

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ!
In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade!*
Let us worship God.

(1 Peter 1.3-4)

HYMN: Jesus Christ is ris'n today!

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Glory to you, Father in heaven, who on this day won a great victory over death, raising Jesus up from the tomb!

Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ, who for us and our salvation overcame death, and opened the gates to the kingdom of God!

Glory to you, Holy Spirit, who lead us onward into all truth, and give us a foretaste of the life of the age to come!

Glory to you, blessed Trinity! Glory to you now and for ever!

Merciful God:

Although we have come together to celebrate your victory over evil and death, we have to confess that we don't always believe that it has really made a difference for us and our world. As we cope with our own difficulties, and hear of the hardships that others experience, we are inclined to be doubtful, fearful, and pessimistic.

Forgive us, we pray, for the weakness of our faith. Help us to see the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of your power, and as a promise of greater things to come. Enable us, then, to look toward the future with confidence, trust, and hope.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our crucified Savior and risen Lord; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

(THE LORD'S PRAYER)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*All the prophets testify about Jesus
that everyone who believes in him
receives forgiveness of sins in his name.*

(Acts 10.43)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God *sincerely*,
let us be *assured* that God will *forgive* us.

INTRODUCTION TO THE READINGS:

In today's service, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from death. We begin with two accounts of how Jesus' tomb was found to be open and empty on that first Easter morning — the day after the Sabbath; the *second* day after Jesus' death on the cross.

Today's scripture readings pick up from where we left off in our Good Friday service. Jesus' body was placed in a tomb on the Friday afternoon, sometime between his death at around three o'clock and sunset, when the Sabbath began. Since the Sabbath was the weekly day of rest, nothing could be done until it was over, and it was light enough outside to see — so nothing more happened until the Sunday morning.

Since we read the account of the events leading up to and including Jesus' death in the Gospel of *Mark*, we begin with Mark's account of what happened on the Sunday morning. However, since Mark's account is very *short*, we will also read the account from the Gospel of *John*, in two segments.

In addition to those three readings, we will read as well a passage from the Book of *Acts* in which the apostle Peter *speaks* about Jesus' resurrection to a group of Gentiles.

The Gospels give us four different accounts of the events of that first Easter morning. Although they all tell the same story, there is considerable difference in *detail*. One detail that all four accounts have in *common*, though, is that one or more of Jesus' *female* disciples were the first to learn of his resurrection. In each account, a different number of women go to Jesus' tomb on the Sunday morning, but in each one, Mary Magdalene is one of them. "Magdalene", by the way, is not Mary's last *name*; it's simply a word that tells us that Mary was from a town called Magdala, which was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

FIRST READING: Mark 16.1-8 - The empty tomb

REFLECTION:

In Mark's account, Mary Magdalene is one of a group of three of Jesus' female disciples who go to the tomb on the Sunday morning. The other two are the same ones who, along with Mary, were named as being present at Jesus' crucifixion — *Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome* (Mark 15.40; 16.1). The three of them witnessed the death of Jesus; two of them witnessed the burial of Jesus; and now all three of them head out to the tomb early on the Sunday morning.

Since the burial had to be done in a hurry on the Friday afternoon, the women take spices with them, to properly anoint Jesus' body — a task that there apparently hadn't been time to do before the Sabbath began. On the way, the women fret about who will remove the stone from the entrance to the tomb for them. I always get a chuckle out of that — it seems to me they should've thought about that before heading out!

At any rate, when they arrive at the tomb, they find that the stone has already been removed. They enter the tomb, then, but, instead of finding the body of Jesus, they find *a young man dressed in a white robe* sitting there (16.5). He gives them the news that Jesus' body is gone because he has been raised to life!

Mark doesn't tell us who the young man is, but in all likelihood, he is an angel. There are two clues: First, he's dressed in white, which in several New Testament passages is the color worn by heavenly beings. And second, the first thing he says to the women is *Don't be alarmed* (16.6) — which is what angels often say when they appear to human beings.

In addition to giving them the news that Jesus is alive again, the angel tells the women to tell the *male* disciples that Jesus will meet up with them in Galilee, repeating what Jesus himself had said to them on the Thursday evening. Significantly, the angel refers to them as *his disciples and Peter* (16.7). Even though the disciples had abandoned Jesus on the Thursday evening, and even though Peter had gone so far as to deny being one of his disciples, Jesus isn't through with them. The instruction from the angel holds out the hope of forgiveness and restoration.

The passage then comes to a surprising conclusion. Mark says, *Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid* (16.8). That's the end of Mark's account of Easter morning and the end of his Gospel. It ends abruptly, and on a less-than-positive note. There's no joy, no appearance of the risen Jesus, no celebration. Everything is left hanging. For me, it's a very unsatisfying way to end the story.

Scholars have long debated whether Mark purposely concluded his Gospel like this, or if there was more that he had written that was lost at some point. Ancient editors also found this ending unsatisfying, and actually added two alternative endings — a short one, a single verse in length; and a much longer one, twelve verses in length. Most recent versions of the Bible make this clear.

Since Mark's version of the Easter story ends so abruptly, then, I've chosen to have us hear John's version as well — which we'll do in a few moments, but first, let's sing the hymn, "Come, ye faithful".

HYMN: Come, ye faithful

SECOND READING: John 20.1-10 - The empty tomb

REFLECTION:

In John's account, only one woman goes to Jesus' tomb on the Sunday morning — Mary Magdalene. However, John says nothing about her bringing spices with her to anoint Jesus' body. As in Mark's account, she arrives at the tomb to find it open, and Jesus' body missing. At this point, John's and Mark's accounts diverge, for here in John, Mary then runs back into

the city — Jerusalem, that is — to notify Peter and the so-called “beloved disciple” about what has happened.

Peter and the beloved disciple then run out to the tomb themselves, and find it empty, just as Mary had said. The cloths that Jesus’ body had been wrapped in are still there, but his body itself is gone. On seeing this, the other disciple “believes”, as John puts it (John 20.8). Presumably, John means that the disciple believes that Jesus has indeed been raised to life, but John doesn’t say so explicitly.

For the most part, however, Jesus’ resurrection takes his disciples and followers by surprise — not only in John’s Gospel, but in the other three as well. Even though Jesus had predicted that he would be raised, they either didn’t believe him, or they had forgotten what he said. No one — apart from the beloved disciple, perhaps — interprets the disappearance of Jesus’ body to mean that he was in fact alive again. With the possible exception of the beloved disciple, Jesus’ disciples and followers are all mystified when they learn on that Sunday morning that his tomb is open and his body missing.

I should point out that the so-called “beloved” disciple — or “the disciple Jesus loved” — is found only in the Gospel of John, and then only in the Passion Narrative and the Easter story. He is never identified, leaving us to wonder which disciple he was. One possibility is that he was the disciple John, and that he was also the author of the Gospel of John, but there’s nothing in John’s Gospel that explicitly says so.

So — the tomb is open, and Jesus’ body is missing. So far in John’s account, then, no one knows what has happened, except, perhaps, for the beloved disciple. There is nothing more to do at this point, so the two disciples head back into the city.

HYMN: The strife is o’er; the battle done!

THIRD READING: John 20.11-18 - The risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene

REFLECTION:

Peter and the beloved disciple have gone back into the city, but Mary Magdalene lingers at the tomb. Presumably, she accompanied the two men back to the tomb, when they went out to verify her discovery.

As she looks into the tomb again, she sees for the first time two angels sitting there, dressed in — you guessed it — white. They ask her why she is crying, but, unlike the angel in Mark’s account, they don’t say anything about Jesus having been raised.

Turning around then, Mary sees Jesus standing there, but somehow fails to recognize him. When *he* asks her why she is crying, she assumes that he’s the gardener. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ tomb is located in a garden. But when Jesus speaks her name, she suddenly recognizes him. She calls him *Rabboni*, which John says means “Teacher” (20.16), but which actually means

something more like “my great one”.

Apparently, Mary then embraces Jesus, for the next thing he says is, *Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father* (20.17). Like many of Jesus’ sayings in John’s Gospel, this one is puzzling. It’s not clear why the fact that Jesus hasn’t yet ascended to the Father should mean that Mary shouldn’t give him a hug. In any case, I like to think that Jesus said it gently, not sternly.

Jesus then gives Mary instructions: *Go to my brothers, and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”* (20.17). Mary then returns to the rest of the disciples, reports that she has seen Jesus alive again, and tells them what he has said to her.

On the whole, then, John’s version of the story of Easter morning is more satisfying to read than Mark’s. In John’s account, Mary is not only told that Jesus has been raised, but sees the risen Jesus for herself. Likewise, her impulsive hug is a more satisfying image than that of the three women running away from the tomb in fear and confusion.

One thing that *none* of the Gospels gives us, however, is an account of Jesus’ resurrection itself. We are not told when it took place, or how. No one sees Jesus coming out of the tomb. Although it becomes clear that Jesus *has* been raised to life, his resurrection itself remains secret — a mystery.

HYMN: See what a morning!

FOURTH READING: Acts 10.34-43 - Peter proclaims Jesus’ resurrection

REFLECTION:

This reading gives us a sample of early Christian preaching. The Book of Acts contains several such brief accounts of sermons preached by the first apostles.

This passage contains a synopsis of a sermon preached by Peter at the request of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who lived in the city of Caesarea, on Israel’s Mediterranean coast. We often read this passage on Baptism-of-Jesus Sunday in January; although, on that day we’re more interested in what Peter has to say about Jesus’ baptism, and in the fact that Cornelius and his household are baptized after having heard Peter speak.

Today, on Easter Sunday, we’re more interested in what Peter has to say about Jesus’ death and resurrection, of course. What he says is, *They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day, and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead* (Acts 10 39b-41).

This agrees with the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ appearances after his resurrection. His post-resurrection appearances were always to his disciples — male and female — never to the public

at large, and certainly never to the authorities who had sentenced him to death, or to the soldiers who had carried that sentence out.

Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were necessary because an empty tomb by itself is not proof that resurrection has taken place. His followers needed to see for themselves that he was alive again, because their task would now be to announce that news to others — which is what *Peter* was doing when he spoke these words. In order for their testimony about the resurrection to be believable, they *had* to have seen the risen Jesus for themselves; they had to have been “witnesses”, to use Peter's word.

Peter thus also speaks about the commission that Jesus gave to these witnesses. Speaking of Jesus, he says, *He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name* (Acts 10.42-43). This ties in with what Jesus himself said in the reading from John about his “ascending to the Father”.

The story of Jesus, then, did not end with his death on the cross. Human beings did their worst to Jesus, but the Father overturned that action by raising him to life again. Although his death appeared to discredit him, his resurrection vindicated him.

But the resurrection of Jesus is good news for us as well as for him. To everyone who believes in him, as Peter says, God offers forgiveness of sins — which means reconciliation with God and adoption into his family. To everyone who believes in him also, Jesus' resurrection holds out the promise of our own resurrection from death. As Paul puts it in his First Letter to the Corinthians, *By his power, God raised the Lord [meaning Jesus] from the dead; and he will raise us also* (1 Corinthians 6.14). Although we human beings are powerless against death, God, our Creator, is not. The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates this. Thanks be to God!

HYMN: Alleluia! Alleluia! Give thanks to the risen Lord!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

God of power and love:

We give you thanks and praise today for your gift of life, and we celebrate your great victory over death in the resurrection of Jesus. We thank you that the powers of evil were not able to silence him, or to stop you from carrying out your plan to save humanity from its slavery to sin and death. We thank you for vindicating Jesus and his ministry, and for confirming the validity of his teaching. We thank you also for being lenient with us human beings, who conspired to bring about Jesus' death, by accepting his death as the ultimate sacrifice that pays for human sin.

We praise you for changing sadness and pain into joy and celebration; for taking a bad situation and making good come of it. And most of all we thank you for offering us human beings the opportunity to *share* in Jesus' resurrection, so that we no longer need to fear death. We

thank you as well for the smaller ways in which your power of resurrection works in our lives to set right things that have gone wrong, and to bring healing to situations of disease, injury, or wrongdoing.

We pray for your church. May congregations everywhere be communities in which your resurrection power is present, changing people's lives for the better, as they experience deeds of kindness, compassion, and generosity. By your power, may we respond to people's needs, be an influence for good in the world, and be a sign of the presence of your kingdom in the world. We pray in particular for our Soup Kitchen today, that conditions may improve to the point that the Soup Kitchen may be able to resume operation, after having been closed for more than a year.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation and others close to us who are dealing with difficulties of any kind today, in particular those whom we name before you now: _____. You know each one's needs, and we pray that you would bring about your gracious purpose in each one's life.

As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray in particular for public health agencies and provincial governments, as they constantly monitor the progress of the pandemic, and are forced to make difficult decisions regarding the tightening or easing of restrictions. Grant them wisdom, we pray, as well as the courage of their convictions, as they experience pressures from interests with opposite points of view.

We continue to pray about the pandemic, that you would sustain those who are most severely affected by it, from people in the health care system, to essential workers who daily face the risk of infection, to people having to make adjustments to the way they work, to those who have been laid off, or are forced to work reduced hours. Grant your blessing to each one, we pray, and grant that each one may receive the support and assistance they need to sustain them through this crisis. We give thanks again that more and more people are receiving vaccinations, and we pray that the vaccination program will eventually reduce the risk of infection to the point where we can at last begin getting back to normal.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:
Go into the week ahead, now,
in peace,
in the strength of the Holy Spirit,
and in the power of the resurrection,
to resume your daily service for God in the world.
And may God bless you:

May he strengthen you against the forces of evil,
and give you encouragement and hope;
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.