

Welcome and Call to Worship

Welcome to this morning's service. Traditionally called Lo Sunday after the wonder and joy of Easter Sunday, like Jesus disciples we enter that time of waiting again to see what will happen now. There are many stories that tell of encounters with Jesus after he was raised from the dead. Unexpected, yet welcome meetings that warmed those worried, fearful followers of Jesus and prepared them for the task of being witnesses. Some time to reflect and remember, to face themselves and find the next steps on their journey. To renew their relationship with a risen Jesus and to choose again to follow but in a different way. A bit like Aslan says to the children who have got too old to keep returning to Narnia, "you must learn to know me in your own world." So we today seek the risen Christ today in new ways.

Hymn Low in the Grave he lay

Opening Prayer

Risen Glorious Christ, we join with all your people in heaven and on earth to greet you and celebrate again the victory you won.

And what a victory!

Beneath you, defeated lie all of humanities ancient foes:

Pride, self-sufficiency, status, security, even death.

By your triumph on the Cross you have put back in their proper place those things which we have come to rely on for life itself:

Friends, health, family, occupation, achievement, success.

Lifted high on the Cross, you hold up before us the ultimate power of love;

Risen glorious from the tomb, you stand before us now, companion, brother, servant...

And living God.

What can we do now but worship, and praise, and seek to follow?

Master, for us you know full well the strife is not yet over, nor is the battle done.

Even as we celebrate the completeness of your risen life still we seek from you comfort and strength for our lesser conflicts, day by day.

If, in our warfare against all that would dehumanise and defile your creation, we forget your way of waging battle - forget to use your weapons of faith, and hope and unconditional love - forgive us, we pray.

In Jesus name Amen

Song On the darkest day of all

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

Song There is none like you

Knowing Jesus in a new way 1 - Known in Absence (see last page with picture)

Song Halleluiah

Reading John 21: 1-18

Offering

The economic effects of the coronavirus response are profound indeed and in hard times folk always resort to belt-tightening - the instinct for self-preservation is very strong. But we who are called to live by faith are called *always* to give freely. For we believe in a God who has offered himself, who has *given* - so we give, by faith, of our hearts and of our lives, And 'in these and all our gifts' we look to the transformation of the things of earth into the things of heaven.

The Grace is said: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore, Amen.*

Address Known in Absence

Let's begin with thinking about how Mary Magdalene might have felt on meeting Jesus in a new way.

*They're not going to listen, I can tell you that now.
They've always been suspicious of me, right from the start,
Wondering what Jesus was thinking of, getting mixed up with someone like me.
I know what they'll say, you mark my words –
'Making it all up'. 'Wanting to be the centre of attention'. 'A lovesick fool.'
Not that I can blame them; it didn't do his cause any good, after all, when I came along. A few tax collectors those Pharisees could stomach, but me, I really put the cat among the pigeons.
I know how tongues wagged; how easy it became to criticise.
Maybe I should've stayed away, kept my distance, but I loved Him. No, not in the sense they meant with their sly, dark innuendo, but deeper, with everything I am, everything I've got, in a way that I've never loved before.
Yet not even the disciples really trusted me, I know that. They found it hard to accept, hard to forgive what I'd been.
And I can understand that – let's face it, I'm finding it hard to forgive them for running away, failing him when he needed them most.
But what I hold on to is those words from the cross:
'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.'
He understood we all fail him, that we're all unworthy, none of us perfect, yet he forgave us and loved us despite that.
I thought I'd lost him, the only one who ever truly accepted me, and I was reconciled to struggling on alone, no one to understand, no one to offer their support.
But I was wrong, for he came to me. There in the garden, overwhelmed by my grief, he came to me, and hope was born again. Not that I could believe it at first. The voice was familiar, the face, the eyes, but I told myself it couldn't be, that it had to be the gardener, anyone but Jesus.
And they'll do the same, I'm sure of it, tell me I got it wrong, that I'm overwrought, ready to believe anything. They won't listen, I can tell you that now, but then I'm used to that, aren't I?
And it doesn't matter anymore, for he's accepted me as he's accepted them, as he accepts everyone who's ready to respond to his love and receive his forgiveness.*

And so Mary is given the command to go and witness that Jesus was alive. To this, some said, woman of ill repute, whom few others will give time of day to, or never would honour her place amongst the disciples, Jesus gives the task of telling the others. Her faith in how real this Jesus is finds its test in the risk she takes in trying to tell others what she's seen and heard and experienced. It's one thing to have an experience where something amazing happens, but it's quite another to then have to persuade someone else about it. Think how vulnerable that made her. She risked what 'credibility', what 'acceptance' she had gained through Jesus. Now for Jesus' sake she offers it back. All the doubts and fears of those wagging tongues must have flooded back. But it didn't matter. Mary had coped with all that before. And here she alone had been given this task, this most special of honours.

Everything had changed. Easy to follow when Jesus was with them day by day, sharing meals, walking the roads, washing feet, telling stories, laughing sometimes as well as weeping with the needs of people. Now Jesus was absent from them. Gone. They were only at the beginning of knowing him and now they would need to know him in a different, new way.

Hard to believe it! There are no barriers it seems to anyone who truly seeks Jesus, the Son of God. The ones who should've, in the normal scheme of things, would've been expected to be the first to see him, Peter and John, they went home. Peter, unable to make any sense of it and still too deep in his own failure to let his heart reach out. John, believing but not sure what to do about it, willing to wait till Jesus came to him. And Mary, who only knew she needed to

be close to where Jesus body lay, Mary who waited not knowing what for, Mary who didn't even believe what her eyes told her. She was the first to meet the risen Jesus.

It strikes me that there are echoes of Eden here in this garden. It's not so bad being an emotional female listening to your heart and not your head, after all! It was to one of them that the message of the resurrection was first given to be spread.

So here we are at the heart of the Christian faith. There's no bigger moment than this. And it's here that we confront what our faith means. To believe that Jesus rose from the dead is a huge statement of faith. It's certainly hard to explain factually how it might happen, certainly medically it's a bit of a mystery. Three days is a long time to wait for recovery! Yet In this mystery is held all of our hope about the way that life in all it's ugliness can be transformed into something beautiful. It holds our hope that from life that is chained in misery and despair and addiction may rise peace and security and freedom. It's, for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ, the understanding that when we walk through the valley of shadow, even death, we do so without fear or failing because Jesus is greater than death, has defeated death, reveals to us life beyond the grave. It isn't an end for us, of us, anymore. Death is not the end!

But that's hard to understand. You can only experience that as you put your faith in Jesus Christ and reach out to meet him. Just as Mary reached out for a new understanding of a risen Saviour, so we too have to reach out to one who is seeking us too. Jesus comes to us, just as he comes to Mary. He brings understanding and peace into our lives through that meeting. He heals the sorrow and brings joy. But we have to let him. We have to wait for him. We each have to be willing to be amazed and be open to a power that we may not have recognised in our lives before. It's the power of the spark of hope that kindles in us a desire to believe and a recognition that we have thins in our lives that need to be dealt with. We have a need to be forgiven and a need to start again. Do you believe? Will you meet the risen Jesus Christ today even?

Just like the disciples, we must learn to know Jesus in new ways as our lives grow and change and we experience new things, like being locked away in quiet space. Or unable to go about our usual routines. Or keeping our distance from each other and our neighbours. Or breaking our own bread and pouring out our own wine.

And it has to work for us not just once, but it has to keep on being real and be experienced in all kinds of situations. And those of us who have believed and now are witnesses to this resurrection life have to make ourselves vulnerable, put our reputations on the line, spread the word, despite the way it may make us look or will be received. And even though it's hard to explain what it's like to believe in Jesus rising from the dead, and how it changes the world for us. Well, we still have to make that real in our lives and live like we believe it too.

Resurrection life has to mean that we don't go through the hard places where we're hit with relationship difficulties and when our bodies suddenly don't work fully, and when people we love are hurting, and when we're exhausted with the pressures of life be they financial or work related or simply trying to squeeze every last ounce of energy out of a day, when we're moving to a new stage of life where we know we'll slow down but we're not ready to yet, where we're frustrated by our aging, or lonely because our movement's restricted. Those hard places, well, resurrection life means we don't go through them alone, in emptiness, but with the faith that Jesus is as real when things are tough and out of our control, as we believe he is when all's well. And for those who believe, the choice of faith will keep presenting itself, and we'll keep needing to meet the risen Christ and be confronted with his peace and joy in believing, over and over, through all the changing scenes of life!

And you each will know those moments when find yourself in the same shoes as these disciples. Filled with emptiness, and loss and failure, what will you do? Where will you go? Will you stay close to where you can be near to Jesus, like Mary chose to do? Will you recognise him when he comes to you and calls your name, like Mary?

When you do hear him, just say 'Teacher'! And listen...

Song O Lord you hear the cry

Prayers of Intercession

Holy God, God of relationship, maker of heaven and earth, to you we bring our thoughts and fears. Sometimes there's little we can say to express our feelings adequately because they change so quickly.

Humanity lives as if you are absent. Today we put our faith in your presence even in the face of our absence from each other. We pray for all those who need your presence to overcome their fears and loneliness.

Humanity lives as if you are not in our brokenness. Today we remember your wounds. We pray for those whose bodies are broken today as they fight this virus as a patient or a health worker or a care giver. Bring your wholeness to hearts and minds and bodies.

Humanity lives as if you are not there and it knows it all things. Today we bring you our doubts about ourselves and one another. We pray that those inventing ways of exploiting and stripping assets, of reaping the world's resources for economic gain, will find their plans thwarted. And that we'll learn to value humility and honesty and doubt so that faith grows in places we cannot imagine.

Humanity lives as if there is no one to whom we are accountable. Today we restate our faith that we are not alone in this world you created. And your judgement will one day open our eyes to our goodness and shed light on all that needs forgiveness in us. We pray that where there is hatred you will bring your love, where there is disappointment you will bring hope, where there is failure you will bring a new beginning and where there is shame you will bring friendship and trust.

Humanity lives as if you are the unknown God. Today we commit ourselves to making you known as we grow to be more like Jesus in our own lives. We will not be silent in inviting others to meet the risen Jesus wherever we go, in our workplaces, with our neighbours and friends, help us to be ready and willing to give an account of our faith.

Humanity lives as if you have not brought your salvation to us already. Your cross stands forever before us as a reminder that love will overcome death and transformation is still a work in progress. Your resurrection is still at a work in progress as life by life people see a new way of living. We are still waiting for you, even today, to bring your kingdom of peace and justice. We pray for all those who are waiting today for healing and justice and peace to bring them new life.

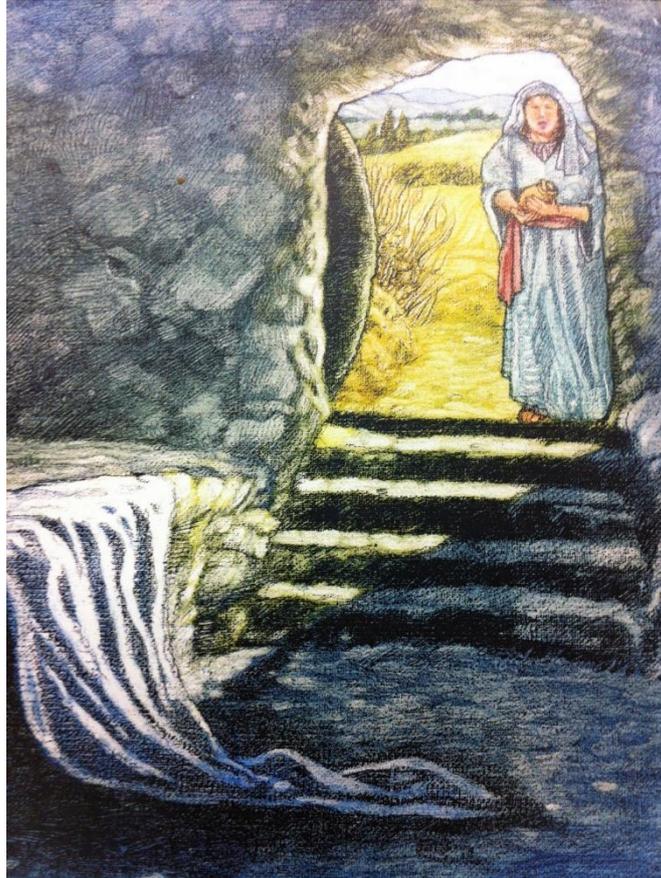
Humanity lives as if we are left to our own devices. But we are not waiting for the Holy Spirit any longer. Today Your Spirit is here with us. All over the world, you move and your people are in even the most difficult places offering hope and help and love. We pray that your Spirit will give us wisdom, courage, sensitivity and openness to every 'other' person. May they see you through us. We invite your Spirit to be at work in us today. We call on your Spirit to be in the places we cannot get to and bring your healing and peace. That the world might believe in you and look for the ways that bring life.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers. In the name of the risen Jesus. Amen

Hymn Crown him with many crowns

Blessing

The Blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you this day and remain with you always. Amen



On the first day of knowing Jesus in a new way, the women went to the tomb.

There were three 'Mary's-among others.

Mary Magdalene seemed to lead the way, and there was Mary, the mother of James, and Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary Magdalene was not a mother. She was a good strong friend.

They carried spices with them to finish the burial and wondered how they would get inside.

When they came to the tomb, the stone had been rolled away, so they looked in. What they saw was nothing, nothing but the white, linen cloth that had covered his body.

They went back to tell the others, but most did not believe them. Peter, being Peter, jumped up and ran to the tomb. Some say John ran too and got there first. He waited for Peter and they went in together.

They could feel his presence in the absence, but Jesus was gone, gone, truly gone.

Mary Magdalene came up and stood outside weeping. Peter and John went back, but Mary stayed. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Through her tears she saw two men, dressed in white. "Jesus has gone. Tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee."

"Woman, why are you weeping?" another voice asked. She turned and saw someone, who must have been the gardener. "Tell me where they have taken him. I will go and take him away." "Mary." This time he said her name and she knew it was he!

Mary must have stepped forward, because Jesus said, "No. You cannot hold me. I have risen but not yet ascended." Then he was gone. Mary hurried back to tell the other.

I wonder what this story makes you feel?

I wonder what questions this story gives you?