

Dorset South & West Circuit Written Service for **Easter Sunday April 4<sup>th</sup> 2021** by Rev David Keep

### Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is risen!  
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

### Hymn

1. Christ the Lord is risen today: *Alleluia!*  
Sons of men and angels say:  
Raise your joys and triumphs high;  
Sing, ye heavens; let earth reply:
2. Love's redeeming work is done,  
Fought the fight, the battle won;  
Vain the stone, the watch, the seal;  
Christ hath burst the gates of hell:
3. Lives again our glorious King;  
Where, O death, is now thy sting?  
Once he died our souls to save;  
Where's thy victory, boasting grave?
4. Soar we now where Christ hath led,  
Following our exalted Head;  
Made like him, like him we rise  
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies:
5. King of glory! Soul of bliss!  
Everlasting life is this,  
Thee to know, thy power to prove,  
Thus to sing, and thus to love: *Alleluia!*

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

### Prayer Meditation

Lord, this is a day of great contrasts:  
In the place where he was crucified there was a garden  
In the place of darkness there is light  
In the place of suffering there is peace  
In the place of doubt there is faith  
In the place of fear there is courage  
In the place of despair there is hope  
In the face of death there is life.

Lord save us from cynicism and despair and fill our hearts with the joy and hope of Easter.

**A Collect for Easter Day before dawn:** Eternal God, giver of life and light, you make this holy night shine with the radiance of the risen Christ. Renew your Church with the joy and gladness of his presence, that we may shine as lights in the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

*(The Methodist Worship Book 1999)*

### Lord's Prayer

**Reading: John 20 11-18** Mary stood crying outside the tomb. While she was still crying, she bent over and looked in the tomb and saw two angels there dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. "Woman, why are you crying?" they asked her. She answered, "They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!" Then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. "Woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who is it that you are looking for?" She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, "If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned to him and said in Hebrew "Rabboni" (This means "Teacher.")

“Do not hold on to me” Jesus told her, “because I have not yet gone back to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.”

So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her.

## **Sermon      Unbelievable? or Unbelievable!**

What a huge difference a punctuation mark can make! For many, Easter will just mean the first Bank holiday of the year, but particularly welcome this time as we cautiously come out of lockdown. There may be those who give some thought to what Easter celebrates and recall Jesus rising from the dead and link that too with the Christmas story of angels and shepherds, wise men and star and even of a Virgin Birth and then begin to wonder. Unbelievable? “ Well, yes of course”, some will say. “How can you ‘follow the science’ and believe all that?” and then they go on to dismiss the whole business as fairy tale and legend from ages past. However, all of us from time to time have experienced something sensational and surprising – and we use the same word.....

“Unbelievable!” we say, yet this time meaning the exact opposite - it is gloriously true!

Holy Week and Easter is a roller-coaster story of changing emotions. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of those present then and imagine what we would have felt and done had we been there.

**1 The women at the tomb.** The four Gospels speak of them and mention several names: *Mark* speaks of ‘Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome’ *Matthew* writes of ‘Mary Magdalene “and the other Mary”’ *Luke* specifies “The women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James” and adds “they and the other women with them”. *John* relates Mary Magdalene’s experience but also writes of how a little earlier when Jesus was crucified “Standing close to Jesus’s cross were his mother, his mother’s sister Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene”.

They went as soon as was permitted after the Jewish Sabbath, and so we find them very early at the sepulchre. We see these heart-broken, traumatised women taking the aromatic spices they had prepared to anoint his body, as an expression of their love and devotion. They are taken aback by finding the stone rolled away. Mary Magdalene stands outside the tomb weeping. She sees someone whom she assumes to be the gardener and asks him if he knows where the body is. She didn’t recognise who it was. You cannot see clearly through tears, especially when your mind is still raging with questions from the terrifying events you have so recently witnessed.

When the man speaks and calls her by name, Mary” she recognises the voice. Mary knows now it is Jesus and goes back to tell the disciples she has seen the Lord and told them what he had said.

*Luke* tells us the women were ‘full of fear’ when confronted by the angels at the tomb., and we can well understand that reaction. But those women were among the very first to witness the Easter miracle.

**2 Peter and John.** When Mary Magdalene first saw the stone had been moved she ran to the disciples to tell them, and Peter and John came running. (John xx 4) They went in, saw the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes and believed. But John adds “They still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from death”(John xx 9) Shortly afterwards Jesus appeared to Peter and invited him to affirm his loyalty. Just as barely a week before Peter had denied Jesus three times so now he invites him to affirm his love. not once but three times. And John, who was entrusted by Jesus from the cross to look after his mother Mary, was also one of the first witnesses of the Resurrection.

To me one of the strong 'proofs' of the Resurrection is seeing this same Peter and John just six weeks later in the city of Jerusalem proclaiming with great courage "This Jesus whom you crucified God has raised" My guess is that no one in his right mind would say this, especially publicly in an alien environment, unless he knew it to be true. Moreover we read that on that feast of Pentecost about 3000 were added to the group of believers. That's not chicken feed! A large church today would rejoice at 30 being added to their company and many of our small congregations would be more than happy at welcoming even 3!

**3. Thomas.** Doubting Thomas they call him. Perhaps we can also say Honest Thomas. He hadn't been there when the other disciples saw Jesus, and he said unless he saw him for himself he would (or could?) not believe. A week later the disciples were together indoors and Thomas was with them. Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you". Then he spoke directly to Thomas, inviting him to see and feel the wounds on his hands and side, and told him not to be doubting but believing. Thomas's response was immediate: "My Lord and my God"

**4 Cleopas and companion** At the end of a long day two of Jesus's followers were walking home the seven or so miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were talking about all the things that had happened. A stranger joined them, engaged in the conversation and asked them what they were referring to. We sense their bewilderment as they wonder if he is the only visitor in Jerusalem not have heard the news. Jesus of Nazareth had been arrested, tried, condemned, brutalised, crucified and buried and they had hoped that he would have been God's long promised Messiah. Some had spoken of the empty tomb but with sad faces they seemed disconsolate and unconvinced. Jesus explains what was said about himself in the scriptures. When they reach home, it is late and they invite the stranger to stay. As they share food the stranger broke the bread and asked a blessing and they recognised it was Jesus. After the meal Jesus seemingly disappeared from sight but the two hurried all the way back to the eleven disciples in Jerusalem with their great news "The Lord is risen indeed" They had recognised him. It was as if their hearts were burning within them as he explained the scriptures on the road, but when in their home he broke the bread and blessed it they had no doubt it was Jesus

Add to these Easter Day events the story some time afterwards of Saul of Tarsus who with much religious zeal believed he was doing God's will in his determination to wipe out the followers of Jesus. On the road to Damascus the last thing in the world that he wanted or expected happened. He encountered the risen Christ. And he went on to become a great ambassador for Jesus and an exponent of the Gospel.

Today we can willingly take our stand in that great succession of those men and women in every age who have sought to follow Jesus the risen Lord. Unbelievable! So, why not make the *exclamation mark* an *acclamation mark*? *Acclaim* him King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And then go on to *proclaim* the Good News in word and deed. Hallelujah! The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen - and Amen again to the truth, joy and wonder of Easter.

## Prayers of Intercession

O God our Father,  
We pray for your Church throughout the world:

for all engaged in proclaiming the Gospel – preachers and teachers and all who seek to communicate the message of the Kingdom to people in their own language

for those engaged in missionary work through health-care, education and agriculture especially in places where Christians are facing persecution and crippling restrictions

for the sharing with other agencies for good to redress the inequalities between rich and poor – from local food banks to international aid.

In the wider world we pray for all working to combat the Covid pandemic. Grant renewed strength to medical teams many of whom are drained by months of stress and danger  
We pray for those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Draw near to them with your comfort and peace.

And finally we pray for ourselves that we may continue our pilgrimage as Easter People with courage and hope.

We ask these prayers through Jesus Christ our living Lord. Amen

## Hymn

1. Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.  
The cross stands empty to the sky  
Let streets and homes with praises ring'  
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.
2. Christ is alive! No longer bound  
to distant years in Palestine,  
but saving, healing, here and now,  
and touching every place and time.
3. In every insult, rift and war,  
where colour, scorn or wealth divide,  
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,  
and lives, where even hope has died.
4. Women and men, in age and youth,  
can feel the Spirit, hear the call,  
and find the way, the life, the truth,  
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.
5. Christ is alive and comes to bring  
good news to this and every age,  
till earth and sky and ocean ring  
with joy, with justice, love and praise.

**Brian A Wren (b. 1936)**

## Blessing

Alleluia!  
Go in joy and peace to love and serve the Lord.  
In the name of Christ. Alleluia!