

**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*Since Christ was raised from death, he can not die again;  
death no longer has mastery over him.*

*The death he died, he died to sin, once for all,  
but the life he lives, he lives to God.*

(Romans 6.9-10)

Let us worship God.

**HYMN:** Christ is alive!

**PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:**

Living and life-giving God:

We come into your presence this morning to continue our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus — your preliminary victory over the powers of evil and death, which anticipates your total victory in the future. We can appreciate the joy that Jesus' disciples felt on seeing him alive again, and we share in that joy as we read the accounts of Jesus' appearances to them after he was raised.

We confess, however, that we often find it hard to believe this good news, just as Jesus' original disciples did before they saw him for themselves. At times, the powers of evil appear to have the upper hand in the world, and we find it hard to believe that they can be overcome and defeated. At times, we feel pessimistic about the future, because things never seem to change much.

Forgive, we pray, the smallness of our faith, and our lack of confidence in your power and love. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, strengthen our faith, our trust, and our hope in you and in your saving purpose for the world, so that we may find the strength and encouragement we need to continue living as your people.

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

**THE LORD'S PRAYER**

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

**ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:**

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*If we claim to be without sin,  
we deceive ourselves,  
and the truth is not in us.*

*But if we confess our sins,  
God is faithful and just,  
and will forgive us our sins,  
and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

(1 John 1.8-9)

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

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **First Reading:** Acts 4.32-37 - A snapshot of the early church.

This reading is like a snapshot of the early church.

It describes briefly what life in the Christian community was like in the earliest days of its existence.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 133 - “How good and pleasant it is ...”

Psalm 133 is a wisdom psalm.

It states how wonderful it is when there is harmony in the community of faith.

The psalm makes its point very briefly, and then illustrates the point with two “similes” — that is, two statements beginning with the words “It is like ...”.

The first simile refers to the ordination ceremony for an Israelite priest, and the second one refers to Mount Hermon, a high mountain just north of Israel, in Syria.

The psalm ties in with what the reading from Acts says about the early church.

- **Letter Reading:** 1 John 1.1 - 2.2 - “This we proclaim”

This reading is the introduction to this letter.

The writer reminds his readers of the origins of their Christian faith, and goes on to urge them to “walk in the light” rather than in the “darkness”.

- **Gospel Reading:** John 20.19-31 - The risen Jesus appears to his disciples

This reading picks up from where we left off last Sunday.

It is still the first day of the week. The risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene that morning, and now he appears to most of the other disciples on the evening of that same day.

**HYMN:** Jesus is risen from the grave!

**SERMON:** “So That You May Believe”

*“Let’s consider your age, to begin with,” said the Queen. “How old are you?”*

*“I’m seven and a half, exactly,” Alice answered.*

*“You needn’t say ‘exactly’,” the Queen remarked. “I can believe it without that. Now I’ll give you something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months, and a day.”*

*“I can’t believe that!” said Alice.*

*“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”*

*Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.”*

*“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!”*

That’s a bit of dialogue between Alice and the White Queen in the book *Through the Looking Glass*, by Lewis Carroll.

Believing impossible things — sometimes our Christian *faith* seems like a contest to see how many “impossible things” *we* can believe. And there are all kinds of them, aren’t there? There’s the parting of the Red Sea; the provision of manna for the Israelites in the wilderness; the collapse of the walls around the city of Jericho; the healing of Naaman, the leper, by dipping himself seven times in the Jordan River.

And those are just some events in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we have all kinds of miracles done by Jesus: miraculous healings of various disabilities and diseases; feeding five-thousand-plus people with just five loaves of bread and two fish; walking on the surface of the Sea of Galilee — and in the middle of a storm, no less; miraculous catches of fish — to name just a few.

The greatest miracle of all, of course — the greatest “impossible thing” of all — is the event we celebrate every year at this time: the resurrection of Jesus — God’s raising him back to life on the second day after his death on the cross.

If we have difficulty believing in the resurrection of Jesus, we can find some comfort in the fact that even Jesus’ first disciples had difficulty believing it. Knowing the story of Jesus’ resurrection as well as we do, we can easily forget how surprised and shocked the disciples were when they first heard that Jesus had been raised.

Even though they had seen Jesus raise a small number of people from death during his ministry, the disciples seem to have been totally unprepared for the possibility that Jesus himself would be raised from death. And even though Jesus had predicted that he would be raised, the disciples seem to have forgotten that he had said that. Or perhaps they had never really believed Jesus’ prediction, and just put it out of their minds.

All four Gospels depict the disciples as having difficulty believing the news that Jesus was alive again — and in the Gospel of John, the struggle to believe is best illustrated by the reaction of Thomas.

In today’s Gospel reading, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples twice — first on the evening of the day he was raised, and then again a week later. Thomas misses Jesus’ first appearance, and so he’s skeptical about the news that Jesus is alive again, even though the other ten disciples all claim they’ve *seen* him alive — not to mention Mary Magdalene, who got to see him first! We can almost hear Thomas say the same thing that Alice said to the White Queen: *There’s no use trying; one can’t believe impossible things!*

Thomas has to see before he believes — and he says so most emphatically: *Unless I see the*

*nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe* (John 20.25).

“Doubting Thomas”, he’s often been called — the one disciple who steadfastly refused to believe in Jesus’ resurrection unless he had absolute proof.

I think it’s a little unfair, though, to characterize Thomas as a stubborn skeptic. After all, the rest of the disciples had already seen the risen Jesus for themselves by then; they had already seen the proof that Thomas wanted to see.

It’s also unfair to characterize Thomas as the *only* disciple who had difficulty believing that Jesus was alive again. In the other Gospels, the rest of the disciples also have difficulty believing the good news. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, when the women return from the tomb on the Sunday morning with the news that Jesus has been raised, the rest of the disciples don’t believe it. Luke says, *They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense* (Luke 24.11). And, then, when the risen Jesus appears to them on the evening of that same day, they think at first that he’s a ghost, not a live person (Luke 24.37).

Actually, there’s an interesting contrast in John’s account of the Easter story between Thomas and the mysterious “beloved disciple”. As we heard in the first part of John’s account last Sunday, the so-called “beloved disciple” went to the tomb on the Sunday morning along with Peter, after Mary Magdalene reported to them that Jesus’ tomb was open and his body missing. When the “beloved disciple” then entered the tomb and saw the cloths in which Jesus’ body had been wrapped just lying there, *he believed*, John says (John 20.8). In other words, it took only the empty tomb to convince him that Jesus had been raised; it took a lot more to convince Thomas. This is an important reminder to us that faith comes more easily to some than it does to others. Some believe easily; others struggle to believe.

To Thomas’ credit, though, he quickly changes his mind when he sees the risen Jesus for himself, when Jesus appears to the group a second time, a week later. In fact, he doesn’t even need to touch Jesus’ scars, as he had said he wanted to; just seeing the risen Jesus and hearing his voice is enough: Thomas now also believes. In fact, Thomas then utters a confession of faith that goes beyond anything that anyone else in the Gospel of John has made — he calls Jesus not just “the Messiah” and “the Son of God”, but *My Lord and my God!* (John 20.28). That’s quite a statement to make!

In response to Thomas’ statement of faith, Jesus says, *Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed* (John 20.29). Some people consider this to be a criticism of Thomas — that his faith isn’t as strong as the faith of those who can believe without seeing the risen Jesus for themselves. But Jesus isn’t criticizing Thomas here; he’s just stating an obvious fact: the vast *majority* of people who will believe that he was raised from death will be people who never get to see him for themselves — people like us, all these centuries later.

It can be argued that Thomas doesn’t *need* to believe anymore, because he now *knows*. He

has seen the risen Jesus for himself, so he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he has been raised.

There's a difference between *believing* and *knowing*, isn't there? When we have proof, we *know*; when we don't have proof, we have a choice — either to believe or not to believe. And there's the essential difference between Thomas and his fellow disciples on the one hand and us on the other: they knew; we don't know. They had no choice but to accept that Jesus was alive again; we do have a choice — either to accept or not to accept; to believe or not to believe.

The apostle Paul speaks briefly of this difference between believing and knowing in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 5, where he says, *We live by faith, not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5.7). What Paul means is that we *believe* things about God without having certain *knowledge* of those things. If we had that knowledge, we would “live by sight”. But since we don't have that knowledge, we “live by faith”.

When it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, Thomas and the others to whom the risen Jesus appeared have a clear advantage over us. They saw the risen Jesus for themselves; they had proof; they no longer had to *believe*, because they knew for *certain* that Jesus has been raised from death. We, on the other hand, have *not* seen the risen Jesus for ourselves; we have no *proof* of his resurrection; and therefore we can not say that we *know* that Jesus has been raised. The *best* we can say is that we *believe* that he has.

We don't have *proof* of Jesus' resurrection, but we do have *testimony*: we have the testimony of those who saw the risen Jesus for themselves — the testimony that's been recorded for us in the New Testament. The people who saw the risen Jesus for themselves have *testified* about what they saw and heard — so that we might believe.

This is what John is getting at in today's reading from the Letters. He speaks of having seen, and heard, and even touched Jesus, and of testifying about what he has come to know. In the opening verses of today's reading, John makes this point three times. First, he says *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes; which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life* (1 John 1.1). Next, he says, *The life appeared; we have seen it, and testify to it* (1 John 1.2). And then he says, *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard* (1 John 1.3).

These first three verses of the First Letter of John are highly repetitive; but whenever a biblical writer repeats something, he does so to show that it's important. Here the message is that his testimony about Jesus is reliable, because he's reporting things that he has actually seen and heard. He's not speaking specifically about Jesus' *resurrection* here, but about the person and ministry of Jesus as a whole. His purpose for testifying about what he has seen and heard, then, is that those who have *not* “seen and heard” — people like ourselves — may nevertheless *believe* in Jesus.

Today's Gospel reading concludes by making the same point. John explains his purpose in

writing his Gospel in these words: *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that by believing, you may have life in his name* (John 20.30-31).

*We live by faith, not by sight*, says the Apostle Paul. If we have difficulty believing in the resurrection of Jesus, as Thomas did, let us not feel as though something is wrong with us. After all, resurrection *is* an “impossible thing”, as Alice in Wonderland would say. It’s not something that happens naturally or automatically; it can happen only by the power of God. And God, being the Creator, has the power to do things that are completely beyond what we human beings have the power to do.

Doubt is not necessarily a bad thing. Doubt is in fact a natural reaction that we have to occurrences that we have never personally witnessed or experienced — and how many of us have seen someone who has died come back to life?

*Living Faith*, our church’s official statement of faith, says something very helpful about doubt: it says, *Questioning may be a sign of growth. ... Since we are to love God with our minds as well as our hearts, the working-through of doubt is part of our growth in faith. The church includes many who struggle with doubt. Jesus accepted the man who said, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief”* (*Living Faith* 6.2.2).

Let us recognize also that, although Thomas and the other disciples received proof of Jesus’ resurrection, we ourselves have not. They had *proof*; we have *testimony*. Proof leads to knowledge and certainty; the best we can do with testimony is to *believe* — to have faith.

So, as we listen to the testimony of Jesus’ original disciples, contained in the New Testament, may we believe that Jesus really *was* raised from death, and that God really *did* win a decisive victory over evil and death on that first Easter!

**HYMN:** O sons and daughters, let us sing

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

Faithful and loving God:

On this second Sunday of Easter, we thank you for Jesus’ appearances to his frightened and grieving disciples, demonstrating to them the greatness of not only your power, but also your love. We thank you that his appearances filled them with not only joy, but also renewed faith and hope, a restored feeling of confidence in his ministry, and a new sense of purpose. We thank you for their testimony about these appearances, preserved for us in the New Testament, which inspires faith and hope in us — faith in your power, and hope that you will use that power for our benefit, both in the present and in the long term.

Strengthen our faith, we pray, as we continue to experience and witness the effects of the

power of evil in the world. Help us not to lose our confidence in your long-term purpose for the world; and use us to help you accomplish that purpose, as you did with the original community of Jesus' disciples and followers.

We pray for your church throughout the world, that it may constantly strive for the unity of mind and spirit and the sense of community and caring that existed in the church in its earliest days. Although we know that we need structures and procedures, help us not to become overly institutional in our mindset, but rather to care genuinely about each other, and have each other's best interests at heart. We thank you for the ways in which your church continues to show compassion to people in distress; and today we pray especially for the work of the Shining Hospital in Nepal, which receives financial support from PWS&D here in Canada. Bless and prosper the work of its staff, we pray, as they tend to the health needs of the community and the surrounding region, so that as many people as possible may be restored to health and strength.

We pray for members of our two congregations, our families, and our circles of friends who are experiencing difficulties of various kinds, especially those whom we now name before you: \_\_\_\_\_ . Gracious God: We pray that you would use your power of resurrection in their lives to heal, to restore, to strengthen, or to guide, according to their situation and their needs.

Hear our prayers for the wider world as well. As we think of those in positions of authority today, we give thanks for the life of Prince Philip, and for his many decades of public service, both in his own right, and as the husband of the Queen. We pray for the Queen, the entire Royal Family, and all who knew and loved him, that you would grant them comfort and strength in this time of separation and sorrow.

We pray also for those giving leadership in the ongoing struggle against the pandemic, especially as a third wave is bringing about an increase in numbers of people who are sick and who need intensive care in hospital in various parts of the country. Grant them wisdom as they make decisions about imposing restrictions, allocating health care resources, and which people to prioritize to receive vaccines. Give strength and stamina to those in the health care system, we pray, as they again experience an increasing workload and increased stress, and as they are forced to make decisions as to who should be given priority in allocating the health care resources that are available. We pray for essential workers who are at ever-greater risk of contracting COVID-19, that their employers may recognize the seriousness of their situation, and implement more effective measures to keep them safe. We pray again also for those suffering long-term aftereffects of COVID-19, that greater attention may be given to their needs, and that more effective support and care may be provided.

We pray as well for people affected by the volcanic eruption on the island of St. Vincent, especially those who have had to be evacuated from their homes and communities. We pray for their safety, and we pray that they may receive the support and assistance they need, especially since the pandemic is complicating the way that support and assistance would normally be provided.

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.

**HYMN:** In Christ alone ...

**COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:  
Go into the week ahead now,  
in peace,  
and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,  
to continue serving God  
as his people and representatives in the world.  
And may God bless you:  
May he confirm and strengthen your faith,  
and give you his peace and joy;  
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.