

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Happy Easter! Welcome to this reflection for Easter Day. Today we'll hear about the empty tomb and how Jesus' followers are sorrowful, puzzled and frightened as they try to make sense of what has happened.

Today and next week our readings focus on the Risen Jesus meeting with two individuals. Next week it's Thomas who's full of questions. This week it's Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the Resurrection, even though, at first she doesn't realise it.

Let us pray:

Gathering Prayer

God of resurrection,
you have rolled the stone away
and the tomb of our world
has been opened wide.
With the dawn has come a new creation.
Let our celebration today
empty our tombs,
renew our lives
and release your power;
through the risen Christ we pray. Amen

James Hart Brumm (from 'Spring', edited by Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications)

As we have seen so often the Gospels vary in the way they retell Jesus life and death. It's the same with his Resurrection, details vary. But on a couple of things they are agreed - that on that first Easter morning Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb and it was his women followers who discovered that.

I've shortened today's Gospel, which is from John's account of the Resurrection. We'll hear first of Mary discovering that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. At this point John adds a section about Mary running back to the other disciples and then Peter and John racing each other to find out what she meant before, bewildered, the men return home but Mary stays by the tomb. I've omitted that passage, John 20 .2 - 10, because I want to concentrate on Mary and, as you'll see, the passage makes perfect sense without what is surely the added section about Peter and John.

John 20 1, 11 - 18 (NRSV)

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' 14 When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' 16 Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary Magdalene's tears are tears of confusion, bewilderment and frustration. She's come to pay her respects to a man who had been at the centre of her life for - we don't know how long, but probably a couple of years at least. He's dead and buried. But the tomb appears to have been tampered with, the stone that sealed the entrance has been rolled away. Through tearful eyes she looks inside where she sees two people who ask what she's crying about. She replies 'What have you done with him? Where have you buried him?' And without waiting for an answer she flees from the tomb and runs straight into the gardener, or so she thinks until he calls her by name, "Mary!"

In the garden

We met in the garden when I came seeking a body.
 "Why are you weeping?" you asked.
 Tears of sadness, grief and loss flowed.

I thought you were the one who cares for that place of the dead,
 not realising that you care for me
 more than I could imagine.
 I did not recognise you, the One I love,
 but you know me by name.

Why now am I weeping? They are tears of joy!
 I have met with you, the Gardener,
 Your care and your love bring life to the dead.
 I see that you are alive!
 For I too know your life!

(Mark Fisher - from Conversations, URC Prayer Handbook 2021)

“Mary!” Jesus calls her by name and she replies “Teacher!” She recognises him in the way he says her name. The voice she’d listened to telling her about God’s love, God’s kingdom, imparting advice and encouragement, but challenge too. The voice whose message had turned her life around since he had first said that word, “Mary!”

The one she thought dead is alive. She wants to reach out and hug him. She thought he had gone, but now he’s there and she reached out to touch him. Jesus stops her. ‘Don’t hold onto me’, he says. She’s not called to cling to the past, she needs to relate to Jesus in new ways that she cannot yet comprehend.

Mary needs to leave the empty tomb behind her. Jesus has a job for her - to tell the other disciples that Christ is Risen from the dead. The word for someone who is sent is apostle. Mary’s the Apostle to the Apostles and her message is that although the tomb is empty, the future is full of hope - because God’s love is stronger than death itself.

Today, Easter Day, many churches have decided it is the time to return to their buildings, after lock down and social distancing has kept them closed them for weeks or months.

But is there a danger that we are just returning to empty tombs? Are we seeking something that is dead? Do we yearn for a return to things that belong in the past? Do we cling onto the security of what was once familiar?

Jesus called Mary by name. He called her away from the empty tomb. To stop looking back and holding onto what was over and belonged in the past. Jesus called Mary by name to turn, face the future and tell others he is risen from the dead.

Through the Resurrection Christ is no longer restricted to time or place. Where are we called by name to proclaim Christ is Risen! Alleluia!!

It is the Lord

It is the Lord, in the dawning,
 in the renewal,
 in the arrival,
 in the new day.

It is the Lord, in the crowd,
 in the church,
 in the conversation,
 in the crisis.

It is the Lord, in our joys,
 in our sorrows,
 in our sickness,
 in our health.

It is the Lord, in the stable,
 in the humble,
 in the stranger,
 in the poor.

It is the Lord, risen and returned,
 alive for evermore,
 giving me new life,
 saving me in strife,
 It is the Lord.

*David Adam
Times and Seasons (Triangle/SPCK 1989)*

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version on the website which you can pass onto those without internet access.

If you can, have a very happy Easter and, if you can't, remember that Easter will come soon for you as well.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, stay safe, take care and remember that the best of all is that God is with us!

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Welcome to this reflection for the Second Sunday of the Easter season. Today we will hear of Jesus appearing twice to the disciples, greeting them with “Peace be with you” and, according to John in his Gospel, breathing the Holy Spirit into them. But, on the first occasion, one disciple is missing - Thomas and missing out leaves him with many questions.

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Risen Jesus,
we thank you for your greeting,
'Peace be with you'.
The shalom of God, deep lasting peace;
peace that brings inner calm;
that keeps a person steady in the storm;
that faces the persecutor without fear
that proclaims the good news with courage and with joy.
This is the peace that reconciles
sister to brother, black to white,
rich and poor, young and old;
but not a peace that is quiet
in the face of oppression and injustice.
This is peace with God,
the peace that passes understanding.
Amen

*John Johansen-Berg
Prayers of the Way (Community of Reconciliation 1987)*

The Gospel reading today tells us about the evening of that first Easter Day. It was a time that the disciples are full of fear. Jesus had been arrested, tortured and executed. Maybe the authorities were after them too! Now his body had disappeared, some were saying he was alive again. Mary Magdalene was saying she'd seen him, and he'd spoken to her! It's hardly surprising then that they've locked themselves away. But someone's missing.

John 20 .19 - 29 (NRSV)

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were 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 his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'

28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

We don't know where Thomas was when Jesus made his appearance to the others in the locked room. There's still confusion and fear among the disciples. Clearly Thomas was sheltering in a different safe house elsewhere in Jerusalem. We don't know when he rejoins them but, when he does, they have startling news that is beyond belief. I don't blame Thomas for having questions. But when Jesus appears to him too maybe he was fearful what Jesus would make of his doubts.

Thomas reflecting

I expected him to give me a row,
not - as you might think -
for doubting.

We all had doubted, at different times,
and he was never angry.

Indeed, he doubted himself, sometimes,
or, if he didn't,
he certainly understood how it felt,
because he would sing the Psalms of doubt
with great fervour.

Doubt wasn't an enemy to him.
He could stand us doubting.
It was indifference he couldn't stand:
indifference and apathy.

(Pause)

I expected him to give me a row
perhaps for making conditions.

I did do that and I won't deny it.

'If only I see this and do that then I'll believe.'

Fancy me,
thinking I could make conditions with God,
but he didn't take me to task.

He saw that I was happy because I had seen
and he said that they were also happy
who believed without making conditions,
without saying 'if only' or 'unless'.

(Pause)

I expected him to give me a row
because I wasn't there when he came.

The others were present, I was absent.
It wasn't their fault or his fault.
It was mine.
I had - for whatever reason -
decided that it was all finished.

He came back to say it was all beginning.

(Pause)

I expected him to give me a row.
But he didn't.
He gave me his hand
and, more than that,
he gave me his peace.

*from 'Stages on the Way',
John L Bell and Graham Maule, Wild Goose Resource Group*

What is the opposite of faith?

We might say "doubt". But I suggest that the opposite of faith is certainty. Why? Because when you're certain of something there's a tendency to stop looking. Thomas' doubts are part of his faith. He wants to know more, to experience for him self what the others had experienced. Imagine if he'd just said - "OK. I believe you". Where's his faith in that?

We are called to a questioning faith, an exploring faith, a faith that asks questions and has room for doubts.

Jesus said,

'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

He could just as well have said,

'Have you believed because you're certain? Blessed are those who have have doubts and yet have faith.'

Thomas's Story

It was different for me;
maybe it had to be.

All of my life it had been the same,
the same as my twin brother -
the same clothes,
the same first day - at the synagogue,
the same birthday - often the same presents.
Even the same name, if people got us mixed up.

Jesus was the first person
who really treated me as an individual.
He knew what was important to me.
He knew what made me, me.

So maybe, on reflection, Jesus had his reasons
to meet with the other disciples
when I wasn't there.

It was a strange week for me.
Everyone was talking about angels and ghosts,
about stolen bodies,
about journeys and broken bread.

I didn't know what to believe.
I needed to see Jesus for myself -
and a week later I did.

He stood in front of me
naming me - Thomas -
inviting me to touch him
to make sure for myself
that he was flesh and blood.

It was different for me -
but maybe it's different for everyone.

Jesus names each one of us,
and invites us into his risen life.

Ruth Burgess ('Fire and Bread', Wild Goose Publications)

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version on the website which you can pass onto those without internet access.

If you can, have a very happy Easter and, if you can't, remember that Easter will come soon for you as well.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, stay safe, take care and remember that the best of all is that God is with us!

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Welcome to this reflection for the Third Sunday of the Easter season. Today we hear another account of that first Easter Day, this time from Luke's Gospel. The disciples are still frightened but also have a growing sense of awe that Jesus is Risen from the dead.

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Risen Christ,
you filled your disciples with boldness and fresh hope:
strengthen us to proclaim your risen life
and fill us with your peace,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Additional Collects - Common Worship, Church of England

I've been doing a lot of walking recently. Trying to ensure I do four or five miles a day. 10,000 steps. Back in the day of course walking would have been the main mode of travel. The setting of today's Gospel follows a lot of walking that two of Jesus' followers have been doing. Luke tells us that they live in Emmaus and that it's around seven miles from Jerusalem. They set off home in the late afternoon of that first Easter Day; confused, frightened and still grieving the death of Jesus their friend. Someone else, whom they don't recognise joins them on the road, and they explain to him why they are sad. But also that they are confused because some of their friends say they've seen Jesus - alive! The stranger then talks about scripture and what the meaning is of everything that has gone on. It passes the time and soon they are home in Emmaus. As night is falling they invite the stranger to stay with them and it's only when he tears bread apart at the supper table that they recognise him. It's Jesus! Then he is gone. But so are they, back to Jerusalem. Despite the fears that the darkness of the night holds they rush back and tell their friends what has happened. Jesus is alive!

Luke 24 .36 - 48 (NRSV)

Watch the Gospel presented by The Revd Phil Summers on YouTube here:
<https://youtu.be/l0i9GWUzo7M>

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' 37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38 He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.

I find the Resurrection appearances of Jesus fascinating. Why is it that the disciples fail to recognise him? Mary bumps into him in the garden - but she thinks he's the gardener (John 20 .11 - 18). Two disciples walk for miles with him on the road to Emmaus - but he's a stranger (Luke 24 .13 - 35). Seven disciples go fishing unsuccessfully, but a stranger on the lakeside encourages them to try again - only then do they recognise him.

For three years or more they've walked, talked, eaten, laughed and cried with him. Why don't they recognise him now? Maybe it's because that they don't expect him to be there. Where do we expect Jesus' presence to be at work? What do we expect Jesus' presence to look like?

Encounter

Hidden Christ
reveal yourself to me.

Tear through the prejudices
which
like a veil
wrap me round
and blind and deafen me
to your presence.

Shatter the arrogant assumptions
which define where and when
I might expect
to meet you.

Throw down the image
I have made of you
which is
in reality
my own image.

Then
when I am naked and vulnerable
stripped of everything
but openness
send me out
to encounter you afresh
in the resurrection garden
of your world.

Pat Bennett
from 'Fire and Bread', edited by Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications

When are you aware of the presence of God? Where do you see the Resurrected Christ alive and active in the world? What's your own story of faith and awareness that God love's you and is at work in your life?

Maybe you can't pinpoint a particular moment. That's OK because there isn't one particular way to encounter God at work in your life. Sometimes it seems that some Christians try and out do each other in accounts about how they came to faith, or were born again. Maybe your story is dramatic, maybe it isn't. But the God of the mighty wind and flame of Pentecost, is the same God as the still, small voice that Elijah encountered in the silence at the mouth of the cave.

Awareness of God at work can sometimes dawn on us at the most unlikely times.

Hide and Seek

Sometimes we go looking for God
and sometimes we find God.

Far better to let God find us
since God is always looking.

The real art is in discerning
when God is right under your nose:

familiar yet surprising,
comforting yet unexpected.

No wonder Easter is life-changing.

Judith Jessop

from 'Fire and Bread', edited by Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications

How true that line is about God finding us! Sometimes it's at the most emotional points in our lives that we encounter an awareness of God's presence. When Elijah (1 Kings 19 .11 - 18) encountered God's still small voice he was experiencing a time of loneliness, was demoralised and was in fear of his life. In today's Gospel the disciples are fearful of all that has gone on and all that awaits.

It's a common theme. When John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed by a renewed trust in Christ it was at a time when he was questioning whether he even had enough faith to enable him to preach at all.

I always finish these reflections with "The best of all, God is with us". Those are said to be John Wesley's final words on his deathbed. I believe they are true. God is with us - in friend or stranger, in scripture or creation. God walk alongside us.

God of Eastertide

God of Eastertide -
of blazing bonfires and familiar gestures,
of serious questions and tears and laughter,
of conversations on the road -

come close to us as we walk,
as we warm ourselves,
as we dance in firelight,
as we share stories and food.

Bless us as we celebrate your rising in us,
closer to us than breathing,
life-giving as fire and bread.

Ruth Burgess

from 'Fire and Bread', edited by Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications

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Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Welcome to this reflection for the Fourth Sunday of the Easter season. Today we hear about sheep and shepherds and their importance in the economic life of communities past and present.

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Additional Collects - Common Worship, Church of England

When you travel around this country I'm sure you, like me, are often surprised by the enormous churches that you sometimes see in tiny villages. Just down the M5 in the Cotswolds there are good examples. St Peter's, Winchcombe and SS Peter and Paul, Northleach are good examples. Both date mainly from the 15th century and are impressive structures inside and out. When they were built they would have been able to hold the population of their parishes several times over.

Why was there so much money around to build these stunningly large buildings? Why was that happening not only in the Cotswolds but in East Anglia, Yorkshire, and up and down the land?

The answer is wool. Lots of it. And you don't have to go far to find its legacy.

St Nicolas', Kings Norton, dates from the 13th Century and its spire was added in the 15th century. Those were the centuries in which the English wool trade boomed. It was in demand across Europe. Traders travelled from as far away as Florence in Italy to buy wool. The looms of Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres also had an insatiable appetite for English wool. Everyone who had land, from peasants to lords, raised sheep. Wool was described as "the jewel in the realm". Even today the Lord Speaker of the House of Lords sits on the Woolsack, a tradition started in the reign of Edward III. Wool was the symbol of the nation's wealth. There's even more evidence of it here in Kings Norton. The building now known as The Saracen's Head was built originally as a wool merchants house. He new where to build it - right in the market square - now The Green - where he could ply his trade. In fine buildings like The Saracen's Head, the nearby Grammar School and St Nicolas Church we still enjoy the legacy of the medieval wool trade.

The humble sheep has been the life blood of the economy in many other places too since pre-history. The imagery of sheep and shepherds runs throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
 3 he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.
 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
 5 You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

From the very beginning of the Jewish scriptures sheep are centre stage. The writer of Genesis describes Adam and Eve's younger son, Abel, as "a keeper of sheep". The theme continues. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's sons, Moses and David, the shepherd-king, are all shepherds. Sheep are at the heart of the the Jewish religious life of the day where they were sacrificial offerings in the Temple. John's Gospel picks up on the theme by portraying Jesus sacrificed as The Lamb of God.

As well as beingsacrificial offerings, sheep provided meat, milk, wool, fat, skins and horn. Almost the whole animal was used. Just like medieval England, sheep and those who tended them, were at the heart of the economy.

Sheep in Jesus' day needed considerable care and attention. They could roam off and get lost, they could be stolen, they could fall prey to lions, bears and wolves. If sheep faced danger so too did shepherds. And if the shepherd also owned the sheep they would go to extraordinary lengths to protect the sheep. A hired hand might not be quite as dedicated.

John 10 .11 - 18 (NRSV)

*A video presentation of today's Gospel from the Revd Phil Summers
 (Perfect Little Gentleman' on YouTube): <https://youtu.be/CkIXXgNwi4c>*

11 (Jesus said,) 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

Note the distinction in that passage between the owner-shepherd who owns the sheep and will go to extraordinary lengths to protect them, and the hireling-shepherd whose commitment is somewhat less. The owner-shepherd has their whole life invested in the flock, every single one is precious to them and worth taking a risk for. But not only them, the protection offered extends to those sheep that have maybe wandered off from elsewhere. They too can receive the protection of the good shepherd.

Why do we have this passage today, in the Easter season? It starts with Christmas! In being born as Jesus Christ at Bethlehem God is prepared to risk all for his sheep - us. In Jesus Christ he, like the Good Shepherd, is also prepared to lay down his life for his sheep - us.

Even death can't separate us from the love of God because God in Christ walks with us. In our good times and bad. In life and in death.

Never look at a sheep in the same light again.

Pages of Life

Jesus,
as each new day begins
you quietly turn the pages of life with us -
never intruding or imposing,
and I like that.

You walk beside us, not striding ahead,
nor silently in the shadows,
but linking arms, stepping out together.

And whether we walk in rugged moorland,
lush green valleys, or desolate places,
you are there, sharing our joys and sorrows.

Like a good shepherd, you will look out for us,
guiding us to rest in stillness
and find in deep, deep, peace
that your loving spirit is closer than breathing.

Thank you!

Amen.

Hazel McCorricken
in Conversations, URC Prayer Handbook 2021

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