

EASTER SUNDAY 10.30 am SERVICE
for Congregation at Trinity Methodist Church, Woking

Opening Words: [Tom M Shuman: *from Fire & Bread, Compiled by Ruth Burgess for Wild Goose Publications*]

This is the day:

When tears are wiped away, shattered hearts are mended, fears are replaced with joy.

This is the day:

When the Lord rolls away the stone of fear, throws off death's clothes, goes ahead of us into God's future.

This is the day the Lord has made:

Death has no fear for us, sin has lost its power over us, God opens the tombs of our hearts to fill us with life.

This is the day - Easter Day!

CHRIST IS RISEN! ALLELUJAH!

Hymn: StF 298 Christ the Lord is risen today (verses 1 & 2)

Verse 1

Christ the Lord is risen today alleluia
Sons of men and angels say alleluia
Raise your joys and triumphs high alleluia
Sing ye heavens and earth reply alleluia

Verse 2

Lives again our glorious King alleluia
Where O death is now thy sting alleluia
Once he died our souls to save alleluia
Where's thy victory boasting grave alleluia

Prayers of Praise & Thanksgiving [Tom M Shuman: *from Fire & Bread, Compiled by Ruth Burgess for Wild Goose Publications*]

Astounding God,

very early on the first day you caught chaos unawares:
planting grace in a garden, setting love loose in creation, flinging joy into the air.

Jesus, Sun of Justice,

very early on that first day you staggered sin, throwing its weight off the world;
you confounded death, leaving it alone in the grave;
you opened the gates of the kingdom, so all could follow you into life.

Scarred Spirit,

very early on this first day of the week,

while we were washing sleep from our eyes and trying to make sense of our lives,
you sang glad songs to us, rolling away fears from our hearts so we can see the Risen Lord.

God in Community, Holy and One,
very early on this first day of the week, we lift our prayers to you using the words Jesus taught us:

Lord's Prayer

Reading: Matthew 28: 1-10

The Resurrection of Jesus

28 Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Mag'dalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he[a] lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you." 8 So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Sermon

We could spend many 'happy' hours teasing out the differences between the four Gospels' accounts of Jesus resurrection. Which women discovered that the tomb was empty? Was the stone already rolled away when they got there? How many angels/ young men were there and exactly what did they say to the women? Did the women actually go into the tomb; did they see where the grave clothes lay? What was the women's reaction to their discovery? Did they go immediately to tell the other disciples and were they believed? To whom did Jesus first appear and what happened in this first encounter?

It's not possible to reconcile the details of all four accounts, so do the discrepancies hint at a fabrication or are they the understandable result of the highly charged emotional state of the eye witnesses at the time? Which, if any, of the details is significant enough either to create the Church's resurrection faith or to undermine it? Certainly if the early Church had been seeking to deceive anyone about the event of Jesus' resurrection you'd think they'd have taken the trouble to get their story straight! In addition, to rely on women as the primary witnesses flies in the face of Jewish law, whereby two adult male witnesses were

required for something to be proven. According to Jewish law, women's testimony was not legally admissible.

It's important to understand that the Gospel accounts are not police statements to be used as evidence in ascertaining as accurately as possible the facts of the case. Let us remember that each of the Gospel writers tells his whole story of the mission of Jesus Christ from the perspective of the Church's faith after the resurrection. Recording the tradition at least thirty years after the event, and in some cases much later, it's unlikely that any of the Gospel writers was actually at the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning, but each of them wrote about it out of their own personal experience of the risen Christ, and in the light of the experience of their church community. These four Gospel accounts are the early Church's experience of a risen Christ, who was crucified and truly dead, but whom they encountered alive and active three days later.

So let us read the Gospel accounts, not as historical documents, but as expressions of the resurrection faith of the writers and of their church communities. What can we learn, then, from Matthew's account in particular?

1) Like the other Gospel writers, Matthew does not attempt to give any account of the actual moment of Jesus' resurrection.

His account is of the opening of the tomb by the rolling away of the stone, and the discovery that the tomb is already empty. Jesus' resurrection has occurred sometime before the women arrived. The guards, stationed at the tomb entrance since the body's burial late on Friday afternoon, remain unaware that its occupant is alive and has left. The stone remains undisturbed until, through divine action, the truth of the resurrection is revealed early on Sunday morning. Matthew makes no attempt to explain how this could be: God has acted and the logistics of such divine action are beyond human imagining or understanding.

2) The nature of Jesus' resurrected body is similarly a mystery.

Jesus left the tomb without the stone being rolled away: he is no longer subject to the physical limitations of his pre-resurrection body. He meets the women 'suddenly' on the road back to tell the disciples. Did he just appear beside or in front of them, or was he waiting for them when they rounded a bend or passed by some boulder or tree?

Yet for all his new and mysterious resurrection body, he is the same crucified Jesus – there is no blotting out of his humanity. He greets them as he would normally have done. He has a physicality: they can touch his feet. His humanity was not a temporary, passing phase, now dispensed with because it has served its purpose.

The risen Christ and the crucified Jesus are one and the same. The women are amazed and awed but they need not fear him. He refers to the disciples as 'my brothers': the intimacy of their relationship before his crucifixion has not been destroyed by their desertion in the face of danger or by his death, nor has it been changed, except for the better, by his resurrection. They remain friends, partners in the mission, they have not become his servants or his slaves.

- 3) **The resurrection of Jesus is seen by Matthew as an eschatological event**, part of God's saving activity at the culmination of time. In biblical imagery earthquakes signify the decisive action of God, associated with the heralding of a new era – in this case the end times. Matthew has two earthquakes in his account of Jesus' passion. The first occurs at the moment of Jesus' death when tombs are opened and the dead rise, as though the day of judgement has come. The second is at the moment of God's revelation that the tomb is empty and Jesus has risen.

Just as Jesus' crucifixion is an essential part of God's salvation plan, so is his resurrection. The resurrection is not done for Jesus' sake, a reward for his faithful obedience: it is an essential part of the recreation of God's relationship with humanity and all of creation, a relationship so damaged and marred by human sin. The early Church and the Church throughout the ages are called to be witnesses to both Christ crucified and Christ risen so that all, Jews and Gentiles alike, may share in that relationship and become disciples themselves.

What does the Easter story say to us as the Church in the 21st century?

Our faith is not the faith of the empty tomb. Many, such as the tomb guards and the Jewish religious leaders, saw the evidence of the empty tomb, but did not become disciples.

Our faith is resurrection faith, the faith of those who have met with the risen Christ, like the women on the way back from the tomb, and later the disciples in a locked upper room.

Our calling, like theirs, is to be faithful witnesses so that, through our testimony, others may believe and encounter for themselves the One who was crucified and is risen.

Prayer of Confession [adapted from a prayer by David Hamflett: *from Fire & Bread, Compiled by Ruth Burgess for Wild Goose Publications*]

Let us open our lives to God and ask for his forgiveness and grace:

For those times when we have kept your resurrection as a past event rather than a present encounter: Lord, have mercy.

For those times when we have been blind to your presence: Lord, have mercy.

For those times when we have failed to live as those who have risen with Christ: Lord, have mercy.

To all who turn to him, Christ says, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

He also says, 'Come, follow me.'

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of Love

We rejoice that in Jesus Christ, suffering, crucified and raised from the dead, you have chosen to express your power in the precarious vulnerability of human life. We praise you that resurrection hope lies at the heart of Easter: the rising, new beginnings, and the light of resurrection illuminating the very shadow cast by the cross.

At this time of trial for so many we pray for your Church: that, as your resurrection people, we may bear true witness in word and deed, not only to what you have done in Jesus Christ, but also to what you are doing in the hearts and minds of those who turn to you in faith.

We are very conscious that at this time there are many for whom the resurrection light has been obscured by the darkness of the circumstances through which we are all living.

We pray especially

for those who go to work each day in fear for themselves and their families;

for those who are isolated and alone,

for those who feel trapped with those whom they have cause to fear;

for those struggling to make ends meet and worrying about future finances;

for those who are sick and for those unable to be with loved ones in their sickness;

and we pray for those whose bereavement casts a pall over this time of celebration of resurrection and new life.

Silence for Personal Prayers

In your mercy, may resurrection light be a beacon of hope for all in need of comfort, strength and encouragement at this time.

In Jesus' powerful name we pray

Amen.

Hymn: StF 313 Thine be the glory (verses 1 & 2)

Chorus

Thine be the glory

Risen conquering Son

Endless is the victory

Thou o'er death hast won

Verse 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

Verse 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

Blessing [adapted from a prayer by Richard Sharples: *from Fire & Bread,*
Compiled by Ruth Burgess

for Wild Goose Publications]

Make this day, Lord, for each of us, a step closer to heaven.

This day, Lord, may we know ourselves loved and valued.

This day, Lord, may we notice the beauty around us, in things great and small.

This day, Lord, may we not miss the messages of joy, of peace, of hope that you send us.

This day, Lord, this day make the day of our own resurrection.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen