

DSW Written Service for 16th April 2023

Welcome to this time of worship wherever you may be.

Hymn [STF 306]:

Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

In the grave they laid him, Love who had been slain,
thinking that he never would awake again,
laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
he that for the three days in the grave had lain,
quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
then your touch can call us back to life again,
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

John Macleod Campbell Crum (1872-1958) (alt.)

Prayers

God our Heavenly Father, we come to worship you: you raised Jesus from the grave, bringing us victory over death and giving us eternal life.
Jesus our Risen Lord & Saviour, we come to worship you: for us and for our salvation you overcame death, opening the gate to everlasting life.
Holy Spirit our comforter and sustainer we come to worship you: you lead us into the truth and breathe new life into us.
Living Lord in the quietness of this moment we recall before you the things we have done & said for which we are sorry;
And the things we have not done & said which we wish we had.....
If we have fallen into despair, **Lord, forgive us.**
If we have failed to hope in you, **Lord, forgive us.**
If we have been fearful of death, **Lord, forgive us.**
If we have forgotten the victory of Christ, **Lord, forgive us.**
If we have fallen short of your ways of love, grace & mercy, **Lord forgive us.**
May the living God raise us from despair, give us victory over sin and set us free in Christ. **Amen.**

Reading: John 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Reflection

Have you noticed how sometimes time seems to go fast & other times it seems to go really slowly? If you think back to last Sunday, Easter day – was it really just a week ago, or does it seem longer -or shorter?

For many of us while some days go quite slowly, others seem to whizz by and we can find ourselves losing track of which day it is! There are times when time itself seems to go at a different pace doesn't it? Either it seems to pass really quickly, or much more slowly.

In the book "Do Pause", the author argues that it is actually true that time is not linear – time is not all the same. Einstein proved that mathematically in

his Theory of Relativity – and for those of us who aren't mathematicians he explained it like this (his words not mine!): "When you sit with a nice girl, for two hours it feels like two minutes. When you sit on a hot oven for two minutes it feels like two hours. That's relativity."

I think that sense of time moving faster or slower than usual comes into sharper focus when life suddenly changes very dramatically or very quickly – and you look back & can't believe things have changed SO much in such a short space of time!

And I wonder whether the people in our Bible readings for today felt a bit like that, and wondered how life could change so quickly?

My guess is that the disciples had a similar sense of the slowness of time – and its speed - in the events that followed Holy Week & that first Easter day.

It must have seemed a long time from Good Friday to that first Easter morning, and during the week that followed - especially for Thomas.

Poor old Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared – how maddening must that have been? To miss out on seeing the risen Jesus in the flesh!

I have some sympathy for Thomas wanting to see some evidence of his fellow disciples' claims that they'd seen the risen Jesus. Sometimes I think he gets a bad press & is looked down on for just wanting to see some cold hard evidence.

As a lawyer part of my training - and what I taught others - was always to look for the evidence. You can argue what you like, but you need some evidence to support it! So I have a lot of sympathy for Thomas.

And when you think about it, he & the other disciples had seen evidence all the way through their journey with Jesus hadn't they? The evidence of people being healed, people being fed – even in vast numbers! Evidence of people whose lives were changed and transformed by their meeting with Jesus – even evidence of people being brought back to life!

So it's not really surprising that at a time when there was a lot of confusion & fear among the disciples after Jesus' death, as they struggled to remember what Jesus had said to them, and tried to work out what they were supposed to do now – it's not surprising really that in amongst all that, Thomas just wanted to see some evidence of what

the others were talking about and whether it was true.

Maybe he was confused by the different accounts of who'd seen what – Peter & John running to the tomb, Mary & her conversation with the man she thought was the gardener – maybe for Thomas it was just all too much to make sense of & he just wanted to see for himself & decide then what he'd believe.

And then Jesus comes, through the locked doors, inviting Thomas to check for himself in a very physical way - "touch my scars, put your finger here, put your hand in my side." Jesus is so gracious with Thomas's faltering faith isn't he? Almost as if he's saying "if evidence is what you need, then here it is - touch & see for yourself. It is true. I am someone you can rely on, my word is true."

So, when he finally sees Jesus, Thomas's response is unequivocal: "My Lord and My God!" he says. He's the first person recorded in all the Bible to call Jesus his Lord.

Jesus comes with his gifts of peace & the Holy Spirit for the disciples, and instead of castigating Thomas's doubts, or rejecting him because of them, Jesus honours his honesty about his doubt, and he meets him where he is & helps him to believe.

And that's comforting for us I think. Because most of us have doubts at various times in our lives if we're honest don't we? We wonder what God is playing at, whether he really does have a plan for our lives - & if so, what it is! We doubt the wisdom of God's timing, we struggle with different aspects of our faith & we question how we should be working out our faith in our daily lives.

And I think God honours an honest doubter – he honours our willingness to be honest with him when we doubt – and he responds to our need to be strengthened & encouraged in our faith.

In the book of Acts, Luke – the great collector of evidence! – describes how the disciples' lives were changed in the days, weeks & months that followed, and how those around them could see the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives & actions. As they shared their possessions and their testimony about the word of God in Jesus, Luke says there was great grace upon them – the

presence of God was evident in their lives as they shared the story of Jesus' sacrifice for the world.

Thomas' understanding of how God works changed when he met Jesus & received his Holy Spirit. He realized who Jesus was and he re-prioritized his life around that truth.

And life changed for Peter too, as we see from this story from Luke's account in Acts. In just a few short weeks we see an astounding change in Peter, who'd denied even knowing Jesus, who crept away in fear & shame, but now stands before the authorities and tells them all about Jesus, a change which is as shocking as it is amazing.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who don't see but still believe." When we step out in faith, like a child taking its first steps, God is always there to meet us and help us learn to trust him, and our faith grows stronger.

Thomas said, "I'll believe it when I see it", but Jesus was trying to teach him about a faith which says "Believe it, and you'll see it."

Our need for evidence is natural, but Jesus calls us to have faith even when – or perhaps especially when - we can't see the evidence for it – in the dark times & the bad times, when life is hard. Because our faith is in a God who can make the impossible possible.

Recently I've found myself awake quite often in the early hours of the morning and sometimes I've found myself listening to the sound of birdsong outside my window while it's still dark. And that reminds me of a card someone gave me a few years ago which says, "Faith is the bird who sings while it is still dark".

The message of Easter is about how much God loves us – and the evidence for that is not just in what Jesus said about God's love and forgiveness for everyone, but also in what he did: giving his life on the cross for us, to set us free from the power of evil and even death. And the evidence is also in what God did in raising Jesus from to death to life, evidence of his power, his love, and the truth of the promise of the gift of new life in him, here and now, and beyond death.

The message of Easter is that we can put our trust and our faith in God in Jesus; we can believe in the

One who loves us just as we are and who wants to be in close personal contact with us through his Spirit; the One who wants to live in us and help us to share his love in all our dealings with each other, living the life we were originally designed by God for.

That's a life based on Jesus' ways of love and generosity of heart and openness and honesty and grace & forgiveness which is offered to us – offered to everyone – for us to offer to each other.

So how can we live as Easter people in these times? How can we find small ways to shine with the light of God's love in these metaphorically dark times of climate & cost of living crises?

How can we be like the birds who sing while it's still dark to those around us ?

How can we share the hope that comes from faith in Jesus with people who may be feeling pretty hope-less at the moment?

How can we be encouragers and signposts to the new life that Jesus offers, where all seems dead & lifeless?

How can we point to the light of love that banishes the darkness of doubt & fear? Or to the wonder of the Easter truth that Jesus has promised to be with us always, bringing new life, transforming fear into joy, despair into hope, doubt into faith & conflict into peace, as he transforms us through the power of His Holy Spirit?

As we walk in faith, being honest about our doubts to God, letting him love us and work through us, may we, like the disciples, shine with the presence of Jesus, sharing our stories of his love, grace & power with all those who still need to know they are loved and precious in His sight.

Let's pray:

Risen Lord Jesus, forgive us when we doubt your presence; breathe through us with your abundant life, that where we cannot see, we may have courage to believe in your resurrection power to transform;

Bless us, empower us and help us through our words, our actions and our lives

to shine with the light of God's grace & love in this Easter season and beyond, so that others may see and believe.

Amen.

Hymn [STF 393]

All heaven declares The glory of the risen Lord.
Who can compare With the beauty of the Lord?
Forever He will be The Lamb upon the throne.
I gladly bow the knee And worship Him alone.

I will proclaim The glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain To reconcile man to God.
Forever You will be The Lamb upon the throne.
I gladly bow the knee And worship You alone.

Noel and Tricia Richards. © 1987 Kingsway's Thankyou Music.

Prayers

Thank you, Father, Son & Holy Spirit,
for the peace which steps gently into the midst of
our fear, even when we bar the door against you;
for the peace which speaks to our need from the
costly depths of your own loving;
for the peace which sends us out in your name, as
wounded healers, forgiven sinners, children reborn,
outcasts raised from the dead.

Thank you for those who in these difficult times are
beacons of your self-giving love in the work they
quietly do to support and care for others.
We remember before you those who are suffering
at this time, naming those who are on our hearts
this morning....
Touch their hearts with your healing presence, we
pray.

Ruler of the world, we believe in you.
We long for your kingdom of justice and peace.
We believe in the common good; in justice and
respect for all:
but when all around we see injustice, poverty and
oppression, sometimes we lose heart, we lose
hope, we lose faith.
Our seeming powerlessness to change things saps
our impulse to love and care.
Loving God, we believe: **Help our unbelief.**

Saviour of the world, we believe in you.
We long for the time when creation will be made
new. We believe that in Christ you loved us to the
end, dying for us upon the cross; we believe that in
Christ your love proved indestructible, when he
rose for us on Easter Day. We believe in your
salvation: but when all around we see suffering and
pain, sorrow and anxiety and indifference,
sometimes we lose heart, we lose hope, we lose
faith.

The heavy cost of loving becomes too much for us
to bear.

Loving God, we believe: **Help our unbelief.**

Sustainer of the world, we believe in you.
We long for you to fill our lives with your power.
We believe that you will change us into the people
that you've created us to be.
We believe that you are the source of love and
unity, enthusiasm, peace and joy. We believe that
you long to live in us: but when all around we see
frightened people unwilling to invite you in,
sometimes we lose heart, lose hope, lose faith. Will
the message of your unending love ever be heard?
Loving God, we believe: **Help our unbelief.**

In the name of the Risen Lord, who revealed
himself to his doubting disciples, we pray:
Loving God, we believe: **Help our unbelief.**
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn [STF 303]

I know that my Redeemer lives -
What joy the blest assurance gives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my everlasting head.

He lives, to bless me with his love;
He lives, to plead for me above;
He lives, my hungry soul to feed;
He lives, to help in time of need.

He lives, and grants me daily breath;
He lives, and I shall conquer death;
He lives my mansion to prepare;
He lives and leads me safely there.

He lives, all glory to this name;
He lives, my Saviour, still the same;
What joy the blest assurance gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives.

Samuel Medley (1738-99)

Blessing

May the light of the resurrection shine on your way
May the peace of the resurrection hold you fast
May the abundant life of the resurrection fill you
and empower you
And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy
Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.