



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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The Lord is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluiah!

Happy Easter and welcome to a special issue of *The Sunday Focus*, which focuses on Mark's dramatic telling of the Resurrection story.

Mark 16:1-8 ("The Resurrection of Jesus")

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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 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. 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.' 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. AMEN. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

The world is facing a time of great testing this Easter. Still though, we can join with people all around the globe for this greatest of celebrations in the Church's year, singing our praises to God in thankfulness for his Easter Grace.

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluiah! (CH4: 410)

Jesus is risen, alleluiah! (CH4: 409)

Away with gloom, away with doubt! With all the morning stars we sing (CH4: 418)

This joyful Eastertide, away with sin and sorrow (CH4: 415)

The strife is o'er, the battle done; now is the Victor's triumph won (CH4: 412)

In the Name of the Father and of

Surprising as it seems, Easter in the gospel of Mark does not really offer us a joyful celebration of new life. Instead, we see people running: not in a playground; not in a marathon; but in a graveyard. It may be Easter, but certainly not as we know it.

That idea seems curiously appropriate for an Easter Sunday of the kind we are experiencing right now, cut off from personal contact with each other and with family and friends, unsure of what the future will hold.

So why is it that Mark's gospel, after 15 action-packed chapters, reaches its climactic final part only to give us an Easter Day filled with fear and panic? Why does he give his readers this stark, strange account of Jesus' Resurrection?

Let's take a look at the text as our starting point. Chapter 16 offers us a picture of his disciples, though not the disciples we might expect. There is no tempestuous Peter, no James and John bickering about greatness, no Andrew, no Thomas, and certainly no Judas. Each of the 12, it seems, is either in hiding or ... is dead.

Rather, Mark provides an alternative view of discipleship as the quietly committed Mary, Mary and Salome – arguably some of the *true* disciples – go to the tomb in which Jesus' body had been laid less than 48 hours earlier.

This was the third day. On day one they had been at Golgotha to witness the horrors of execution ... standing, we are told, "at a distance". I like to think that these women got as close as they could to the cross of Jesus, there in full view of – and in powerful solidarity with – the man they had followed so faithfully. Surely they would want him to see them and to know that at least they cared. Whether that happened or not, day one was a day of weeping and of unbearable loss.

Day two was the Sabbath, when all work was forbidden. Shops would be shut, with goods unobtainable. Only at sundown on the Saturday evening would the city spring back to the liveliness of commercial life, with burial spices available for purchase once more.

And so, on day three, once the city gates had been opened, the same three women made their way out to the grave, to perform the task of preparing Jesus' body: his second anointing in the space of a week. They knew what to expect: a tomb sealed up with a huge stone; a stone so huge that they were wondering among themselves about who would help them to move it.

But what they found, there on that Sunday, early in the morning, was something strange and totally unexpected: the stone had already been rolled away. And in place of a dead body was a young man bringing these words of divine reassurance: "Do not be alarmed."

The simple instruction, "fear not", appears 71 times in the Bible. Think about this: we could work our way, Sunday by Sunday, from Advent and Christmas, and all through the year, and then on to the next Easter, reflecting each week on all the 71 different ways that Scripture points us towards a fear-free life. And in this day and age, maybe we would find that useful.

Yes, these days, perhaps that is a discipline we should all follow, reading our Bibles and reassuring ourselves that the Christian faith is the "fear not" faith:

- Coronavirus is in the neighbourhood: fear not.
- The way we live is changing out of all recognition: fear not.
- I don't know when or how it's all going to end: fear not.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Let's be clear about one thing here. Everyone has fears at times like this, and I am not belittling those many and varied anxieties which you and I and everyone else are forced to endure day by day, now and in the weeks and months to come. We are living in an age of pandemic and our deepest concerns are entirely natural. Yet with these words, "fear not", the Bible surely reinforces – more than 70 times – this vital message sent from heaven to earth: fear not. Terrible things happen – of course they do. But the God of Easter is there in our midst, and in the midst of this horrifying pandemic. And the presence of God is a powerful presence for those who place their trust in God's eternal love and grace.

Indeed, one of the greatest signs of God's presence is seen in Easter itself, for with the dawning of the third day we see the promises of Christ fulfilled and the joy of heaven made real on earth. Christ is raised from death sparking new faith among his people:

*Had Christ, who once was slain, not burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain: but Christ is now arisen, arisen, arisen ... arisen!*

Three women, at a graveside, met by a stranger. So the question is: do Mary, Mary and Salome listen to this man in white? Do they take seriously his "fear not", quietly contemplating the meaning they might find there? No, they do anything but. Think about these words penned by Mark:

... 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.

That man in white, whether an earthly messenger or a heavenly angel, had commissioned the would-be anointers at the tomb to do only one simple task before they ran and ran:

" ... go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee."

One single request, and what did they do? They ran. They fled. And Mark tells us that they said nothing to anyone, "for they were afraid".

No happy ending here, then, even on Easter Sunday, the Church's day of days.

Despite this, I love the ending we find in Mark 16:1-8, and I think the reason I love it is that we are simultaneously offered a "fear not", while also being shown a recognition of the reality of human fear. There is no attempt to paper over the cracks and fragilities of human nature, only an acknowledgement that the Resurrection is more than awe-inspiring. It challenges us to step back and confront our humanity and the true depth of our faith, even as it makes clear the panic being felt there at the open tomb.

And that's not quite all, because a later ending to Mark's gospel tells us that the women did indeed pass on the message from the man in white, and this seems to be confirmed in Matthew's gospel too. What might that tell us? Possibly that those first witnesses of the Resurrection, after all their running, maybe stopped running to catch their breath ... and to catch also a sense of what Easter means.

What was it that Jesus had said after all, just before riding into town on the back of a colt?:
'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

The Lord is Risen. He is Risen indeed. Alleluia! AMEN.

Praying for others

Easter God of new beginnings,
We come to you on this day of celebration
as human beings in need of your love.

Despite our devotion to you,
like the women at the tomb we know what it is to fear.
Take those fears – so real to us – and dispel them this day.
In the midst of our fears and concerns
show us the reality of your grace
springing green in new light of day.

We bring to you those whose fears mount up at this time.
We pray for *[names here]* as they seek a way forward
through the shadows of illness, bereavement or suffering.

Inspire us in this season.
Help us to dwell in the truth of your Risen Son, here among us.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers Easter services in the setting of Covid-19 isolation:

Last week I was musing on how new technology allows us to remain in contact with all those we love. Even if we cannot touch them we can see them, chat to them, laugh with them. My 83-year-old, technology-phobic mother has even learnt how to make video calls so I saw her face for the first time in a month yesterday. It was lovely.

But the closure of church buildings has also forced the Church to speed up ways of being the Church when you can't all meet in one central building. Some churches were ahead of the game before Covid-19 struck – they already streamed or recorded their services and made them accessible online. But many of the rest of us are only now exploring how new technologies can help us provide worship in a time of national lock-down.

Various friends of our church have produced recordings of worship material for Holy Week. Robin took to Youtube for his Good Friday "Internet Passion", still available online. Douglas Hamilton and Ewen Glen each produced short services aimed at young children. The Rev Alec Shuttleworth made videos of reflections for each evening of Holy Week.

Starting last Sunday and continuing for every Sunday from now until lock-down ceases, we will hold a service on Zoom where we can join together to see and hear Robin and others leading worship. If you would like to join in please contact me at abimor1808@gmail.com for access details. And the added good news is that Zoom even allows for phone access too.

It occurs to me that some of these ways of delivering worship might be very useful even after lock-down ends.

Adversity is the mother of invention, they say. I hope the adversity is short but I also hope we may continue to be inventive and deliver the Gospel message in new and exciting ways long after Covid-19 is a distant memory.