

Sunday 4th April 2021 – Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8 (Resurrection)

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Hazel Willson

Welcome to our Easter Sunday morning service.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

To begin, an opening praise of God.

*God of glory,
by the raising of your Son
you have broken the chains of death and hell:
fill your Church with faith and hope;
for a new day has dawned
and the way to life stands open
in our Saviour Jesus Christ.*

Amen.

Now Hazel will lead us in our prayers as a church family.

Prayers

Let us pray.

Peter told Cornelius, 'the Jews killed Jesus by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day.' Hallelujah!

Almighty God, on this joyful morning we praise You that light has conquered darkness; that hope has conquered fear; that Your resurrection power has conquered death, and that that same power lives in us! Thank you that despite all the continued suffering and storms we can cling to the words 'but God.'

But God, is sovereign, and knows and plans everything; but God guides His people (even blindfold); but God has the last word.

'I serve a risen Saviour, He's in the world today
I know that He is living, whatever men may say
You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!

Father God, we come in faith, trusting, like Daniel, that You will hear and answer as soon as we pray.

We recognise our failures, our lack of trust, our inconsistencies, and the times when we turn our backs on You and others. Father, we cry for mercy – wash us as only You can, and we shall be whiter than snow. Turn us again O father, and forgive Your children.

Creator God, as we experience again the freshness and exuberance of spring, and thank You for new life, we are very aware of those whose circumstances mean their eyes and hearts are closed to such wonders. We pray for those bereaved, those anxious about loved ones who are ill, those not sure where their next meal is coming from, or whether they will be able to find another job or home. We pray for those who minister in Your name in all these

situations to bring light and hope in the darkness and despair. Thank you for our CAP centre and Foodbank, and all those who walk alongside and help some of the 8.5 million people in this country facing unmanageable debt. Give courage to more people to come for help and support.

God of love, who created this beautiful planet as a home for Your children, we sadly acknowledge that we have spoiled it. Everywhere we look there is evidence of injustice and inequalities; the failures of our society have been highlighted through this year of pandemic and stress, and frustrations have spilled over. You alone are the answer, and You call us to be the means of that answer – help us not to fail You and others. We thank you for vaccines, and ask for a fair distribution. We pray for leaders of nations, that selfishness may not take hold; and we pray that You will raise up people to help heal fraught international relationships.

Father God, we pray for Your worldwide family, Your church, where there is opposition and hatred. We ask especially for the situation in Mozambique, Tigray in Ethiopia, North Korea, Nigeria, Myanmar and China, among others. Thank you for Your incomparably great power for those who believe – the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. May your people put ever more trust in You, the One who makes a Way, and who walks beside them, for despite opposition, You will have the final word.

Gracious Father, amidst the chaos and heartache of this last year, Your love and light has continued to guide individuals in St John's. We thank you for answered prayers, and continue to lift before You those who are hurting. We pray for Yvette and her family, as they remember her mother's death a year ago today, and ask that You continue to strengthen Zak. Among others, we lift for healing; Lin, Khris and his wife Sally, Andy, Will Stewart, Kath and Sam – and pray quietly for others known to us and You, facing various problemsMay Your peace rest on them.

Loving Father on this day of new life, we pray and give You thanks for the new thing You are doing with the coming together of St John's and Holy Trinity. We pray again for the person You will bring to lead and serve us, and the renewed witness to this local area – that You will make a Way, and lead us in it, for You are The Way.

Your light is the only light we need, as we travel through life's mystery
Your word the only voice we hear
That still small voice that leads us to the place where we should be
Your presence is the only company we need, as we walk this narrow road
Your fellowship the warmth we crave, to help us on our way.
May the truth of Easter, the joy of Easter, and the blessings of Easter
Be with us this day and all days.

We ask in the name of the Risen Lord Jesus, **Amen.**

We pray the prayer which Jesus taught us:

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come, Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours, now and for ever.
Amen.**

Our Easter Sunday reading is from the book of Mark, chapter 16 verses 1-8

Reading Mark 16.1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?'

⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

⁶'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."'

⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

This is the word of the Lord – **thanks be to God.**

Sermon

This is the day when we celebrate the resurrection, because it guarantees the reality of our hope; a dead Saviour can't save anyone, but a raised Saviour opens the path of eternal life for every believer. There is a concentration on the cross, and the meaning of sacrificial death, in so much Christian teaching, but the very first church witnessed to the resurrection first and foremost. When Judas was replaced by the disciples, described in Acts chapter 1, they looked for one who 'must become a witness with us of his resurrection'. The church's first opponents were 'disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead'; that's in Acts 4. Let's look at Mark's account of this, and consider 'How do we live out our mission in the light of the resurrection?'

When the women who had travelled with Jesus, and had helped to support the disciples, go to the tomb at the dawn of that Sunday morning, they take spices to anoint Jesus' body. This is very similar to us taking flowers to place on the grave of someone who has died. They certainly don't expect Jesus to be alive! Even when Christians were a tiny minority, they met on Sunday, which was the first working day of the week for the Jews among them.

Nevertheless, they marked this day as different to the Sabbath, the Saturday, because it was a new beginning, a mark of their own new life in Christ beginning, although they had to fit in their worship around the demands of what was a normal working day for all those round them.

On the way to the tomb, they wonder who can move the stone that seals the entrance to allow them inside to anoint the body. The stone was circular and heavy, easy to close as it rolled along a carved gutter, but difficult to lift back up the slope. But they find it has already been rolled away. This doesn't mean Jesus has rolled it away to get out; it's so that everyone can get in to see that he has risen. That's why the angel tells them 'He has risen! See the place where they laid him. Go and tell the rest.' There will be denials, and that's even among the disciples, and that's why these witnesses are told to get the disciples to come and look for themselves. Otherwise, these women would have believed but the male disciples would have doubted. Jesus had repeatedly told them that he would die and rise, but they hadn't understood. Notice the individual mentioned in verse 7: 'Go, tell his disciples, and Peter'. Peter boasted he would never desert Jesus but then ran away, and denied Jesus three times. There is particular concern that he sees the truth, that he can be forgiven by the risen Jesus. Feeling like a depressed failure, Peter is given a special encouragement, and Mark's gospel is based on Peter's account.

Mark and Matthew only mention the 'young man in a white robe' because he's the one who speaks, although there is a second silent angel present, described by Luke. John, in his gospel, gives witness from his own viewpoint, first hearing of it when Mary runs into the room, back in Jerusalem, and tells him 'Jesus is alive'; he never saw the angels and Mary didn't think they were exactly the most important thing to tell! These small differences don't make the gospels contradict each other; in fact, they reassure us that these are separate but confirmatory eye-witness accounts, just as people will emphasise different details when they tell you about the same event at which they were present. Although only three women are mentioned here, Luke tells us that a fourth named Joanna is there, so there are four witnesses to the empty tomb, just as there are four gospels. Moses' law required two or three witnesses in a legal case, and we have been given an extra one.

The message for the disciples is that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, as he had told them on the previous Thursday (see chapter 14 verse 28). They are to leave the capital and go back to the sticks. What did the disciples do? They stayed in Jerusalem, hiding. They are meant to take the good news to the end of the world, but instead they stay where they are. Ah, but that's the men – weak, you see. The women did what they had been told, didn't they? No. Verse 8 says they ran off and 'said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid'. One did, we know from the other gospels, and that was Mary Magdalene, who had a personal encounter with Jesus that day near the tomb, his first resurrection appearance, and she was inspired and empowered to tell the others.

Mark's gospel ends very differently to the others, with a big surprise, 'The tomb was empty' – The End. The final verse, 'they said nothing because they were afraid', seemed so strange to people at the time that someone added verses 9-20, which certainly aren't by Mark. They probably assumed that the original ending had been lost. What the actual ending at verse 8 does achieve is that it puts us in the position of the women and the disciples. It makes sense of past events for them, as if a veil has been drawn back and the need for Jesus' death is revealed. His warnings, and the prophets' words, receive meaning. We're given the

evidence – what do we make of it? How do we solve the mystery and what does it mean for us?

We are in their future, but just as they are called to set out for Galilee, to go forwards, we are asked to follow The Way, to set out on our own journey to the Promised Land after the Passover of this death and resurrection. To look back, fondly remembering a loved one, contemplating his life, to want to embalm Jesus' corpse, is humanly understandable and natural, but futile. Stones and walls can't contain the life offered by God; this is a life that goes beyond human reality, beyond death. Even seeing the empty tomb is not enough – it takes a personal encounter with the life beyond the grave to convert the thinking, the world view, of the first church members.

Mark leaves us with a picture of doubt and fear in the face of this intrusion of resurrected life into the known world, as do the other gospels. Doubt is part of these stories because this resurrection, just like following Jesus in daily life, isn't some kind of magical transformation – He is Risen, abracadabra, now we automatically believe. The disciples didn't believe at first, when they heard others' report of it. Of course, Mark has told us Jesus is the Messiah; his very first verse says 'Jesus, the Son of God', and we have been shown the transfiguration halfway through the book.

In John's gospel we see Thomas only convinced when he is invited to put his hand into the wounds of the risen Jesus, before Jesus praises all those who believe without having seen. Set out in faith and then you will encounter the risen Christ in the people of Galilee, people at the ends of the earth, a forerunner of the same encounter at the end of time. Fear and reticence will receive the gift of the Spirit, and become peace and joy. The disciples doubting and hiding in an upper room in Jerusalem will be empowered to set out 'into the whole world'.

Mark doesn't explain everything; in fact, he leaves a great big silence for us to wonder in. That is what the Christian walk is like. The book of Acts begins with the disciples asking the risen Christ when the kingdom will be restored to Israel, and he tells them that only God the Father knows. We aren't carrying out a step-by-step plan, Ikea instructions on how to construct a new world. We have free choice, freewill; we are liberated to follow the guiding of Christ, of his Spirit, in the freedom that God loves to give us.

Easter isn't just the source of what we believe; it offers us a model of Christian life. It brings us the grace we need; it also brings us the content of life, because we are called to share our journey along 'The Way' from death to eternal life.

Blessing and closing prayer

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:

Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Have a great Easter Sunday and a great week. Goodbye.