

Service - Easter Sunday 2021

Sermon by Reverend Peter Lyth

A prayer of adoration

God of resurrection, ever renewing, ever reviving,
we adore you for your life-giving presence.

Son of Man, newly risen, sorrow made joy,
we adore you for your sacrificial living and dying.

Holy Spirit, breezing among us this Easter morn,
we adore you for breathing new life into us.

Amen.

A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

Lord, we love the joy of Easter Sunday,
but we may not have walked through Holy Week.

We may not have been humbled by Jesus' hands washing our feet.

We may not have tasted the bread and wine of his last shared meal.

We may not have known the primal fear of Gethsemane,
or the bewilderment of the disciples at his betrayal.

We have not known the way of sorrow to Golgotha,

the blood, sweat and tears of a crown of thorns

and the weight of a cross that will bear our dying body.

Therefore, Lord, we confess our failure to feel at one with Jesus
in his dying as well as in his resurrection life.

As we celebrate our risen Lord, we remember the man of sorrows
who died for our sins, and we bow our heads in penitence.

Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Lord, in the warmth of your hands washing human feet, **we are forgiven.**

Lord, in your willingness to drink the cup of suffering for us, **we are forgiven.**

Lord, in the wide embrace of your arms upon the cross, **we are forgiven.**

Risen Lord, in your emerging from the tomb, death is defeated. **We are forgiven.**

Alleluia! Amen!

Readings: 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11

John 20: 1-18

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This is a very odd Easter Sunday. For the second year in succession, we find ourselves worshipping the risen Christ in our homes rather than belting out a hymn such as “thine be the Glory, Risen Conquering Son” as part of a congregation and maybe sharing in an Easter breakfast. You might also find it odd that, despite it being Easter Sunday, I take as my text for the sermon not the resurrection story found in the Gospels but the companion reading in the lectionary for Easter Sunday. I would say though that a reading of the resurrection story on Easter day is not a story of a triumphant display accompanied by fanfares but rather a muted affair with personal appearances to fearful people maybe more akin to our current experience. But the reading I am looking at instead is taken from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, a letter written to an early community of Christians who were subject to all sorts of pressures. They were in a melting pot of cultures leading to all sorts of beliefs. They also had a number of preachers who made conflicting claims about the foundational beliefs of the early church. Much of what Paul writes in this letter is to get them “back to basics”, to understand what was essential in their faith.

So what would you regard as essential to your faith? For some it would have to be a number of things, maybe the virgin birth, or the fact that Jesus was a historical figure. Perhaps for many it might be the historical accuracy of the Bible. Certainly the URC, together with the Baptists and Methodists are a “broad church” that have a wide spectrum of foundational beliefs. But for Paul, there was one thing that was paramount. Jesus was raised from the dead. For him this was not negotiable. This passage is all about that. He says an almost throwaway sentence, “Christ died for our sins” – but that bit of theology is definitely put on the back burner. For here it’s all about the Resurrection.

In the 13th Century, the Catholic theologian St Thomas Aquinas came up with the *Quinque viae* – they were five logical arguments by which the existence of God could be justified. This is taught in theological colleges up and down the land but this is not sufficient to convince many. Such arguments would probably have intrigued the people of Corinth as Greek philosophers were revered in the society of the time. But here, Paul argues we are not dealing with a theoretical faith, derived through much thought but ultimately of little practical value. This is something very different – something that Mr Spock in *Star Trek* would dismiss as “Not Logical” – yet foundational to Paul’s and our faith.

So how is Paul so convinced?

Firstly, because of the source. Paul says, “I received” and then “I handed on”. Paul met a lot of people in the Jerusalem church, some of whom were direct witnesses to the Resurrection. Earlier in the letter, Paul talks of “receiving” and “handing on” the tradition of the Last Supper, what we sometimes refer to as “The Institution of the Feast”. Here is something similar. Paul has met people in the flesh to whom Jesus appeared. Showing that Easter is not some kind of theory but a real event, Paul lists five resurrection appearances, two of which appear in the Gospels: to Peter and to the twelve. We don’t know who the five hundred people were, but there is a strong chance that the James that is mentioned refers to the Lord’s brother who went on to lead the church in Jerusalem. “All the Apostles” is a group that Paul places himself.

Paul also includes himself in that number – but he oddly describes himself as “untimely born” rather like a premature baby. But there is a sense that his conversion came out of the blue, unlike those who had followed Christ over a much longer time, often throughout his ministry. He had not the previous acquaintance with Jesus and the disciples. But, like a premature baby who needs to be placed in an incubator to survive, Paul attributes his continuing and strong faith to a spiritual incubator – God’s Grace no less. It is that which supported him and strengthened him to do God’s work, founding churches such as that in Corinth. So personal experience was a major factor – but one to be passed on for the whole church.

The second thing was the fact that all this was rooted in the Old Testament. Paul says, “in accordance with the scriptures” It was not a radical break from what went before but rather was a fulfilment of the texts that were and still are foundational to faith in God. Some of these are quite specific – Isaiah presages Christ’s death in Chapter 53 and Hosea mentions the idea of resurrection on the third day. There are other references from the psalms as well as those two prophets. However, maybe Paul is making a more general point – that Christ’s death and resurrection chime in with God’s plan. God is faithful and gracious, God will conquer sin and sorrow bringing life out of death. This was a message that the people of Corinth needed to hear. For many of them, death was a void. A common Latin inscription on the graves of the time read, *non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* which means “I was not, I was, I am not, I care not) which is particularly bleak. Instead was the hope that God brings. Paul tells them that some of the 500 had since died – the message is victory over death not protection from it.

This leads us onto Paul’s third reason, the message of hope – the meaning of the Resurrection. It shows that nothing can defeat the power of God. Later in the chapter, Paul would go on to draw the connection between the Resurrection of Christ and resurrection in general. Ultimately, this was to be the first stage in the resurrection of the dead. It was not

just about fixing a mistake of putting Jesus to death – as though God was doing a “Repair Shop” with some broken artefact, nor was he somehow showing Christ’s identity through another miracle. No – God is showing that ultimately God will triumph over God’s enemies – even death itself.

Even though we do not meet in person this Easter, we can take comfort from Paul’s message – that the Good News of the resurrection is for everyone, it is very real and shows once more that God is all powerful. It is a message that is at the very root of our faith. It transforms lives and brings hope.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for the world, that they might find Resurrection hope at this time.

Praise the Lord: **Alleluia.**

We praise and thank you for the progress that has been made in the Covid vaccination programme, and we pray for those in our health services who have been put under additional pressure as a result of the pandemic; for those preparing for a third wave; and those working in care homes.

Praise the Lord: **Alleluia.**

We praise and thank you for the churches that have been able to reopen for worship, and for creative ways which have been found to unite people in prayer and worship. We pray for those who feel isolated; who long to gather with others; who cannot access online worship.

Praise the Lord: **Alleluia.**

We praise and thank you for signs of spring; for blossom and daffodils, and all the green shoots of growth.

We pray for gardeners; for those who look after parks and public verges; for those who keep our streets clean and make our communities more pleasant.

Praise the Lord: **Alleluia.**

We pray for tense political situations throughout the world Myanmar, Yemen. We pray that at this time your resurrection may bring hope to the oppressed.

Praise the Lord: **Alleluia.**

We praise and thank you for the message of hope, encouragement and peace that Jesus brings. We pray for those who are fearful for the future, those who have lost direction in life and those whose lives are troubled. We especially pray for...

Praise the Lord: **Alleluia.**

Lord on this Easter Sunday, let us remember once more your Resurrection and your conquering of evil. May we be people who live in hope.

Receive our prayers and speak to the needs of all your children, we pray.

Amen.

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