.

We pray that the Easter light of life, hope and joy,
will live in us each day;
and that we will be bearers of that light
into the lives of others.

Amen. [13]

Confession

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! [14]

Intercessions

In joy and hope let us pray to the Father.
That our risen Saviour may fill us [and ...] with the joy of his
glorious and life-giving resurrection ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That isolated and persecuted churches
may find fresh strength in the good news of Easter ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That God may grant us humility
to be subject to one another in Christian love ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That he may provide for those who lack food, work or shelter ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That by his power war and famine may cease through all the world ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That he may reveal the light of his presence to the sick,
the weak and the dying,
to comfort and strengthen them ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That, according to his promises,
all who have died in the faith of the resurrection
may be raised on the last day ...
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

That he may send the fire of the Holy Spirit upon his people,
so that we may bear faithful witness to his resurrection,
we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer

Heavenly Father,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant that, as his death has recalled us to life,
so his continual presence in us may raise us to eternal joy;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen [15]

Blessing

God the Father,
by whose love Christ was raised from the dead,
open to you who believe the gates of everlasting life.

Amen

God the Son,
who in bursting the grave has won a glorious victory,
give you joy as you share the Easter faith.

Amen

God the Holy Spirit,
whom the risen Lord breathed into his disciples,
empower you and fill you with Christ's peace.

Amen

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

Amen [16]

Notes:

- [1] Church of England, *Common Worship*, section 5 at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons-6#mmm186>.
- [2] Kerry H. Wynn, "Jeremiah 31:1–6," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 68 (2014), 184-186, at 184, citing Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52* (Word Biblical Commentary; Word, 1995), 83.
- [3] Robert P. Carroll, "The Polyphonic Jeremiah: A Reading of the Book of Jeremiah," in: Martin Kessler (ed.), *Reading the Book of Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 77-85, at 84.
- [4] Colin Cornell, "10th April: Liturgy of the Palms: Psalm 118," *Expository Times* 133 (2022), 250-252, at 251.
- [5] L. Susan Bond, "Acts 10:34-43," *Interpretation* 56 (2002), 80-83, at 80-81.
- [6] Bond, "Acts 10:34-43," 82.
- [7] Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2017), 164.
- [8] Kenneth L. Waters, "Matthew 28:1-6 as Temporally Conflated Text: Temporal-Spatial Collapse in the Gospel of Matthew," *Expository Times* 116 (2005), 289-324, at 297-298.
- [9] Geoff Brammall, "4th April: Easter Sunday – John 20.1–18," *Expository Times* 132 (2021), 278-280.
- [10] Sam Wells, "20th April: Easter Sunday – John 20.11-18," *Expository Times* 125 (2014), 291-294, at 293.
- [11] Barbara Brown Taylor, "The unnatural truth," *The Christian Century* 113, no. 10 (20.03.1996).
- [12] John Birch, online at: https://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Easter.htm#gsc.tab=0.

[13] Michaela Youngson, online at. <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/lent-and-easter/prayers-for-lent-and-easter/>.

[14] John Birch, online at:

https://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Easter.htm#gsc.tab=0.

[15] Church of England, *Common Worship*, form H1 at

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/easter#mmm209>.

[16] Church of England, *Common Worship*, Solemn blessing for Easter; online at:

<http://justus.anglican.org/~ss/commonworship/hc/presed/presedseasonal/easter2.html>

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.

- A playlist of suggested songs for Easter can be found online: <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/easter>
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

Everyone will have their own favourite Easter hymns. Here are some of mine:

- CH4 409 – “Jesus is risen, alleluia!” – originally written in Swahili for Lutheran churches in Tanzania, this is a wonderful short acclamation of the resurrection.
- CH4 410 – “Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!”
- CH4 411 – “Christ the Lord is risen today”
- CH4 412 – “The strife is o’er, the battle done”
- CH4 413 – “The day of resurrection!”
- CH4 415 – “This joyful Eastertide”

- CH4 417 – “Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain”
- CH4 419 – “Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son”
- CH4 794 – “Surrexit Dominus vere” – a wonderful chant with Alleluias which could be used to respond to the gospel reading. It can be sung as a round.

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’.
- While singing in our congregations is still 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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