

SERVICE OF WORSHIP

Easter Sunday

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Today is the most special day in the Christian calendar, the day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ- Easter Sunday.

It was not Jesus' ethical teaching or his healing ministry or even his sacrificial death upon the cross which brought the Christian Church into being and spread the Gospel throughout the world. It was the news of the resurrection. Had the disciples not been convinced that Jesus was not dead but was alive now and forever, there would be no Christian Church. The church is built upon the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. Without faith in the risen and living Lord there would be no Christianity. As the Apostle Paul said, "*If Christ had not been raised, your faith is futile....*" (1 Cor. 15:17).

This is perhaps the most unusual Easter Sunday most of us will have experienced. Normally, we would be in church together sharing the joy of this day. However, we are confined to our homes, concerned about our own health or about the health and wellbeing of others. The whole situation is almost surreal.

So, my message to you today is stay positive. We are part of a loving church family. We are thinking about one another and praying for one another. We have the strength and hope our faith gives us. There is a lot to be thankful for. We will get through this unprecedented period, and we will get through it together and by the grace of God.

I wish everyone of you a very blessed Easter Sunday. Please be assured that I am thinking about you all and praying for you. May

the day come, as soon as possible, when we can meet again, shake hands, embrace and laugh together as we did only a few weeks ago. Until then, may we, during the days ahead, be able to keep going by echoing the words of the Psalmist: *“You are my place of safety and protection. You are my God and I trust in you”* (Psalm 91:2).

With kindest regards and every blessing to you all,
Gareth

Let us worship God, let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, on the Friday when your body was taken down from the cross, all hope seemed to have gone. You were dead and after your body was placed in a tomb, a stone was rolled across to seal the entrance. Your life, your ministry, your mission seemed to be at an end.

Then everything changed. The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, you appeared to your followers; hallelujah, you were alive!

Risen Lord, this Easter Sunday we praise you for all this means for us. Love is not in vain and faith is not futile. Death is not the end but a gateway into a new life.

Receive our worship and our praise. Receive us as your people. Fill our hearts with joy and wonder as we rejoice in the message of your resurrection.

Lord Jesus Christ, renew us and restore us through your love and strengthen us by the inner power of your Spirit. May we serve you better and live our lives in the light of your Easter triumph.

For your name's sake we ask it. Amen

HYMN

1. Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son;
endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won;
angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave clothes where thy body lay.

Refrain:

*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won.*

2. Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
Lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let the Church with gladness, hymns of triumph sing;
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting.

Refrain:

*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won.*

3. No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of life;
life is naught without thee; aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love:
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above.

Refrain:

*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son,
Endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won.*

SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 16:1-8 **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

The Resurrection of Jesus

“16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been

raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid". Mark's Gospel 16:1-8 **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

We Have a Living Hope

"3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In God's great mercy he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. 4 Now we hope for the blessings God has for his children. These blessings, which cannot be destroyed or be spoiled or lose their beauty, are kept in heaven for you. 5 God's power protects you through your faith until salvation is shown to you at the end of time". 1 Peter 1:3-5 (New Century Version).

MESSAGE: Resurrection Hope

The Reverend Dr. Alexander Whyte was one of Scotland's great preachers during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century. He was well known for the prayers he would say from the pulpit during a service of worship. He always seemed to find something to thank God for, even in bad times.

Well, one dark, stormy Sunday morning a member of his congregation thought to himself: "*The minister will have nothing to thank God for on a wretched morning like this*". But Dr. Whyte began his prayer: "*We thank thee, O God, that it is not always like this!*".

Being thankful should come naturally to people of faith, like us. When we live life believing in God, we learn to be thankful in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Peter, who was, of course, one of Jesus' disciples, wrote a beautiful pastoral letter to Hebrew Christians who were struggling in the midst of persecution. We have the letter preserved for us in the New Testament; it is called 1st Peter. The Christians who lived in Asia Minor were having a tough time. Because they lived in a pagan society they were mocked,

beaten and sometimes even killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Peter writes his letter to give them advice and comfort by stressing the reality of their living hope in the Lord. This is what Peter writes at the beginning of his letter: *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In God’s great mercy he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead”* (1:3).

The two points or lessons we are going to draw out of this verse today are that we, as Christian people, have hope and we have it because Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

The first lesson then is that we have hope. Dante, the Italian poet and philosopher, wrote ‘The Divine Comedy’. It is an allegory of human life presented as a visionary journey through the three Christian realms of death: hell, purgatory and heaven. Famously, in the poem, the following words are said to be inscribed on the lintel above the gates into hell: ‘Abandon hope all ye who enter here’.

Is it too much of a stretch to suggest that a similar sign could be put up above the gates to our country and our world today? I say this because so many people seem to have lost hope; hope in politicians, hope for society, hope in the future of the planet, indeed, many Christians seem to have lost hope in the future of the Church.

However, as people, we need hope. It is vital that we have hope.

To illustrate this, there is the story of a study carried out amongst some women who worked in a dressmaking factory. All the women worked the same number of hours and received the same wages, but some seemed to be unhappy at their work and performed poorly at times, whilst others were upbeat and more productive. It was found that the happy ones had something to look forward to- a party, a date, going home to a loved one, taking their children to the cinema- whereas the unhappy ones felt that they had little to look forward to.

We need hope in our lives. The artist G.F. Watts painted a very well known picture entitled ‘Hope’, a version of which is to be seen in the Tate Gallery. It shows the bent figure of a young woman sitting on a globe, her eyes are

bandaged and she is holding a lyre with all but one of the strings broken. That one, unbroken string represents 'hope'. The message of the painting is that even for this figure who has reached the depths of despair, hope remains intact. There is always hope.

There is a story that the artist Watts received a letter from a lady describing an occasion when she was walking the streets of London in a mood of total despair. She contemplated suicide by throwing herself into the Thames because she had lost all feelings of hope. However, whilst walking down one of the streets, she passed a gallery and in the window of the gallery was a copy of the picture 'Hope'. Stopping briefly, she looked at the picture and its message immediately touched her. It encouraged her not to despair, but to try again; to give hope one more chance. Inspired by this, she turned her life around; married, settled down and had a family. But always on her dressing table, she had a copy of the picture which saved her life. *"My children have long since discovered"* she wrote in her letter *"how much I love it, and they call it 'mother's hope'"*.

Also in the Tate Gallery, there is a beautiful sculpture entitled 'Pandora' by Harry Bates. In Greek mythology Pandora was the first mortal woman. The gods gave her gifts of beauty and the power of song and eloquence. Zeus also gave her a box containing every human ill and sent her to Earth. When she opened this box there flew out all of the diseases and sufferings that afflict humanity. Only one thing was unable to escape from the box before the lid was closed- hope, and so hope remains the only help and consolation there is amid all the sufferings we endure.

How true this is: that very often, the only thing that keeps us going through the difficult times in life is hope.

So let us come back to thinking about the words of Peter. He says: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In God's great mercy he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead"*.

Peter is saying that we have a new kind of life because of Jesus Christ and because we love Jesus Christ and believe in him. Our hope is not empty, it's not in vain, because Jesus was raised from the grave. He has brought

about a new relationship between us and God. Our hope is founded on Jesus Christ and in his resurrection power.

People around us, in society, often put their hope in every kind of material thing. They put their hope in the stock market, in their bank account, in their job, in another person. Then things go wrong, the stock market plummets, there's a run on the bank threatening their money, they are sacked by their boss and the person they rely on lets them down. These things have happened and they are happening now.

It is very unwise to rely on and put our hope in money or a bank, or a job, or a person, or anything else that can easily be taken from us through the unkindness or thoughtlessness of others. We have to build our hope on something reliable, and that something reliable is Jesus Christ- the resurrected Jesus Christ.

Because we believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead through the power of God, it means we can trust Jesus, we can trust what he says, we can trust his teaching, we can live our lives by what he said. The resurrection is God's stamp of approval for Jesus. God was saying, in effect, 'Yes, Jesus is really special, he is unique, he is my Son, you can rely on him and believe that he is who he says he is. You can put your hope in him'.

In addition, the resurrection of Jesus means that his spiritual presence is with us, always. Wherever we are, whatever we go through, Jesus Christ is with us as a constant spiritual presence, a support, a comfort and a help.

I personally find this very comforting, as I'm sure those who first read Peter's letter found it comforting. Those new Christians were trying to live out their lives in the face of persecution and harassment from the authorities. They may have felt insecure and in danger, so Peter wrote the letter to encourage them that no matter what happens, no matter what they face, they will always have hope because Jesus Christ was resurrected.

In life, our tendency is to fret about unfortunate circumstances and complain about difficult situations. The words of Peter remind us that we have so much to rejoice about and be thankful for, because we have what many people without faith don't have – we have hope. We have hope in

something sure and solid, hope in what can never be taken away, hope in the resurrected Jesus, our living Lord and Saviour. Amen.

PRAYER

Loving God, we praise you for this day of celebration; a day where hope followed despair, joy followed sorrow, life came after death. This is the day that changes the way we feel, the way we think, the way we act and the way we live; this is the wonderful day that changes everything.

There are times when life feels mysterious and some events confuse and trouble us. Help us to remember that you came to your first followers on that first Easter day; they were in shock and they felt confused, they were struggling to come to terms with seeing you crucified. Then you appeared before them, restoring their faith, renewing their joy, reviving their vision and rekindling their faith.

We gain strength today from the promise that you are with us through all the experiences of our lives. Whatever we may face, whatever trials come our way, we know that you meet us and hold us to quieten our hearts.

Lord Jesus Christ, our world is hurting. People are crying out for meaning in life and they are searching for hope. Remind us today that endings can lead to new beginnings and may this knowledge touch our hearts and lives.

We thank you that no situation is beyond your power to change, that if we have faith in you then nothing can cast a shadow upon the light of your presence in our lives.

Lord Jesus Christ, we cast upon you the burden of all the changes and challenges of our lives and pray that you will fill us with your resurrection power. Walk with us on our life's journey. Restore and renew us through your wonderful love and strengthen us through the inner power of your Spirit so that we can serve you better and live to your glory.

All this we ask for your name's sake, Amen

“Our Father, who art in heaven....”

HYMN

*Alleluia, Alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord,
Alleluia, alleluia, give praise to His name.*

1. Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
He is the King of creation.

Refrain.

2. Spread the good news o'er all the earth.
Jesus has died and has risen.

Refrain.

3. We have been crucified with Christ.
Now we shall live forever.

Refrain.

4. God has proclaimed the just reward:
Life for all men, alleluia!

Refrain.

5. Come, let us praise the living God,
Joyfully sing to our Saviour.

Refrain.

BLESSING

As the morning dew falls, so may God's love descend upon us.

As a brilliant sun bathes the world in glorious light, so may Christ's radiance shine upon us.

As the breeze blows where it will, so may the breath of the Spirit fill our hearts and minds.

Living and loving God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to you be all praise, honour and glory, today and for ever more, Amen.
