

Circuit service for April 24th 2022

Prepared by Jon Skeet

Call to worship

Welcome to worship, wherever you are, however you are worshipping. Our worship together is richer because of what each one of us brings to it, in praise of the God who created us and loves us. We join together in celebration of the ultimate symbol of that love: the resurrection of Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed – alleluia!

In our first hymn we continue to lift our voices in praise, rejoicing in the eternal life first shown in Christ's resurrection, and offered to all through God's grace.

Hymn: STF 311: "The day of resurrection, earth, tell it out abroad!"

Words by St John of Damascus, translated by John Mason Neale

CCLI 2725914

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49hPB6NTVEE>

1. The day of resurrection,
earth, tell it out abroad!
The passover of gladness,
the passover of God!
From death to life eternal,
from earth unto the sky,
our Christ has brought us over,
with hymns of victory.
2. Our hearts be pure from evil,
that we may see aright
the Lord in rays eternal
of resurrection light;
and, listening to his accents,
may hear, so calm and plain
his own 'All hail!' and, hearing,
may raise the victor strain.
3. Now let the heavens be joyful,
let earth her song begin,
the round world keep high triumph,
and all that is therein;
let all things seen and unseen
their notes in gladness blend,
for Christ the Lord is risen,
our joy that has no end

Prayers of adoration and confession

Our prayer of adoration and praise comes from psalm 150, the appointed psalm for today. As we read ancient words together, we think of how our praise of God continues to change over time. Praise God on the electric guitar! Praise God across the world on Zoom! Praise God across time on YouTube! Praise God with words from prophets across thousands of years! Our praise may change, but it is the same God that we adore.

Psalm 150 (STF 840)

1. Alleluia. O praise God in his holiness;
praise him in the firmament of his power.
2. Praise him for his mighty acts;
praise him according to his excellent greatness.
3. Praise him with the blast of the trumpet;
praise him upon the harp and lyre.
4. Praise him with timbrel and dances;
praise him upon the strings and pipe.
5. Praise him with ringing cymbals;
praise him upon the clashing cymbals.
6. Let everything that has breath
praise the Lord. Alleluia.

Amen.

We offer prayers of confession.

Risen Lord Jesus, we celebrate your resurrection – but as we approach you, we remember your crucifixion, and the sins which grieve you. We look at your example of perfect love, and think of all the times our love has been anything but perfect. We have let you down as individuals, as your church, and as a global community, from wars and climate change to petty and spiteful actions in our individual relationships.

All of this, you know. All of this, we regret. We are sorry.

Pause

Lord, we ask for your grace which is more than forgiveness. We turn back to you, finding healing and wholeness.

Amen.

Doubt and questions

The Gospel reading for today is from John's Gospel, and it's a passage about Doubting Thomas. This is the Gospel passage set for the Sunday after Easter every year – and I love it. It's one of my favourite bits of the Bible. We'll be thinking about it in more detail later on, but I wanted to start off by thinking about the word "doubt".

In my job, and in my hobbies too, I talk with a lot of people from around the world. I only use English, as that's the only language I know, but "English" isn't really just one language anyway. One of the words that I've spotted being used differently across different parts of the world is "doubt". In my experience in Britain, it's almost always used in a slightly negative sense – a bit like "suspicion". Elsewhere, it's often used just as another way of asking a question. Someone might say "I have a doubt about the psalm we've just read" just because they want to know more about who wrote it, for example.

Now in the Gospel reading, Thomas really does have a doubt – he doesn't believe that the other disciples have seen Jesus alive. But maybe we should think about it as Thomas being ready to learn more, about him saying "I don't know yet, but I want to find out."

I think it would be great if we could change our feelings about the word “doubt” from it being a bad thing, focusing on *not* believing something. Instead, we can think of it as being curious, as asking questions, looking for truth. I expect to keep asking questions for the rest of my life – and I don’t expect I’ll get very many simple answers.

Some people feel bad about having questions or doubts. They might feel it makes them “less of a Christian” – or that it means they shouldn’t be in church to think about *becoming* a Christian. If you sometimes feel like that, please take this as encouragement! Questions are *good*. Questions are *healthy*. God doesn’t love me any less when I ask questions – and that’s something I don’t have *any* doubts about.

Our next hymn celebrates that spirit of questioning, recognising difficult times in our faith life, and celebrating Christ as the ultimate answer to all our questions.

Hymn: STF 644: “When our confidence is shaken”

Words by Fred Pratt Green

CCLI 3109072

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxFce6_2_Q4

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| <p>1. When our confidence is shaken
in beliefs we thought secure;
when the spirit in its sickness
seeks but cannot find a cure:
God is active in the tensions
of a faith not yet mature.</p> | <p>3. In the discipline of praying,
when it's hardest to believe;
in the drudgery of caring,
when it's not enough to grieve;
faith, maturing, learns acceptance
of the insights we receive.</p> |
| <p>2. Solar systems, void of meaning,
freeze the spirit into stone;
always our researches lead us
to the ultimate Unknown:
faith must die, or come full circle
to its source in God alone.</p> | <p>4. God is love; and he redeems us
in the Christ we crucify:
this is God's eternal answer
to the world's eternal why;
may we in this faith maturing
be content to live and die!</p> |

Readings

Sometimes we can find it hard to concentrate on something we’ve heard lots of times before. You may have read or listened to these passages many, many times – particularly from John’s Gospel... or the passages may be new to you. Let us pray that we approach them both with open hearts and minds.

As you read or listen to these passages, try to spot the use of different times: what’s in the past, what’s in the present, and what’s in the future? We’ll be thinking about that a lot more in a little while.

- Revelation 1:4-8
- John 20:19-31

Our next hymn remembers the disciples in that locked room, and their experience of the risen Christ. It talks of transformation – and indeed that’s the name of the tune in the hymn book. Again, we’ll be thinking about transformation shortly.

Hymn: STF 296: “Christ has risen while earth slumbers”

Words by John Bell and Graham Maule
CCLI 1980987

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbPqHmagRRc>

1. Christ has risen while earth slumbers,
Christ has risen where hope died,
as he said and as he promised,
as we doubted and denied.
Let the moon embrace the blessing;
let the sun sustain the cheer;
let the world confirm the rumour.
Christ is risen, God is here!
2. Christ has risen for the people
whom he loved and died to save;
Christ has risen for the women
bringing flowers to grace his grave.
Christ has risen for disciples
huddled in an upstairs room.
He whose word inspired creation
is not silenced by the tomb.
3. Christ has risen to companion
former friends who fear the night,
sensing loss and limitation
where their faith had once burned bright.
They bemoan what is no longer,
they expect no hopeful sign
till Christ ends their conversation,
breaking bread and sharing wine.
4. Christ has risen and forever
lives to challenge and to change
all whose lives are messed or mangled,
all who find religion strange.
Christ is risen. Christ is present,
making us what he has been —
evidence of transformation
in which God is known and seen.

Sermon

The book of Revelation can be hard to understand. Even in the five verses we heard today, there’s a lot we could unpack – but my mind kept being drawn to the phrase that’s repeated twice:

‘Grace and peace to you from him *who is, and who was, and who is to come*’ and then later: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “*who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.*”

What is this “*who is, and who was, and who is to come*”? It’s a variant of Yahweh – the name God revealed in Exodus chapter 3. “I am who I am.” It reassures us that God has permanence and dependability: that God is a fixed point – *the* fixed point – in the universe. Whatever else may happen, whatever else we may face in our lives, God is present. I like the word “present” here because it captures two senses: God is present in terms of being with us, and God is *in the present* in terms of being in the “now”. God *is*.

I suggested that when reading or listening to the scripture passages, you think a little about what’s in the past, what’s in the present, and what’s in the future. There’s a mixture in the passages – and in our hymns too. The day of resurrection says that Christ *has* brought us over, but otherwise implores us in the present tense: “Now let the heavens be joyful, let earth her song begin”. It also

looks to the future, with an aspect of eternity: “For Christ the Lord is risen, our joy that has no end.” In our second hymn Fred Pratt Green talks about God’s eternal answer to the world’s eternal question of “why?” John Bell writes how “Christ *has* risen and forever *lives* to challenge and to change”. In our final hymn we shall sing “Soar we *now* where Christ hath led” and “Everlasting life is this”.

What has all this got to do with the encounter between Thomas and Jesus, I hear you ask. That historical encounter, between those two specific individuals, happened nearly 2,000 years ago. That is definitely in the dim and distant past. It’s recorded so vividly in John’s Gospel that it might almost *feel* like we’re there – but we really weren’t. It wasn’t *our* present... but John writes at the end of this chapter that “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.” I suspect that John would have been somewhat astonished at the idea of his words still being read nearly twenty centuries later, but it still feels like we’re included in those verses.

Our encounters with Jesus didn’t happen two thousand years ago. They aren’t in a locked room, and we won’t see the physical resurrected Jesus inviting us to put our hands in his wounds. Instead, our encounters are happening *today* – in the lives of Christians around the world, and indeed in the lives of those who wouldn’t currently describe themselves as Christians.

God was, God is, and God is to come.

Every year, we celebrate Easter. We experience the exploration, journeying, tension and grief of Lent, and then the joy of Easter itself. But isn’t this a nonsense, when looked at in the most literal sense? Jesus was no more dead on April 15th than on April 14th. He was no more alive on April 17th than he was on April 16th. We have imposed our arbitrary dates on the celebration – and therefore on our own emotions – in order to help us explore the nature of God’s redemption through Christ. In some ways it’s astonishing that we can get so caught up in the emotional rollercoaster of Holy Week, when we know intellectually that the exact days don’t matter. The *events* matter, but not the *dates*.

Just in case you’re wondering precisely how much of a heretic I am, I do absolutely believe in the historical crucifixion and resurrection. I believe that although we may not know the exact dates on which they happened, they were real days. I don’t think we know the names of the soldiers who crucified Jesus – but I believe they did *have* names. All of the details were there – we just don’t know them now.

What I’ve been trying to lead up to is that I don’t think the *when* actually matters... because God was, God is, and God is to come. It’s important that it’s historically real, but would Easter have been any less relevant if it had happened a thousand years earlier or a thousand years later? Were all the people who lived before Christ somehow not eligible to receive God’s grace, through simple chronology? If humankind manages to survive for another ten thousand or hundred thousand years without destroying the bountiful creation entrusted to us, will Christ’s death and resurrection be any less relevant to the people living in those times?

While the historical events took place two thousand years ago, I think that in another very meaningful sense, Christ is being crucified today. And Christ is rising today. And Christ is meeting with each of us, offering us peace, and inviting us into new life, today. Although God may not

change, we certainly do – and our encounter with the living Christ can be fresh and different every day of our lives.

We can still draw inspiration from Thomas though – and I have to admit, he’s a bit of a hero of mine, when it comes to the disciples. Because even though he had doubts and questions, his reaction to encountering Jesus is exemplary: “My Lord and my God!” He is transformed.

I said earlier that questions are a good and healthy part of a faith life. What I didn’t mention is that they go both ways.

God was, God is and God is to come. Christ stands before you, crucified *today* for you. Christ stands before you, alive *today* in triumphant love. Christ is asking you a question *today*: who do you say I am? How will this encounter transform your life? Thomas may provide the inspiration for a response, but Thomas is in the past: it’s *your present* that matters today. How are you responding?

We approach our prayers of intercession as we sing our next hymn. It is easy to look around the world and feel despondent, seeing little that speaks of God’s love. Yet we are called to hope in the power of God’s healing and reconciling work, and given the gift of prayer to lift our burdens to God.

Hymn: STF 696: “For the healing of the nations”

Words by Fred Kahn

CCLI 3200067

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiloXrApr4U>

1. For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.
2. Lead us forward into freedom;
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.
3. All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned;
pride of status, race, or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life’s brief span.
4. You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Alternative: STF 706: “Longing for light, we wait in darkness.”

Words by Bernadette Farrell; not covered by CCLI

Prayers of intercession

Let us pray.

Lord, we pray for your church. We for your wisdom and boldness in our leaders, for unity and energy in our communities. May we seek and find you in our lives day by day, transforming us and empowering us to transform the world around us according to your Kingdom values.

Lord, we pray for the nations of the world. We continue to pray for Ukraine as the horrific war there continues. We remember other places in the world where violence and fear are the dominant forces, and all those who live under brutal regimes. We ask for your guidance to find peaceful resolutions to conflict, and for your love to flourish in the hearts of national leaders.

Lord, we pray for your natural world. We ask for determination in the struggle against climate change, and for collaboration between people of all nations, faiths and backgrounds in recognition of this global danger. We remember other areas of environmental impact, and pray for your vision in caring for the world.

Lord, we pray for our local communities. With the cost of living rising so quickly, we think of all those are struggling with energy and food prices. With Covid still affecting so much of society in many different ways, we remember those who are ill, and those who care for them. In a moment, we each remember those known to us who need to feel the warmth of God's love, and we lift them to the Lord.

Finally Lord, we pray for ourselves: that we may be embrace the promise of the risen Christ, and allow you to transform our lives for your glory.

Amen.

Hymn: STF 298: "Christ the Lord is risen today"

Words by Charles Wesley

CCLI 2259095

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sj9ljVsfk>

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| <p>1. Christ the Lord is risen today,
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Sons of men and angels say:
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Raise your joys and triumphs high:
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Sing ye heavens; thou earth, reply:
<i>Alleluia!</i></p> | <p>3. Lives again our glorious King:
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Once he died our souls to save;
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Where's thy victory, boasting grave?
<i>Alleluia!</i></p> |
| <p>2. Love's redeeming work is done,
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Fought the fight, the battle won;
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Vain the stone, the watch, the seal:
<i>Alleluia!</i>
Christ hath burst the gates of hell:
<i>Alleluia!</i></p> | |

4. Soar we now where Christ hath led,
Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head;
Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise;
Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.
Alleluia!

5. King of Glory! Soul of bliss!
Alleluia!
Everlasting life is this,
Alleluia!
Thee to know, thy power to prove,
Alleluia!
Thus to sing, and thus to love:
Alleluia!

Blessing

May God who is, and was, and is to come, bless us today and every day.

May Christ who died and is risen reveal his grace to us today and every day.

May we know the Spirit who works through and between us transform our lives today and every day.

Amen.