

COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE WORSHIP

Holy Communion for Easter Day

Sunday, 12 April 2020 9:30 am



Easter Cross 2016

Gathering

We gather today as one body from the many places where God gives us shelter for this season.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Welcome to this Covenant Community online service for Easter Day. We are internationally dispersed, and socially distant, but we covenant today to be a community in worship. For our service today you'll be invited to light a candle and as it is Easter Day, I will be sharing in communion with my family. You might like to share bread and wine in your own homes as well wherever you are. If you haven't got them already, whilst we sing our first hymn you might like to gather those things, bread, wine and a candle for later in the service.

STF Hymn 298: Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Alleluia

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Earth and heaven in chorus say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once he died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where's thy victory, boasting grave? Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!

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

Charles Wesley 1707–1788.

A candle is lit and you are invited to light a candle at home, saying:

**We light this candle as a symbol of our faith and hope.
For our future as a covenant community;
our future as a people; our future in this pandemic.
We trust in the alchemy of the Holy Spirit
to bring her dream to life here amongst us.
Gather your people, O God,
that your dream for us may come true. Amen.**

A prayer of affirmation and awareness

Loving God, who brings resurrection life
Out of the darkness and despair of death
Who opens our tombs and calls us out
Into a freedom beyond anything we could imagine for ourselves:

**We cry out to you in pain for all that is wrong in our world.
We hold before you our painful awareness of evil.**

Silence

We affirm that we are made in your image and likeness.

**We affirm that your love and power and grace
Inspires, frees and empowers us. Thanks be to God!**

Bible Reading

Matthew 28.1–10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

STF Hymn 309: See, what a morning, gloriously bright,

See, what a morning, gloriously bright,
With the dawning of hope in Jerusalem;
Folded the grave-clothes, tomb filled with light,
As the angels announce, "Christ is risen!"
See God's salvation plan,
Wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice,
Fulfilled in Christ, the Man,
For He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

See Mary weeping, "Where is He laid?"
As in sorrow she turns from the empty tomb;
Hears a voice speaking, calling her name;
It's the Master, the Lord raised to life again!
The voice that spans the years,
Speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us,
Will sound till He appears,
For He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

One with the Father, Ancient of Days,
Through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty.
Honour and blessing, glory and praise
To the King crowned with power and authority!
And we are raised with Him,
Death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered;
And we shall reign with Him,
For He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

Stuart Townend b. 1963 & Keith Getty b. 1974

The Sermon

Easter is the high point of the Christian Calendar and the oldest Christian festival. All the first Christians, and Christ himself, were Jewish, but in the resurrection, Christianity, which had been nurtured in the bosom of Judaism, began its journey towards becoming a distinctive faith community. And it all began with a group of women, and one woman in particular Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is the only character reported to be present in all 4 of the gospel accounts of the resurrection and in John's account she is the only person present.

However, what is especially striking about this story for me is not that Jesus, chose to reveal his resurrection to women, who at that time would have been viewed as unreliable witnesses because they were not male. Rather it is that Matthew alone records the moment of resurrection: *a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.*

I love that imagery. It feels like a drop the mic moment doesn't it? The angel descends from heaven, great earthquake, rolls the stone away, sits on it, drops the mic then folds his arms. Whaddup? Obviously in my head the angel is either black or a rapper....

Whereas, in the other gospels by the time Mary and the other women arrived, the stone had already been rolled away, in Matthew's account they appear on the scene as the earthquake occurs, the angel descends, and the stone is rolled away. And for added effect, the angel sat on the stone and invited them to look at the place where Jesus had been laid. All this happens as the sun was rising, God's Son was also raised.

We have to acknowledge that this is hard for many to believe, one of the big stumbling blocks of Christianity, the claim of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the empty tomb.

However, it seems to me that what differentiates lively Christian faith from lip service and mere religiosity is experience of God at work in your life. Most of us don't encounter the angel of the Lord in an earthquake or see him sitting on a large stone. But if you don't have some experience of the divine, you'll never be changed. Easter is about an encounter with the divine that so impacts you that you are forever changed. This was true for the individuals involved but also for the church in general. This Easter I pray that you would encounter God in fresh new ways, even if they initially frighten you, so that you may be transformed by his grace.

The second thing that I notice about the passage is that the women are given a commission to speak of the resurrection. Twice. First, by the angel in v7 and again by the risen Christ in v10. The most important news that Jesus had to share, Alleluia! That Christ is risen, was shared with a group of women, rather than male disciples. How do the men first find out that Christ is risen, because the women told them. So, I just don't understand why some people struggle to accept women preachers! If there were no women preachers, there would have been no witnesses to the resurrection. However, this is not a new phenomenon. When the apostle Paul talks about the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, he mentions how Jesus appeared to Peter and the other male disciples but neglects to mention that he first appeared to women. Indeed, Paul neglects to mention any women as witnesses to the resurrection. Odd! Despite this these women clearly fulfilled their commission. They spoke of what they had seen and experienced. But here's the thing you can't speak with authenticity about what you have not experienced. Some of us struggle to speak about our faith because we need a fresh experience of the risen Christ. This Easter I pray that you will experience the risen Christ afresh.

The third thing I notice is the inexplicable absence and presence of Jesus. Though Matthew tells us of the moment of resurrection he is like the other gospel writers silent on the mechanics of resurrection. What exactly happened? What would we have seen if it had been recorded? Intriguingly, after sitting on the stone the angel does not say 'Look, here is Jesus walking out of the tomb.' Alleluia! He is risen! Instead he says 'Look at the place where he lay.' Jesus is absent in that moment. Why is he not there?

But then as the women left the tomb to go find the male disciples, they had another and more significant encounter, this time with Jesus himself. Angels are fine but Jesus himself is much better. '*Suddenly Jesus met them and said*

"Greetings!" The unexplained absence of the risen Christ is suddenly remedied by his appearing.

Two weeks ago, I talked about the story in John chapter 11 when Jesus showed up 4 days too late to heal his friend Lazarus. There we see that same pattern of inexplicable absence and then presence. And in our lives we notice a similar pattern. When you expect to see Jesus, often he seems inexplicably absent. Then sometimes when you least expect it, he shows up, in undeniable ways. Easter is a reminder that ours is not a domesticated deity, who comes when we whistle, and then performs some tricks for our pleasure and delight. Ours is a wild God, the Lion of Judah, the wind of the Spirit that goes wherever it wills. Nonetheless, this is a God who never abandons us. Our task is to be faithful, and to place ourselves somewhere where we might encounter God, rather than trying to summon God into our situation. Do you know why the women were witnesses to the resurrection? Because unlike the men they placed themselves at the tomb, while the men remained at home. They were in the right place to experience the resurrection glory of God.

The reason that early Christians started worshipping on Sunday mornings, was because they wanted to commemorate and to re-live the resurrection. Eventually, Sunday worship replaced Sabbath observance for Christians. This is a really significant insight. Every Sunday, the reason we gather as a church at all, is to attempt to position ourselves so that we might be in the right place to experience afresh something of the resurrection of Jesus so we might be renewed by his resurrection life and power. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

**You are the burning heart of being,
Ablaze with love and freedom.**

May all we hold in prayer
Be held in this never ceasing gift of life.
May we carry that light, that flame, that miracle
Into every place of death and despair.

**You are the burning heart of being,
Ablaze with love and freedom.**

Bring before God the people, places and situations that are on your heart today. You may find it helpful to bear in mind these ever-widening circles in your prayers: yourself & your own family/friends; local church, local area; our region; our whole country; the whole world.

Collect

Lord of all life and power, who through the mighty resurrection of your Son overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him: grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ, may reign with him in glory; to whom with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit be praise and honour, glory and might, now and in all eternity. **Amen**

The Peace

The risen Christ came and stood among his disciples, in a locked room, where they sheltered from the crowds that they feared. Meeting them there, where they were, He said, ‘peace be with you’.

The peace of the risen Christ be always with you.
And also with you.

STF Hymn 287: When I survey the Wondrous Cross

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ my God
All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them to His blood

See from His head, His hands, His feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of Nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all!

Isaac Watts 1674 – 1748

Preparation of the Table

We gather as God's people, in our different places,
around this table of our communion.

We bring bread, knowing our need to be fed,
And aware that many are hungry.

We bring wine, knowing our need for joy,
And aware that many are lonely.

We bring ourselves, trusting that you will take and share
Our time, our talents, and our treasures,
And make them enough. **Amen.**

Eucharistic Prayer:

God of all creation, we give you thanks
for the story of your love and faithfulness.
You recall your people again and again
by your unpopular prophets
to the vision of radical justice that you set before us.

We thank you for your Holy Spirit that sustains all things,
inspiring us with dreams for the future
and enflaming us with passion for your world.

We thank you for the embodiment of your justice and love
in your Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

The crowds came out to see this Jesus,
yet at the end they turned on him
as those in power sought to destroy his challenge.

On the night Jesus was betrayed
A circle of friendship and learning gathered around a table
to celebrate the freedom of your people.
Jesus blessed you for the food;
he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and said:
This is my body, given for you all.

Jesus then gave thanks for the wine;
he took the cup, gave it and said:
This is my blood, shed for you all
for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this in remembrance of me.

And so, with these fragile things, this bread and this cup
we celebrate the strangeness of the cross and resurrection.
We hold together the mystery of dying and living,
Of sacrifice and empowerment,
Of communion and community.

Send your Spirit on us now
that we may feed by grace on Christ
with opened eyes and hearts on fire.

May we and all who gather around your table
offer ourselves to live for you,
anticipating with joy and gladness
the feast at your table in heaven which will have no end,
when we will see you face to face
and know your embrace
overcoming all our distancing. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

We say together the prayer Jesus gave us in its modern form:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.
Amen.

Communion is shared in the minister's home; you may like to eat bread and wine in your own home too as a sign of our unity even while apart.

Post communion prayer

May we who have shared in the reality of our communion
Without being physically present to one another
Know the reality of your presence with us always.

May we who are living in this time of brokenness and separation
Know your wholeness in our hearts and in our communities.

May we who hunger for a time when we may be together again
Feed a world hungry for love and justice. **Amen.**

Blessing

May the One who established the dance of creation,
Who transforms life into death, chaos into order,
and just sometimes, order into what looks very like chaos,
Lead us to transform our lives and the Church
To reflect God's glory in creation.

And the blessing of God,
The womb of creation, the word of life, and the wind of change,
Be with you and rest upon your home now and always. **Amen.**

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The Minister and Stewards of Rayleigh Methodist Church
wish you and those dear to you a Happy Easter.

