

Prelude Sarabande for the morning of Easter – Herbert Howells

Words of welcome

The Lord is risen, *he is risen indeed!*
Alleluia!

Hymn Jesus Christ is risen today

Prayer

Lord God, we worship you and praise you for the rising of your Son Jesus Christ from the dead. We glorify your name, that in this act death itself is defeated, and that we are brought into your family. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

Lord God, on an Easter Sunday like no other, an Easter Sunday where over all the world few churches may meet together, we still bow before you in worship and adoration, with joy and amazement in our hearts. We still bow before you in the company of the faithful, for we know that if we are in the risen Christ, we are joined to our brothers and sisters where ever they or we may be.

Almighty God, through the rising of your Son from the grave, you broke the power of death and condemned death itself to die. As we celebrate this great triumph, may we also make it the model for our living.

Help us to identify in our lives all that should rightly die – redundant relationships, tired habits, fruitless longings. Resurrect in our lives faith, hope and love, as surely as you raised Jesus Christ from the grave.

And as your faithful children, hear us as we pray as our Lord, Jesus once taught us saying....

Easter day and we can't meet together to celebrate. It is not normal. Normal would mean being in church and special music and great joy and probably some extra people present and of course it would mean me rolling mini eggs down the aisle. And we can't do that today. We can't do what is normal.

Instead this morning I crept out early and left what is called "the Real Easter Egg" on the doorsteps of the children who are regularly in Messy Church – a Fairtrade egg and a booklet with the Easter story, so that they will know that they are not forgotten, and so that they will still have the story of the resurrection in their Easter.

Instead of gathering together, we are meeting in our homes, with just the members of our households, which for some of us means with no one else at all.

Instead of loud singing, we may be chirping along to the recorded music.

And it is not normal.

And, you know, that is all right. Easter is a time of hope and joy and new beginning, but it is not a time of things being or going back to being normal. It never was.

Hear How John describes that first Easter morning.

Reading: John 20:1-18

John gives us the fullest story of Easter morning. Matthew, Mark and Luke talk only about the women and Peter and John finding the tomb empty and receiving messages from angels. They don't record them meeting with Jesus himself, not then. John also emphasises the empty tomb, and the confusion and puzzlement of the disciples. But John records the

meeting between the risen Christ and Mary, Mary who stood weeping, who hung around that empty tomb when Peter and John had gone off scratching their heads in confusion, maybe, or maybe afraid to be seen near an empty tomb which should have held the body of a condemned criminal.

Mary isn't thinking of what people who see her there might think. She is not thinking of herself at all. She is just sad. Puzzled, worried, afraid that even the body of her Lord has been tampered with, and sad. And Jesus comes to her. He comes to her when she is alone, not when she is with others. He comes to her when it all seems beyond bearing.

He didn't come first of all to his twelve friends (eleven now). He had used to go around with them, but things were different now. He didn't come first to Peter, James and John, his inner circle in the past, for things were different now. When you go through death, things are different. He came to Mary because she was sad. And she was alone. The resurrection was never declared in a public blaze of glory, but its truth seeped and crept into the world as Jesus encountered his people one or two at a time. Some of us are alone today, and we don't like it. We long for things to be different and we ask how long it will be till things go back to normal. And Jesus comes to us and says that we are not alone, but that normal, human normal, is never what he brings in.

Hymn Christ is alive, let Christians sing

The next account we have of that Easter Day is given us by Luke

Reading: Luke 24:13-35

Jesus is next seen by two people together, Cleopas and his companion. Maybe a wife, maybe a friend. But just two of them. Like Mary they also are sad, sad and puzzled. And it is to them that Jesus comes to explain the ways of God, to show that the Lord's anointed one had to suffer and even die to enter into his glory. He comes to just a couple of people and gives them a profound lesson in the ways of God. To two people, not a large crowd.

And again he has not come to his eleven friends. Cleopas and his companion had known Jesus, had heard him, had been enough in his company to know what he looked like when he broke bread for sharing – obviously Jesus had broken bread many times, not just at the last supper. The host of a meal would break bread to share with guests, just as Jesus broke the bread when the five thousand were fed. But Cleopas was not one of the inner ring of disciples. And yet it was to these two that Jesus now came. Not to the eleven. Not yet. Easter Day was never about reinstating the status quo.

When they realised, like Mary, their instinct was to rush back to where the disciples were to tell them. And by that time at least one of the eleven, Simon Peter, had had his own encounter. But none of that day was normal, all of it was confusing and no one knew just what it meant that Jesus had risen.

And in fact that has been the state of things ever since. We who live this side of the resurrection are always still discovering what it means. There is no normal that Jesus takes us to, but a journey of discovery as we live each day seeking to understand. We don't know what the resurrection means in each situation of our life, but what we can and do cling to is that in all the changes we live through, all the things which are not normal, the truth is that Jesus is alive.

Over the centuries the Church, the people who hold to the truth of the resurrection, have tried to think and explain and codify what it means that Jesus is alive. And much truth has been discovered. It means that we have hope. It means that death is turned backwards

and that we who follow him can cross the threshold of death with him in safety. It means that the reign and rule of evil is over, no matter how it might seem at times. It means that a baptism and a funeral are both parts of the same thing. The resurrection means that we have good news to give to the world. All of this and more.

It is good to think about what the resurrection means. Over the past few Easters in Laggan and Newtonmore churches we have celebrated a very informal communion where we have arranged ourselves into small groups and as we have passed the bread and juice to one another have been invited to say what the resurrection means to us. We can't do that this year, but it is a good thing on this Easter Sunday for us all to think for ourselves why Jesus rising from death is good news.

The resurrection has much that is good attached to it, but one thing it has never meant is that life can now go on as normal.

It just wasn't normal then and it still isn't now.

Hymn: Now the green blade riseth

Prayer

Lord God, on this day of days, this day when Jesus returned to life, and changed the world forever, we bring you our prayers for those who are deeply concerned with death at this time – some of whom may well be us. Risen Lord, in your mercy, *hear our prayer.*

We pray first of all for those, known to us or not, who have been bereaved in this pandemic through which we are living. We ask that you speak comfort to their hearts and on this Easter day assure them of your promise of life everlasting. Risen Lord, in your mercy, *hear our prayer.*

We pray for those who live in fear because of the illness that stalks the world. We lift to your compassion those who fear for themselves and those who fear for others, we think of those who are separated by distance or by isolation rules, so that families are apart, and people worry about elderly or vulnerable dependants. On this Easter day, bring hope and comfort and joy. Risen Lord, in your mercy, *hear our prayer.*

We pray for those who work with the sick, for our doctors and nurses working so hard in such difficult situations. Give them strength and compassion and on this Easter day help them to know that they are held in your sustaining hand. Risen Lord, in your mercy, *hear our prayer.*

We pray for those in government who must make decisions about how we all should live. Give them wisdom to hear the best advice, and strength of purpose to lead for the true benefit of all. On this Easter Day may they remember that you are the Lord of all and seek your help. Risen Lord, in your mercy, *hear our prayer.*

And we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ, who are celebrating and mourning and questioning along with us. We pray for those who live near us in this presbytery of our church, and for those who are far away. We remember Joel and Fiona Havfenstein in Nepal and ask that they know your presence. We remember the church in Libis and Kostalek, in the Czech Republic, twinned with Laggan and Newtonmore, and pray for our friends there that they may know the joy of the resurrection. Risen Lord, in your mercy, *hear our prayer.*

Hear all our prayers, Lord God, for we ask them in the name of Jesus, your Son, risen from death to bring us life. Amen.

On that Easter Day Jesus was popping up here and there, walking through doors, disappearing from sight – he had never done that sort of thing before, and it wasn't normal. We are resurrection people: we live on this side of Jesus' rising from death and so all our lives should be coloured by the wonderful truth that Jesus is alive. But living as Christians in the world never means that we can count on an easy passage; it never means sinking back into comfortable familiarity. It means living looking for his life and his presence not only in the familiar but in unfamiliar circumstances.

This is an Easter day like no other in any of our lives: the Easter when the church cannot meet. Even in wartime churches met and celebrated Easter together, but not this year. And this is an Easter when death is much on our minds, as we receive daily death tolls from the Covid virus that is stalking the world. Easter is about life. It is about life made new, and as we work out what that means this year, we should remember to look for God's opportunities in the new forms that are being imposed on our lives.

This year we are called to show love and respect for each other by staying apart. But Jesus is just as much alive as he has always been and the truth that we celebrate at Easter is just as much true now as it ever was. And so let's be creative in how we celebrate today.

Maybe you will be able to go outside and roll an egg and remember the stone rolling from the tomb. But maybe you won't, or you don't want to waste an egg!

Maybe you will be able to turn to your spouse or family in real presence or by remote link and say "The Lord is risen" but for some of you, this may not be an option.

Maybe you will be able to think of a way that you can show living love to a neighbour – not in person, of course, but in some other way – by post or phone or electronically.

Maybe you can step outside and breathe deeply of our good fresh air and thank God for the life he has given you, which in the light of Jesus' resurrection is life eternal.

And maybe we can take this Easter of enforced abnormality as a chance to think about how we might celebrate next year. Together, I would hope, but together how? Together, why?

The message of Easter is that everything has changed and that with the risen Jesus everything will always be changing. In the time of trial through which we are living, when nothing is certain, we long for things to go back to normal. But that is not the message of Easter. We move forward with the risen Christ and there is no going back. There is no going back to the old ways, with which, though we know them not to be perfect, we have become comfortable. Easter, that day of celebration and joy is also a day of confusion and wondering and puzzlement. And ever since the day that Jesus rose from death, his followers have sought to discover what the fact of his rising means for them and for now.

So don't worry that today feels a bit odd for Easter. Don't worry that we have had to meet virtually and still be alone. Jesus comes to us in our ones and twos. Jesus comes to us when we feel confused and upset. Jesus comes to us, and because he lives, he can lead us forward into his life, which is always new and always changing, but always real and always with us.

Hymn Thine be the glory

Benediction

Christ was raised from the dead
By the glorious power of the Father.
Set out, then, on a new life with Christ.

And the blessing of God almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen.

Postlude *All Hail the Power of Jesus' name* by Healy Willan