

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Easter Sunday, 12th April 2020
Morning Service 11.15

Introduction:

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people all over the world, and especially family and friends who are separated from us. I invite you to use this service in whatever way is best for you. You may like to look up the hymns and read – or sing them.
God bless you all.

Call to worship

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our fellowship this Easter morning, we join our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time, as we proclaim:

***Alleluia! Christ is risen
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

Let us worship God:

Hymn 410 Jesus Christ is risen today

Welcome and Intimations

Good morning.
Wherever you are on this special day,
whether you worship with us regularly, or occasionally, or especially if for the first time,
you are welcome to our worship and our fellowship.

Intimations

Gathering words

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

This expression is so familiar that it has become a cliché.

But for us as Christians it is a statement that sums up the truth of this day – a truth broken-hearted women discovered as they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty; a truth the Apostles discovered as, huddled behind locked doors, Jesus appeared among them; a truth countless generations have discovered since then, as the risen Christ has transformed their lives.

For each one, suddenly life began again, with a clean sheet, a fresh page, a new chapter.
Listen afresh to the Gospel story;
think about it as though you had never heard it before,
and rejoice in the new life that God offers to you too.

Now let us pray:

First Prayer + Lord's Prayer

Lord, this is your day: the day of light.
We remember that this is the day of Resurrection:
a day for desert hearts to throw aside the taste and texture of the wilderness;
a day for weariness to be met and soothed,
and bound up gently with the healing of the Gospel.
A day for the bracing and clear challenge of God to reach us
especially at a time when we are confined to our own homes.

This is your day, Lord.
You will forgive our sins if we want to be forgiven.
You will speak to us if we will listen:
You will heal us if we are willing to be healed:
You will give us the Morning Star, if we crave your glorious hope:
You will reach down to us, if we wish to be lifted up:
You will reach out to us, if we admit that we need you:
You will hear us, if we make the effort
to make our requests in humility and in that blessed poverty
that does not need us to pretend to be self-sufficient.

You, Friend of Sinners, Physician of Souls,
will seek us out, and find us, if we want to be found.

Lord, have mercy upon us
Christ, have mercy upon us.

Jesus, Bread of life,
Jesus, Good Shepherd,
Jesus, Lamb of God,
Jesus, name above every name,
may your risen power so move our hearts and hands
that we may know again, beyond all doubting, that on this your day
your will for us is that we should know your love and pity,
your health and purpose, your victory.

In your name we ask, as in your words we pray:
*Our Father which art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy Name,
Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us
not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom the Power and the Glory for ever. Amen.*

Hymn 412 The strife is o'er

Readings:

Matthew 28: 1-10 (NRSVA): The Resurrection of Jesus

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 worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Acts 10: 34-43: (NCV)

Peter began to speak:

"I really understand now that to God every person is the same. In every country God accepts anyone who worships him and does what is right. You know the message that God has sent to the people of Israel is the Good News that peace has come through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Lord of all people! You know what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after John preached to the people about baptism. You know about Jesus from Nazareth, that God gave him the Holy Spirit and power. You know how Jesus went everywhere doing good and healing those who were ruled by the devil, because God was with him.

We saw what Jesus did in Judea and in Jerusalem, but the Jews in Jerusalem killed him by hanging him on a cross. Yet, on the third day, God raised Jesus to life and caused him to be seen, not by all the people, but only by the witnesses God had already chosen. And we are those witnesses who ate and drank with him after he was raised from the dead. He told us to preach to the people and to tell them that he is the one whom God chose to be the judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets say it is true that all who believe in Jesus will be forgiven of their sins through Jesus' name."

Contemporary Reading:

I have used this poem in church several times, but I think it is worth repeating:

Because He Is Risen: A Poem for Easter by Gerard Kelly

Because he is risen
spring is possible
in all the cold hard places
gripped by winter
and freedom jumps the queue
to take fear's place
as our focus.

Because he is risen.

Because he is risen,
my future is an epic novel
where once it was a mere short story.
My contract on life is renewed
in perpetuity.
My options are open-ended;
my travel plans are cosmic.

Because he is risen.

Because he is risen
healing is on order and assured
and every disability will bow
before the endless dance of his ability
and my grave too will open
when my life is restored,
for this frail and fragile body
will not be the final word
on my condition.

Because he is risen.

Because he is risen
hunger will go begging in the streets
for want of a home
and selfishness will have a shortened shelf-life
and we will throng to the funeral of famine
and dance on the callous grave of war
and poverty will be history
in our history.

Because he is risen.

And because he is risen,
a fire burns in my bones
and my eyes see possibilities
and my heart hears hope
like a whisper on the wind
and the song that rises in me
will not be silenced
as life disrupts
this shadowed place of death
like a butterfly under the skin
and death itself
runs terrified to hide.

Because he is risen.

3 Hymn 421 Our Lord Christ hath risen

Message

Somebody said:

"I don't know whether these things happened in this way or not, but I know that this story is true."

None of the Gospels describes the resurrection of Jesus. The nearest we get is their accounts of visits to his tomb early in the morning on the day after the Jewish Sabbath. The details differ, but what they all have in common is that the testimony comes from women – not something that anybody would fabricate, because in those days the evidence of women was regarded as worthless.

Each Gospel adds its own distinctive touches. Mark and Matthew tell us about one angel, while Luke and John say there were two. Matthew says Jesus' followers returned to Galilee; Luke says they stayed in Jerusalem until Pentecost. *And so on.*

Just as those of us who call ourselves Christians, or who know even a little about Christianity, think we know the Christmas Story, the Easter Story that we think we know is probably a combination of all four gospel accounts, overlaid by centuries of tradition and practice, so it is almost impossible to look at the Easter story with fresh eyes.

People suggest that the contradictions between the accounts mean that they are inventions. But if you were setting out to invent a story, you wouldn't do it like that, would you? You would make sure that all the witnesses agreed in what they said – different words, maybe, but basic facts identical. Even more important, you would make sure that the primary witnesses to the events were all men, because the testimony of women in those times was regarded as completely valueless.

I think that those very defects tell us that the **overall** story is true. Attend a court hearing, or read a newspaper report about a road accident - see how much the witnesses differ from each

other in what they remember. It's the weaknesses in the Easter story that give it its authenticity. Remember too that, even though the stories would have been passed on verbally down the years, the Gospels were written 30 – 60 years after the events they describe. Can you remember accurately what people said that long of ago?

Countless attempts have been made to explain away the resurrection of Jesus. It was very much in the interests of the Roman government and of the Jewish religious leaders to quash the rumours, and to stamp out this 'heresy' from the very beginning. They could have done that very easily. All they had to do was to produce the body of Jesus. They could not do it.

The puzzles over the accounts of the resurrection might occupy many Bible-study sessions, but Matthew's basic story is clear:

The two Marys go to the tomb. There is an earthquake, and an angel appears and rolls back the stone from the entrance to the tomb. The guards collapse from fear, but the angel reassures the two women, tells them that Jesus has been raised from the dead, offers to show them the place where he lay, and instructs them to hurry 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." As they start on their way, they meet Jesus himself: the risen Christ. As they fall at his feet, he tells them not to be afraid, but "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me".

Lots of questions we might ask. Enough here for many Bible-study sessions.

OK: So what?

We can never know exactly what happened on that first Easter morning.

All four Gospels have an account of the appearances of the Risen Christ, but there is no account of the actual Resurrection itself: no details or image of Jesus rising from the dead: no record of any appearance of Jesus to the Jewish or Roman authorities or to individuals or groups of people who were not disciples.

But it doesn't matter whether things happened as Matthew or Luke, (who based their accounts on Mark's original), or John, described. It is what it all means that is important.

If you believe that the stone was rolled away, whether by an earthquake or by angels, or by some other means, and that the tomb was empty – that's fine.

If you are not sure about some of the details – or all of them - or even if you are quite sure that it *didn't* happen that way at all – fine.

Ask yourself – *what does it mean?*

It means, quite simply, that Jesus lives.

The Gospels tells us that, after his death, Jesus continued to be encountered and experienced, but in strange new ways. The risen Jesus was able to enter locked rooms. He could walk and talk with his followers – with people who had known him well - without being recognised. Two thousand years after his death he continues to be encountered and experienced in countless ways by countless people all over the world.

I don't know what happened on that first Easter Sunday, or on the days that followed.

But if there had been no Easter, we would not know anything about Jesus Christ. If the story had ended with the crucifixion, he would have been forgotten in a week. Maybe there might have

been a few traces – like the oblique references in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, or the Roman historian Tacitus, but, other than that, he would have been just one more Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that saw thousands of such executions.

Without Easter we would not have Holy Week, or Good Friday, because there would have been no Christian community to remember, or commemorate, or give any meaning to his death.

When Jesus was arrested, his friends and companions bolted. While he was on trial they were cowering in hiding, terrified that they would be next. One of his closest companions cursed and swore and denied that he knew anything about him. Without Easter, these people would have melted quietly into the background. No doubt they would have mourned for him, maybe talked about how all their high hopes had come to nothing, but they would have kept a low profile, kept out of trouble, tried to return to their ordinary lives – if indeed it is possible to meet with Jesus and ever be the same again.

No, I don't know what happened on that first Easter Sunday. But I don't think it matters: because I do know that something so stupendous happened that it changed those terrified men and women into courageous witnesses for the new-born faith – "*The Way*" – boldly proclaiming Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Something so outstanding, so unprecedented, happened between that Friday evening and that Sunday morning that almost exactly 2000 years later we are still talking about it and honouring the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and regularly re-enacting his last meal with his friends.

Something so extraordinary, and so life-changing, took place, that the lives of millions of people have been totally changed, and continue to be changed.

Whatever happened that day, we come back to that simple, factual, world-changing announcement by Mary Magdalene, as recorded in John's Gospel: "*I saw the Lord.*"

Here we have the fundamental essence of our Christian faith. Christianity is not about knowing *about* Jesus: it is about *knowing Jesus*.

Christianity is not about arguing about Jesus: it is about meeting him.

It is about living our lives in the reality of the risen Christ. Even at this time of anxiety and uncertainty in the face of Coronavirus, it is about holding on to his words:

"Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)

In his Letter to the Colossians Paul says:

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Col. 3: 1-4)

Christ is risen. Hallelujah.

Alleluia! The Lord is risen!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

To God be the Glory. Amen.

4 Hymn (Offering) 425 The Saviour died, but rose again

Dedication of Offering

Gracious God,
on this day of all days,
there are no words deep enough to thank you for all your goodness,
no deeds great enough to thank you for all your love,
no gifts costly enough to thank you for your gift in Jesus Christ.

Seeking to express our gratitude for all you have done for us
we bring you now this money, as a token of our love,
a sign of our worship, and a symbol of our discipleship,
offered to you in joyful and grateful praise, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

Holy God,
On this Easter Day,
we celebrate the joyful news that Christ is alive.
We rejoice in your amazing love,
shown in the giving of your Son for all humanity.
We rejoice that death has been overcome, and new life is given to all who believe.
We thank you for all those who have witnessed to your Son's glorious resurrection;
names known in the world, and names known only to you.
Living, loving, risen Lord, we worship and adore you.

As followers of Jesus in this place, we pray for the Church and for the world.
We pray that you will call forth new spiritual leaders,
women and men of vision, insight and humility,
filled with your Spirit, dreaming your dreams, eager to follow the Living Christ,
seeking always the Holy Mystery at the centre of all life,
that embraces all humanity and all peoples, of faith and of none.

Risen Lord, conqueror of evil,
we pray for your world, that there may be peace on earth.
We pray for places and peoples torn apart by war and conflict,
mindful of the people of Syria and Iraq and Yemen, and Afghanistan; of Africa,
and so many other places throughout the world.
We pray for justice, for equity, for an end to violence
and the evil that is done in the name of governments around the world.

Especially at this time, when the world, and our own country
are swept by a new and virulent disease,
we pray for our own leaders, as they seek to make policies
to contain and overcome Coronavirus
that they may have a wisdom shaped by your wisdom.
Help us to help them by following their guidance in the face of this pandemic.

We pray for doctors and nurses and all medical professionals
who daily risk infection and serious illness to look after those already affected;
we pray for those working to understand the disease, and to produce vaccines.
We pray for people affected by Covid-19, and for relatives who wait and worry.

We pray for all those who suffering in any way:
for all who are ill;
for those who are dying,
those whose lives are torn apart by grief, or misfortune,
especially those known to us, whom we bring to you now.

Pause

We pray for the work of charities throughout the world
and for all those who serve the poor, the homeless, the sick in body or mind.
Strengthen us all in our commitment to help where we can:
to feed, clothe and support those in need.
May we feel for them with *the heart of Christ*.

Loving God,
we give thanks for all whom we have known who now are in your nearer presence.
Assure us that they are blessed and made whole in the mystery of life beyond this life.
May it be that, when our days here are ended,
we too may enter your fullness,
grateful for life lived faithfully, honestly and with love in our hearts.

On this Easter day we bring all our prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

5 Hymn 411 Christ the Lord is risen today

Closing Words and Benediction:

Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father.
Set out, then, on a new life with Christ.
May you know his power and strength;
may the light of the risen Lord shine through you.

And the blessing of God the Father almighty,
Jesus Christ his risen Son, our Saviour,
and the Holy Spirit our help and guide,
be with us all, and remain with us,
now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

May God's blessing surround you each day,
As you trust Him and walk in his way,
May his presence within guard and keep you from sin,
Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.