



Easter Day

16 April 2017

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Introduction	2
Acts 10: 34-43	2
Psalms 118: 1-2, 14-24	3
Colossians 3: 1-4	4
Matthew 28: 1-10	5
Sermon ideas	7
Time with Children.....	8
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions.....	17
Additional Resources	18



Introduction

There is no account in any of the Gospels of the Resurrection itself. In the Gospels, we have appearances of the Risen Christ but no details or image of Jesus rising from the dead. There is no record of an appearance of Jesus to Jewish or Roman authorities or to individuals or groups who are not disciples. These are not incidental or peripheral points. God's presence and acts in the world are always elusive: Mystery is impenetrable. The experience of Resurrection occurs to believers, in the heart, soul and mind of those who follow Jesus. To encounter the Risen Christ, to be at one with the Living God, is the climax of the human journey. The way in which individuals encounter the Sacred will be different in each case but no less transformative.

Scripture requires to be read imaginatively. It is a faith narrative which weaves together spirituality, liturgy, myth, poetry, prose, and fragments of history. We need to gaze into the stories, let ourselves become part of the drama (a witness to the spiritual drama) and let the story enter our consciousness and saturate the soul. We are not to read the Bible as though it were a record of events thousands of years ago: its power lies in its potential to penetrate our psyche now: the Spirit in Scripture unites with the Spirit in us.

Acts 10: 34-43

One of the most striking points made by Peter in his speech is that Jesus appeared to His followers, to those 'who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.' The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a powerful, transformative means of entering into oneness with the Risen Christ, with the Eternal. More than the others, John's Gospel captures the mystical nature of faith and the mystical teaching of Jesus. To His disciples, Jesus said, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.' *This* is the treasure we are being offered. Jesus said, 'Abide in me as I abide in you.....As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us.'

Jesus speaks of a mutual indwelling. In a sense, with friends or a partner, we live in and through one another. Jesus invites us to live in and through Him, and let Him live in and through us. This is what it means to live as people of the Resurrection. Jean Vanier writes:



Communion at the table of the Lord... is a gift of his love and a sign of his desire to dwell in us all the time. The sacrament of his word and the sacrament of his presence in the poor and the weak [and the broken] are... signs of his desire to live in a heart-to-heart relationship with each one of us. The sacraments are like doors that open us up to this friendship, reveal it and deepen it.

The words of Jesus, 'Eat my flesh... and drink my blood' are best understood as rich imagery of union, intimacy and communion. It is metaphorical language. We are to ingest the Holy, feed on the Sacred, and let the Spirit of God nourish, transfigure and raise us spiritually to eternal life. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is an act of love; it is not for nothing that the reformer, John Calvin, believed that God's people should receive the Bread and Wine each and every week.

The crucial point is that Peter perhaps could have spoken of a great many different things, but He drew attention to sharing bread with Jesus. The Sacrament has a power, a property of spiritual pilgrimage, which the Word preached does not possess in the same way. This is particularly true if we are invited to journey to the chancel in order to receive the Elements.

Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24

This is a psalm of national thanksgiving. The writer celebrates that the love of the LORD is steadfast, that is, utterly trustworthy. There is a militaristic theme which runs throughout this psalm. The right hand of God (118: 15) is reminiscent of the LORD's right hand which saved the Hebrew people and crushed the Egyptians (Exodus 15:6). The jubilant chorus running through the psalm celebrates that this day of victory is the day that the LORD has made: 'let us rejoice and be glad in it' (118:24). In the NRSV, the psalmist is heard to say, 'The LORD is my strength and my might' (118: 14). The Hebrew word for 'might' may also be rendered 'singing'. Singing would not be out of place here because it is the song of victory.

Psalm 118 was the reformer Martin Luther's favourite psalm. This is because it expresses the enormous strength of faith which is born out of help from God. The psalmist said, 'I shall not die, but I shall live'. These are words which, in light of the Resurrection, in light of the fact that we are



raised with Christ, suggest that we may have confidence or strength of faith from the help of God. We are alive in God forever. It is a good spiritual practice to remind ourselves of all that is good in our life and to look for the hand of God in our own story. The more we reflect on the twists and turns of life the more we are likely to see God in our story, and recognise and acknowledge the help we have received, albeit for much of the time imperceptibly. The sentiment of this psalm encourages us to seek God in adversity: 'I shall not die, but I shall live.'

Colossians 3: 1-4

Mysticism lies at the heart of the Gospels and is present in the writings of St Paul. In Colossians, these verses are among the most beautiful; they strongly convey the view that the followers of Jesus are one with Him: we have already been raised with Christ. The same theological sentiment is found in the Gospel of John: 'Abide in Me as I abide in you.' (John 15:4) We are to be activists - activists of the Spirit – and pursue with passion the life of the Spirit, seeking the things that 'are above', that is, in this life we are to seek ever deeper union with the life of the Divine.

Paul states, 'You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' True liberation theology, a theology of freedom, is one in which we are free from the things of this world, free from our inner demons and destructive patterns of living, free to discover the Sacred within us. The spiritual writer, Martin Laird, tells the story of a young prisoner who self-harmed in order to escape the hurt inside. With the help of the Prison Phoenix Trust, the prisoner began to learn how to pray. Laird writes, "After learning how to meditate and practicing it twice a day for several weeks, the young prisoner speaks movingly of what he has learnt. 'I just want you to know that after only four weeks of meditating half an hour in the morning and at night, the pain is not so bad, and for the first time in my life, I can see a tiny spark of something within myself that I can like.'" (Ref: Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: The Practice of Contemplation*, 7)



Matthew 28: 1-10

To a large extent, Matthew's account of the Resurrection of Jesus is based on the earlier Gospel of Mark. Matthew's story is more dramatic; it draws upon stories and images in the Old Testament. It is characteristic of Jewish writing that words, phrases and images from earlier and older stories are used by writers in order to infuse their own stories with meanings from earlier times. This is true of the Gospels, not least in Matthew's account of the Resurrection.

Before arriving at the Resurrection lectionary reading for today, it is worth stepping back into Chapter 27 to the moment of Jesus' death. Death on a cross was a horrendous way to die: death came by exhaustion, suffocation and exposure to the elements. Of crucifixion, one commentator writes, 'Eventually the man could no longer hold up his chest cavity, and the result was suffocation, often after great gasps of breath.' The Gospel writers do not dwell on the excruciating details of death by crucifixion. The first evangelist explicitly connects the moment of Jesus' death with the moment at which the curtain of the temple is torn in two: 'at that moment'. For Matthew, Jesus' death is *the* moment of destruction of the temple: spiritually, the temple is destroyed from top to bottom. It is here in the horror and trauma of a violent death that God is revealed, in a moment of supreme self-sacrifice.

At that same moment, 'the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After His resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.' The splitting of the rocks may be suggestive of the coming of the Lord, the Messiah: 'On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives....and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley.' (Zechariah 14: 4). Or, the splitting of the rocks may hint at the provision of life-giving water by Moses: 'Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink' (Exodus 17: 6; Isaiah 48:21).

Matthew's images of graves being opened and the saints rising from the dead may have their origin in Ezekiel and Daniel:

*Thus says the LORD God: I am going to open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves, O my people.....I will put*



my spirit within you. (Ezekiel 37: 12)

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

(Daniel 12: 2)

There is a parallel with the Gospel of John:

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

It may be that Matthew's use of the graves being opened is a demonstration of what Jesus had said about Peter and the Church: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.' (Matthew 16: 18).

Earthquakes are a symbol of God's power. In Matthew's telling of the Jesus story, there is an earthquake when Jesus' died (27: 51) and an earthquake when He rose from the dead (28: 2). In Isaiah, the arrival of the LORD of hosts is marked 'with thunder and earthquake and great noise' (29: 6).

Matthew's account of the Resurrection begins, 'After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning...' (28: 2). The use of such imagery, the darkness of night being dispelled by the light of the morning, is similar to that of John's Gospel: 'The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 1: 5). It is also possible that the image of darkness is drawn from the Book of Amos, in which the LORD God will 'make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight'; this is a day that will be 'like the mourning for an only son' (Amos 8: 9 – 10). These visual details are not incidental.

The same is true of the stone. In Jewish writing, images are intentionally suggestive. The stone may draw us back to the story of Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 28: 10 – 22). Jacob uses one of the stones of Bethel as a pillow. In his dream, he saw a ladder on earth the top of which reached to heaven; on the ladder angels were ascending and descending. In the dream, the LORD stood beside Jacob and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.' In Matthew's account,



the angel has descended from heaven. On waking from his dream, Jacob said, 'Surely the LORD is in the place – and I did not know it!' He named the place Bethel, meaning the house of God. Jacob said, 'This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' Through mention of the stone in the faith narrative, Matthew hints that the empty tomb is the gate of heaven.

It is possible that the angel (28: 2) is a reminder of the angel Michael, the great prince, who was prophesied to appear when the dead shall rise: 'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake....' (Daniel 12: 1 – 2).

Matthew mentions the guards who are at the tomb in order to guard the dead. There is a subtle contrast here: those who are charged with guarding the dead 'became like the dead', while the one who was dead could not be more fully alive. The guards, representing the powers of this world, are as nothing, empty and lifeless in contrast to those whose lives are filled with Jesus.

Sermon ideas

At its core, Resurrection is about union with God. Jesus is not immortal because He was raised from the dead; He was raised from the dead because He was immortal. Jesus repeatedly taught His followers to see the Kingdom of heaven within themselves. Having lived a life in God on earth, in death He was alive. In Judaism, Moses was raised to new life and so too Enoch and Elijah. In an argument with the Sadducees, Jesus said that the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were already alive in God. In a mystical vision, in a moment of transfiguration, Jesus stood alongside Moses and Elijah who were already alive in God, already raised from the dead. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul said, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.' The greatest of the mystics, Meister Eckhart, said that eternity is now: it is possible to live life in God now. This is what Paul means to be hidden with Christ in God.

At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, we read of the death of Moses. Moses, as you may recall, is the one who, in meditation and contemplation, saw God face to face. It was on Mount Nebo that Moses died. We are told that *at the LORD's command*, Moses died. The Hebrew for 'at the LORD's command' literally means on 'the LORD's mouth'. In other words, in the Hebrew tradition, it is said that God took Moses' breath away with a kiss, with an intimate gesture of love. For the



Resurrection to have meaning, we are to see ourselves as lovers of God: we embrace and are embraced by the Divine. Christ is in us, lives in us.

Resurrection is not a one-off historical event: it occurs everyday. Christ is born in us, rises in us, if we are prepared to be God-bearers. Of his daily meditation, of his encounter with the Risen Christ, each and every day, the blind poet, mystic and preacher, the Victorian George Matheson said:

We pray, 'Enlighten our eyes!' but often we can only get our inner eye enlightened by having the outer eye shaded. Is the soul never to get moments for repose – for meditation, self-reflection! Is it never to have an hour all to itself – an hour when its doors are shut, when its windows are covered, when its outside voices are hushed, when it is untouched by the heat of the day! God says, 'Yes, it shall have such moments'; and He prepares a place for it in the wilderness. He stops me midway in the race. He lays His hand upon me, and I fall. He bears me into the silence, into the solitude. He puts the multitude all out, and locks the door. He closes the shutters of the casement. He interrupts the music in the street; He forbids the dancing in the hall. He says, 'Your nerves are weary with excitement; in this desert place you shall rest awhile.'

The more we allow ourselves to be saturated by the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the more we will see new birth, new life, everywhere. Resurrection, living in Jesus, Jesus in us, sensitises us to the tenderness and fragility of God's life in all things:

Time with Children

Option 1: The Body of Christ (the Church)

The message: together and individually, Christ lives in us.

Show the children pictures of churches from across world Christianity (Russian and Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed). Show the children congregations worshipping from across the traditions of Christianity. The final 'picture' is a



(square/rectangle framed) mirror, which you first hold with its back to the children while asking them what might the final picture be. Once you turn the mirror, you reveal that Christ lives in them as much as in every Christian around the world, and in every Christian for two thousand years.

Option 2: Ceremony of Daffodils

You will need a large wooden cross loosely wrapped in chicken wire. You will also need as many freshly cut daffodils as there are children (and adults). The aim is to decorate the cross with daffodils: slowly the cross is transformed from dull, dead wood into a picture of life, which is stunningly beautiful. This is a splendid visual representation of Resurrection. As you invite the children (and adults) to come forward to place one daffodil on the cross, you may also say that, as they place their daffodil into the chicken wire, they may wish to say a silent prayer for someone, someone in need, for themselves or a situation that is on their mind. In doing so, each person places their concern on to the cross, into the hands of the Risen Jesus.

Prayers

Prayer of Approach

Let us pray.

Before the beginning,
 before God began to create the heavens and the earth,
 hidden in the Soul of the Sacred,
 deep within the Depthless Dark,
 in Eternity's silence,
 the exploding and ever-expanding cosmos,
 conceived in the Father's womb,
 formed, evolved and was born;
 beyond all understanding,
 from cavernous silence and darkness,
 new life was born.



Before the women arrived,
before the angel spoke,
before the stone was moved,
in the silence of the sepulchre,
in the airless dark of the cave,
hidden from all but the Holy One,
new life was born.

Billions of years ago,
new life was born.

Two thousands of years ago,
new life was born.

Today

new life is born in us.

Hidden within our depthless dark,
in the silence of our soul,
the Sacred is reborn,
the Spirit of the Risen Christ
rises once again.

May we know the Spirit of Jesus within us,
hear His voice call us by name,
touch His crucified feet,
receive from His hands bread broken, the sacrament of forgiveness,
and, in the mind's eye,
see Him stand before us,
gaze into our eyes,
saying 'Peace be with you.'

Jesus is risen. Alleluia!

Amen.



Collect

Lord of life and power,
through the mighty resurrection of Your Son,
You have overcome death
and opened the gate of everlasting life.
Grant that we, being dead to sin,
and alive to You in Jesus Christ,
may reign with Him in glory,
who with You and the Holy Spirit is alive,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Traditional Collect

O God, who for our redemption didst give Thine
only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by His
glorious resurrection hast delivered us from the power of
our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may
evermore live with Him in the joy of his resurrection; through
the same thy Son Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth
with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving, Intercession & Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

Holy God,
we thank You above all for the light shining in the face of Jesus,
the Risen Christ,
for the immense love He brought to the least,
for the vision of justice He lived in a corrupt world,
for the healing with which He touched the diseased.
We thank You for all the apostles, saints and martyrs,



all who have witnessed to Your Son's glorious resurrection,
names known in the world and names known only to You.

We thank You for Your blessings to us,
in family, loved ones, friends,
for the opportunities at work and leisure
to discern Your Presence,
follow You
and live to Your glory.

As followers of Jesus in this place,
we pray for the Church and the world.
We pray that You will call forth new spiritual leaders,
with depth, insight and humility,
women and men of vision,
filled with Your Spirit,
dreaming Your dreams,
eager to follow the Living Christ
without safety or certainty
but with a thirst and hunger for the Holy,
for the Mystery at the center of all life,
that entwines all humanity,
all peoples, of faith and none.
Inflame each one of us:
may we hear the words of Jesus, 'Peace be with you.'

We pray for our leaders,
for the Queen, her ministers of state,
all who serve us in parliament or council;
give to them penitence,
an understanding heart,
a wisdom shaped by Your Wisdom.



We pray for the work of charities,
for those who serve the homeless,
the mentally ill,
those destroyed by the poison of poverty.
Strengthen us in our commitment to help where we can,
to feed, clothe and visit those in need.
May we feel for them with *the heart of Christ*.

We pray for justice,
for equity,
for the cessation of violence,
in places and peoples torn apart by war and conflict.
We are mindful of the children and families of war-torn Syria and Yemen,
the evil that is done by governments around the continents:
tear open heaven that Your reign may pour into our world.
Bless us in our calling; strengthen us in all that we can do to make a difference.

Holy God,
we give thanks for those whom we have known but who now
are in Your nearer Presence. May we know them to be blessed,
made whole in the Mystery of life beyond this life.
May it be that, when our days here are ended,
we may enter Your fullness grateful for the life we had,
having lived faithfully, honestly and with love in our hearts.
We look forward to the moment when Christ will say to us,
'Come and see.'

The Lord's Prayer



Alive, by R S Thomas

Alive.

It is alive. It is you,
God. Looking out I can see
no death. The earth moves, the
sea moves, the wind goes
on its exuberant
journeys. Many creatures
reflect you, the flowers
your colour, the tides the precision
of your calculations. There
is nothing too ample
for you to overflow, nothing
so small that your workmanship
is not revealed. I listen
and it is you speaking.
I find the place where you lay
warm. At night, if I waken,
there are the sleepless conurbations
of the stars. The darkness
is the deepening shadow
of your presence; the silence a
process in the metabolism
of the being of love.

* * * * *



Rilke found comfort in darkness. This is an insightful perspective, not least because the metaphor of light for God is not always helpful to those who live in the most painful and lonely darkness. Rilke, like others such as St Mother Teresa of Calcutta, was comforted by the Christ found in emptiness, in the darkness of an empty cave.

Du Dunkelheit, aus der ich stamme, by Rainer Maria Rilke

You, darkness, of whom I am born –
I love you more than the flame
that lights the world
to the circle it illumines
and excludes all the rest.

But the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations – just as they are.

It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.

I believe in the night.

* * * * *

There is a wonderful poem by Ruth Etchells, which draws upon the Christian creeds: specifically, she reflects on Jesus' descent into Hell before being raised at dawn on the third day:

The Ballad of the Judas Tree

In Hell there grew a Judas Tree
Where Judas hanged and died
Because he could not bear to see
His master crucified



Our Lord descended into Hell
And found his Judas there
For ever hanging on the tree
Grown from his own despair

So Jesus cut his Judas down
And took him in his arms
'It was for this I came' he said
'And not to do you harm

My Father gave me twelve good men
And all of them I kept
Though one betrayed and one denied
Some fled and others slept

In three days' time I must return
To make the others glad
But first I had to come to Hell
And share the death you had

My tree will grow in place of yours
Its roots lie here as well
There is no final victory
Without this soul from Hell

So when we all condemn him
As of ever traitor worst
Remember that of all his men
Our Lord forgave him first.



Musical suggestions

CH4 410	Jesus Christ is risen today, <i>Alleluia!</i>
CH4 413	The day of resurrection!
CH4 415	This joyful Eastertide
CH4 78	Oh, set ye open unto me
CH4 414	Come, you faithful, raise the strain
CH4 424	Blest be the everlasting God
CH4 425	The Saviour died, but rose again
SGP	In a byre near Bethlehem
CH4 412	The strife is o'er, the battle done
CH4 417	Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain
CH4 427	Alleluia! Alleluia!
CH4 431	O sons and daughters, let us sing!
CH4 419	Thine be the glory



Additional Resources

Pray Now is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [People of the Way](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.

Quick Guide...

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

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Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

