

Easter 2 – 11th April 2021 at Christ Church Woodley

Opening words: Welcome to this time of worship, whoever you are, and wherever you may be. We are devoting this time to the worship of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. We begin with our call to worship

Psalm 100

- 1 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
- 2 Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.
- 3 Know that the Lord is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.
- 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.
- 5 For the Lord is good and his love endures for ever.

Last Sunday we celebrated the risen Jesus as we remembered that his closest friends found his tomb empty. Today we remind ourselves that Jesus is very much alive in our world today. So we sing our first hymn:

Hymn StF 297 Christ is alive! Let Christians sing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJn5YnyhMCM>

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

In every insult, rift and war
where colour scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still yet loves the more,
and lives where even hope has died.

Women and men, in age and youth,
can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
and find the way, the life, the truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

Christ is alive and comes to bring
good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love, and praise.

Brian Wren (b. 1936)

Prayer

O God, our God, we come before you now to offer you our praise and our worship.

You watch over us in times of uncertainty; you lead us into new experiences of your love and care; you challenge us to face new situations with you; and when the experiences of life bring us sorrow or pain, you are there to give us comfort and peace.

You know each one of us better than we know ourselves, yet you go on loving us. Most of all, in sending Jesus, your Son, into the world you have shown us the extent of your love

for us. In Jesus you took human form, with all its limitations, so that you could show us your truth. In Jesus you showed us how to live. In Jesus your selfless love overcame even death. In Jesus you reached out to give us your life and so we worship you.

We praise for the gift of your Holy Spirit in our lives, showing us where we have gone wrong, working in us to cleanse and to heal, giving us strength to live your way, and guiding us in our journey of life with you.

O God, You are our God and we are your people. We offer the words and music of this time together in praise to you. When we return to our day to day activities help us to go on worshipping you by the way we live our lives.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
Let all the peoples praise you, Amen

We say together the Lord's Prayer

**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.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen**

All-age talk

What do you notice as you walk or travel around where you live that is different from a month ago? (Flowers, especially daffodils, blossom on trees). Spring is a time of new life. You've probably noticed that birds are busy collecting nesting materials.

Think of a plant with last year's dead stems on it, and one with new growth. A week ago I looked at some bare earth in my garden and wondered whether the large hosta that is usually there had died. This week I noticed new shoots coming through. Gardeners with perennial plants will be looking for similar surprises in their gardens.

Today we continue to remember and celebrate that Jesus who died, whose body was laid in a tomb, was raised to life and met his disciples in a number of different places.

James will Introduce the Junior Church theme, prayer and hymn

Hymn StF 152 This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YYfuXQPS2E

This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made.
We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made.

This is the day, this is the day when he rose again, When he rose again.
We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it.
This is the day when he rose again;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day, this is the day when he rose again.

This is the day, this is the day when the Spirit came, when the Spirit came.
We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it.
this is the day when the Spirit came;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day, this is the day when the Spirit came.

Anonymous

Blessing as JC leave

Reading: John 20:19-31 *Jesus Appears to His Disciples*

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Reading: Acts 2:42-47

The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Hymn StF 306 **Now the green blade rises from the buried grain**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6xOVwvva7g>

- 1 Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.
- 2 In the grave they laid him, Love who had been slain,
thinking that he never would awake again,
laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
- 3 Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
he that for the three days in the grave had lain,
quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
- 4 When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
then your touch can call us back to life again,
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:

Sermon Easter 2 2021 Thomas Believes: John 20:19-31; Acts 2:42-47

Some years ago, I was in a Sunday service at Christ Church, when the Minister asked all the men who had the colour red in their ties to come to the front, and when they did so they were asked to line up facing the congregation. The minister looked along the row, walked up and down, and said about one man 'Well he's always rude to me,' and then took out a pair of scissors, and cut a huge chunk off his tie. Can you believe it? A minister did that in front of the whole church. You might find that story hard to swallow, but I know it happened because I was there.

What is it about a witness statement that makes it believable? How do you judge whether someone is telling the truth? I think you consider a number of things such as - Can you trust the witness? Is what you have been told likely to have happened? Does it fit in with your experience and knowledge of the circumstances? Is anyone else telling the same story? Is there any other evidence to back up what you have been told? However, after all these considerations, there is always a personal element. We try to be fair and objective, but we all see things in our own way.

These ideas of evidence, belief and disbelief, trust and mistrust are very much in our news when the covid pandemic is being discussed, and particularly when vaccinations are the main topic for discussion. To many minds, scientific knowledge is no match for ancient prejudices or cultural traditions. Consequently, during the past week, well known and trusted people, such as Sir Lenny Henry, have gone public to encourage people to believe the scientists and the doctors and get ourselves vaccinated. Things that are normal practice to some people are unthinkable to others.

Have **you** ever been faced with disbelief over something that you've said? You know that what you have just said is true, but it comes as such a surprise to your listener that it is greeted with words such as "You don't say! No, that can't be true!" In our reading from John's Gospel it was like this with the disciples when they told Thomas that they had seen the risen Jesus. 'I don't believe you' was his reaction. 'I want to see it for myself.' He could not accept what they were saying.

Why was that? Should Thomas have believed them? After all, they were his friends. They had been together for some time and had been through a lot together. Surely they knew whether or not they could take each other seriously, trust each other. We're not talking about one or two disciples here, but a large group who all had the same story to tell. Still Thomas rejected their testimony, their witness account. He could not believe that Jesus was alive without seeing the Lord himself; indeed, he wanted to see Jesus' wounds to be sure that it was Him.

I think many of us are aware that to refer to Thomas as 'Doubting Thomas' does him rather an injustice. After all, other early witnesses to the resurrection doubted that Jesus could be alive and only believed when they saw the risen Jesus. Think about Mary in the garden, or the two disciples on the Emmaus road. They were uncertain until they recognized the risen Jesus. We've no idea why Thomas wasn't in that room with the other disciples on that first Easter Sunday, but when they met again a week later it seems that Jesus appeared particularly for Thomas's benefit.

Jesus knew what questions Thomas had in his mind and he was dealing with them. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus knew how important it was that his closest followers should be convinced that he was alive. Thomas didn't need to touch Jesus. What he saw was enough to convince him and he responded with a profound declaration of faith "My Lord and my God!" Like the other disciples he had seen for himself the risen Jesus. A witness is someone who sees at first hand.

The first disciples believed that Jesus is the Son of God because they experienced at first hand his resurrection. But Jesus himself told them that for others faith in him would not be a matter of seeing him in the flesh but of believing without seeing. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." When he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for those who would believe because of the disciples' message. He said, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." In praying in this way he was showing how important the witness statements of the disciples would be for future generations. The future mission of the church was entrusted to them. However, they were given the help of the Holy Spirit in this tremendous task. As Peter said "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Later in his ministry, Peter wrote to some Christians to encourage them as they were facing persecution and it is clear from some of his words that these Christians had never actually seen Jesus. This means that they came to faith because of what others told them. Peter wrote, "You love him although you have not seen him, and you believe in him although you do not now see him. So you rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls, which is the purpose of your faith in him." So the witness of the first disciples was to enable others to have faith in Jesus as the Son of God and giver of life.

Another way of thinking of this is that Jesus should be acknowledged as Lord and Saviour. Thomas's immediate response on recognising the risen Jesus was to say "My Lord and my God." One commentator that I read (D. A. Carson) said "The most unyielding sceptic has bequeathed us the most profound confession." This confession of faith was in the Jesus who bore the marks of the cross. Paul says of Jesus in Romans 1:4 "He was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." Christian faith rests on the conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The alternatives we face are either faith in a Saviour who was crucified but then resurrected, or unbelief.

Our second reading, which was from Acts, gives us a glimpse into the life of the first Christians in Jerusalem. They met regularly to learn more about Jesus from those who had been with him throughout his earthly ministry. They shared in communion in their homes. I want to commend all those who have kept our services going, during the past year, either on Zoom, or through the printed sheets. It has been a huge task for some week after week.

The first Christians also shared their possessions, and even sold goods and property so that there was money to provide for those who had little or nothing. We need to remember that they expected Jesus to return soon, in their lifetime, and they didn't expect to put down roots anywhere. What I want us to take from this is the care they took of each other in practical ways. I think we have seen many examples of this through items on the news, and through the efforts of those in Christ Church who have been involved in the drop-off tables by our Lower Hall entrance at the church building. In the most difficult of times they have found ways to help others.

Tomorrow is another stage in getting back to what we used to regard as normal living. Some things will bring relief – like getting a haircut – others will make many of us quite anxious. Let's keep to our habits of prayer, Bible study and fellowship with others however difficult that may be at times.

So where does all this leave us today. I think we must take on trust the eyewitness accounts of the earliest disciples as we find them in the New Testament. They were written down and preserved so that we and countless others in the last 2000 or so years could, in the words of John 20:31 "Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing (we) may have life in his name." We have to put our faith in Jesus himself as the one who offers us forgiveness and life. This is more than an intellectual assent of what someone said. It is a personal commitment to the Son of God such that he becomes our whole reason for being. In the words of Henry Alford's hymn:

We walk by faith and not by sight: no gracious words we hear
Of him who spoke as none e'er spoke but we believe him near.
We may not touch his hands and side, nor follow where he trod;
yet in his promise we rejoice, and cry "My Lord and God!"

Hymn StF 660 Called by Christ to be disciples

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5f10N6umzc

Called by Christ to be disciples
Every day in every place,
We are not to live as hermits
But to spread the word of grace;
Citizens of heaven's kingdom,
Though this world is where we live,
As we serve a faithful Master,
Faithful service may we give.

Richly varied are our pathways,
Many callings we pursue:
May we use our gifts and talents
Always, Lord, to honour you;
So in government or commerce,
College, hospice, farm or home,
Whether volunteers or earning
May we see your kingdom come,

Hard decisions may confront us,
Urging us to compromise;
Still obedience is our watchword –
Make us strong and make us wise!
Secular is turned to sacred,
Made a precious offering,
As our daily lives are fashioned
In submission to our King.

Martin Leckebusch (b. 1962)

Prayers of Intercession (*with response*)

Lord, we pray for your world. When you made it, it was good, beautiful and perfect. We are sorry for the ways in which we spoil your world by the things we do and the choices we make. We thank you for those who remind us that cannot go on using and misusing the earth's resources. Help us to be willing to change the way we live so that the earth will be sustained for future generations.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

Lord, we pray for those for whom daily living is a struggle. Those, in the poorest countries, who must work long hours for little reward, and barely have enough to feed their families. Those, in our own country, who have no work because of Covid-19, and don't know how they'll pay the bills and feed their families. Open our eyes to help in any way we can.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

We pray for young people everywhere; for those who are at school, college or university, or on apprenticeship training. We pray for all those facing the restrictions which Covid-19 has brought to places of education and training; that they will be able to cope with the new challenges and settle into different ways of learning.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

For those who are lonely and alone, for those who feel they've been forgotten, for those who feel sad and uncertain.

For those who are ill, and those who care for them. For doctors and nurses, porters and cleaners working in our hospitals.

For those who grieve the loss of a loved one. Particularly the family of Richard Okorogheye.

We pray for those we know to be in any kind of need:

(Invite those on Zoom to mention those they know to need our prayers)

May we all take our share in showing the love of God to those he sends us each day.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

In the name of Jesus whose healing touch reached out to those in need.

Amen

Hymn StF 313 Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6plhKbcn5g

- 1 Thine be the glory,
risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory
thou o'er death hast won ;
angels in bright raiment
rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave-clothes
where thy body lay :

*Thine be the glory,
risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory
thou o'er death hast won.*

- 2 Lo, Jesus meets us,
risen from the tomb ;
lovingly he greets us,
scatters fear and gloom ;
let the Church with gladness
hymns of triumph sing,
for her Lord now liveth,
death hath lost its sting :
- 3 No more we doubt thee,
glorious Prince of Life ;
life is naught without thee :
aid us in our strife ;
make us more than conquerors
through thy deathless love ;
bring us safe through Jordan
to thy home above :

Edmond Budry (1854–1932)

translated by Richard Birch Hoyle (1875–1939)

Blessing

God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, give you grace, mercy and peace;
May they be yours in truth and love.
Amen.