

SERVICE OF WORSHIP
An Eastertide Sermon

Let us worship God, let us pray:

Loving God, we come before you this morning with faith in our hearts and praise on our lips. We come with gladness and with thanksgiving as we join together in worship.

We rejoice in the Good News of Christ's resurrection which is at the heart of our faith.

Almighty God, speak to us today and may the truth of the resurrection inspire us, encourage us and fill us with new hope.

In the name of Christ our Lord, Amen.

HYMN

1 In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
this cornerstone, this solid ground,
firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
when fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all,
here in the love of Christ I stand.

2 In Christ alone - who took on flesh,
fullness of God in helpless Babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
scorned by the ones he came to save
till on that cross as Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied,
for every sin on Him was laid;

here in the death of Christ I live.

3 There in the ground his body lay,
light of the world by darkness slain,
then, bursting forth in glorious day,
up from the grave He rose again!
And as he stands in victory
sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
for I am His and He is mine -
bought with the precious blood of Christ.

4 No guilt in life, no fear in death,
this is the power of Christ in me;
from life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man
can ever pluck me from His hand;
till He returns or calls me home,
here in the power of Christ I'll stand!

Stuart Townend
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John 14:1-6 & 27 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Comforts His Disciples

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” 6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”.

MESSAGE

As the years go by, religious festivals seem to accrue an increasing number of symbols- everything from Easter eggs to Christmas trees. It's certainly true to say that for many people Christmas is more about Father Christmas than Jesus Christ and Easter is more about the Easter Bunny than the resurrection.

Sometimes the line between the sacred and the secular becomes blurred and it's not always straightforward distinguishing between the truly Christian and the non-Christian.

Easter is a very good example of this. It takes place at the time of the year when many ancient civilisations celebrated the arrival of spring, new life, animals being born, plants bursting into bloom. Many of the symbols of Easter echo this theme of regeneration and renewal; the tradition of wearing bright Easter clothes emphasises the arrival of light and hope after the darkness of winter; eggs speak of new life (we tend to think of chocolate eggs but in many cultures the decorating of a hen's egg is an important Easter tradition); Easter bunnies remind us of the rabbits' reputation for productivity! The name Easter is of Saxon origin. Eostre, the goddess of spring, in whose honour sacrifices were offered around Passover time each year, was symbolised by a rabbit or hare.

Basically, instead of trying to stamp them out, the early Christians pragmatically accepted some pagan practices and gave them new symbolic meaning associated with Christ and his death and resurrection.

The symbols of Easter (and the other religious festivals, such as Christmas) are fine so long as they remind us of the true message of the Gospel, but the danger is that they mask or lead us away from the true meaning of the Christian celebration.

We have all heard the story of the two shoppers who were viewing a Nativity display in a large department store window. One turned to the other and said, "Isn't it awful how they even try to drag religion into Christmas"! It's a humorous story in one way, but also a sad reminder that there is a danger in seeing the symbols without understanding the true meaning behind them.

Therefore, let us emphasise that Easter is far more than a general celebration of new life in spring, it is much more than Easter lilies, bonnets and bunnies. Instead, it is a celebration of God's love for us, as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of his son- Jesus Christ.

The resurrection was and is the proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be and accomplished what he said he would accomplish. The resurrection is the historical foundation upon which are built all the doctrines of the Christian Faith.

So let us now think about two of the lessons the resurrection of Christ teaches us:

Firstly, it teaches us about life here and now. We can and should lead lives that are pleasing to God, lives that are happy and fulfilled. Life is precious and we should make the most of it.

There is the amusing story of the couple on holiday in Ireland. They wanted to drive from Dublin in the east over to Killarney, which is on the west coast and famous for its lakes, forests and mountain scenery. Unfortunately, they lost their way and stopped to ask directions from an old man who was busily digging peat by the side of a lonely road in the middle of nowhere. "So you want to get to Killarney, do you?" said the old fellow, before adding, "Well, if I were you I wouldn't be starting from here!"

Well, in life we have to start from where we are. We may well wish we were somewhere else, but until a time machine becomes a reality, we have to start from where we are.

In his book 'A Touch of Wonder' Arthur Gordon describes a wintery afternoon in New York when he was feeling downhearted and frustrated. He sought comfort in the company of an old friend who was also an eminent psychiatrist. Gordon was led into his friends office to listen to three tape recordings of patient interviews and identify, if he could, the two-word phrase which linked them. After listening to the tapes, Gordon

couldn't think what they had in common, until his friend pointed out "*the two saddest words in the English language, 'if only, they say to me. If only I had done it differently....If only I had been wiser'.* The trouble with *if only* is that it doesn't change anything. It keeps the person facing the wrong way- backwards instead of forwards. It wastes time. In the end, if you let it become a habit, it can become a real roadblock- an excuse for not trying any more". Arthur Gordon's problem was that he was focused too much on past events. The advice he received from his older friend was "*Shift the focus.... change the key words from 'if only' to 'next time', push aside the roadblock of regret*".

The resurrection teaches us about life here on earth; that our loving Heavenly Father wants us to make the most of our lives, to be kind and caring, to have no regrets but instead to love people as much as we can when we can. Let us strive to make a positive difference while we are here because life is short and death, one day, will come to each of us; which brings me naturally to my second point.

Secondly, the resurrection gives us hope of life eternal. The resurrection of Jesus Christ assures us that death is not the end for us. When Jesus was here, on earth, he said to his disciples: "*When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*" (John 14:3).

Down the ages, philosophers have put forward many arguments in favour of the idea that life continues after death but, at best, they could only offer speculation. The resurrection of Christ, however, gives us certainty. As Jesus himself said: "*Because I live, you too will live*" (John 14:19). It is the resurrection of Christ which makes all the difference.

On the 22nd of December 1899, the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody died. On his deathbed he said:

"Is this dying? Why this is bliss.

"There is no valley.

"I have been within the gates.

"Earth is receding; Heaven is opening; God is calling; I must go.

Shortly after, Moody died. Naturally his family and friends were sad, but the funeral was full of hope; hymns were sung, prayers were offered and they heard the Apostle Paul's comforting words proclaimed: "*O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?*"

Every Christian has hope of eternal life because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let me sum things up like this. Our inspiration in this life and our hope for the life to come is not built upon the power of nature, Easter bunnies or Easter Eggs. It is built upon the love God has for us and how this was manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the Living God who brings new life to all, to this natural world that we know and experience, as well as to the spiritual world that we hope to experience.

The resurrection showed God's great love for Christ, but also for us. It was a love which endured all the agony and suffering of Gethsemane and Golgotha and shone victorious on that first glorious Easter morning. It is a love which continues to bless and surround us to this day, inspiring and encouraging us. Thanks be to God for his great love. Amen

"Love seeketh not itself to please, nor for itself hath any care, but for another gives its ease, and builds a Heaven in Hell's despair." (William Blake, 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience').

PRAYER

Loving God, we praise you for everything you have done for us in and through your Son and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We thank you that through him you won victory over sin and evil, darkness and death. May this triumph inspire our words and deeds, our lives and thoughts.

We praise you that your love could not be defeated, your plan could not be thwarted, your purpose could not be denied. May this knowledge inspire our confidence to follow you through all our life's experiences.

Almighty God, forgive us if we ever lose the sense of awe we should have when we recall what you went through for us and what you have done for us. Forgive us if we forget how great you are. Forgive us if our vision is sometimes narrow and our faith is sometimes feeble.

Almighty and most-wonderful God, assure us that you have not uttered your final word, but rather that you have more to reveal and more to do.

Fill us now with wonder, joy and thanksgiving knowing that we are your people and you are our God.

All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven.....Amen

HYMN

- 1 In the cross of Christ I glory,
towering o'er the wrecks of time:
all the light of sacred story gathers
round its head sublime.
- 2 When the woes of life o'ertake me,
hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
never shall the cross forsake me;
Lo! it glows with peace and joy.
- 3 When the sun of bliss is beaming
light and love upon my way,
from the cross the radiance streaming
adds more lustre to the day.
- 4 Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
by the cross are sanctified;
peace is there that knows no measure,
joys that through all time abide.
- 5 In the cross of Christ I glory,
towering o'er the wrecks of time:

all the light of sacred story
gathers round its head sublime.

BLESSING

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship
of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.
