

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*John 20:1-10; 19-23 ("The Resurrection of Jesus")*

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. ...

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Jesus Christ is risen today* (CH: 410)

*Jesus is risen, alleluiah!* (CH: 409)

*Away with gloom, away with doubt* (CH: 418)

*This joyful Eastertide* (CH: 415)

*The strife is o'er* (CH: 412)

**E**aster is all about gifts. Of course it is. Ask any small child what they get on Easter Day and you will find that most are programmed automatically to say, "Easter eggs!" (and not the sort that you boil in a pan before painting).

It is estimated that in 2021 an enormous £381 million was spent on chocolate Easter eggs in the UK, most of which would have been bought as presents for other people. Interestingly, it appears that if, as a nation, we had all bought chocolate bars rather than eggs, we could have got exactly the same amount of chocolate but saved ourselves £154 million! But you can see why eggs are so incredibly popular around this time of year, giving people a special seasonal treat.

So yes, Easter is very much a time for gifts to be given and received. Indeed, you might be surprised to learn that our Easter reading from John's gospel says pretty much the same thing (although without the fancy Cadbury's wrapping). In this passage we see Jesus giving his friends the Easter gift of three words beginning with the letter "P". Two of these words are simple and straightforward, with the third "letter P" word being a little unexpected.

And so on this Easter Day, let us start with that much-craved and yearned for gift, the gift of peace. When Jesus comes to greet his friends on the Day of Resurrection, peace is far from their thoughts. Only three nights earlier they had shared supper with their Lord and, to their surprise had found their feet being washed by him. Tension was in the air, with talk of betrayal. Then came the arrest, a hurried trial and the execution. The one who had held out that towel on the Thursday evening was blood-stained and dead on a cross by 3 o'clock on the Friday afternoon. And the disciples? They were behind closed doors, locked away in the darkness of their fear and regret. No doubt they were reeling from the depth of their cowardice, wondering if they were about to suffer the same terrible punishment which had been meted out to their dear departed friend, the man from Nazareth.

Into that setting of dismal isolation comes Jesus with his first Easter gift - just four simple words: "Peace be with you."

Not, "Why did you desert me when I needed you most?" but, "Peace be with you."

Not, "You've shown a sad lack of faith in the promises I made," but, "Peace be with you."

Not, "I'm back, and you're all fired, you miserable crew," but, "Peace be with you."

The natural way of the world would have been one of criticism and accusation and recrimination. But the way of Jesus - the way of heaven - proved to be one of forgiveness and openness and inclusion: "Peace be with you."

At this point, if we allow ourselves to go back to the text I think we'll find something which might be a little surprising. You see, this Risen Jesus seemed to realise all at once that his mysterious arrival in the room had caused some confusion. Immediately after those four words of peace, John tells us this:

*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*

With these words, we come to the second Easter gift to the disciples: proof. What a special gift this must have been on that desolate evening. Coming right up close, Jesus revealed his wounds in all their horrific detail. "Hang on", you might well say. "That's not much of a present." And you could, of course, be forgiven for thinking this way. Yet, we are told, Jesus' friends found this experience to be uplifting ...

decisive, even. They had heard his greeting. Then they were shown his hands and side. Then, and only then, did they rejoice.

Jesus had returned to them not as a ghost or a spirit, not as a fond memory or a high ideal, but as Jesus himself, crucified, dead and buried, now on the third day Risen to new life. For us, this is a holy mystery that is so hard to square with what we know from our own experiences of life and of death, yet for the disciples Jesus had proved himself the Lord of both life and death. There, among them all, he had offered the gift of proof – a gift which would turn around their lives, opening up fresh insights of faith.

Yes! For the disciples Easter changes everything.

It is often said that the disciples arrive at their turning point in the gospel story right at the very end when fear gives way to confidence, with doubt overcome by true faith. It may well be that this very special gift of proof was just precisely what was needed to galvanise a bunch no-hopers, sending them flying into a bright and courageous future on a new trajectory named “church”. But to make that up-and-coming adventure possible, one further gift was necessary.

And this brings us to our third and final “letter P” word (and this, if you recall, is the unexpected one).

The last - the ultimate - gift of Jesus on Easter Day is what we might call “pneuma”, which doesn’t sound like much of a “letter P” word at all, until we come to think of rubber tyres. They are “pneumatic” and that, of course, comes with its very own letter “P” right at the front of the word. Let’s go back to the text once more to recall what happened next: *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit ...*

In Greek, the language in which John was writing his book, the idea of human breath is summed up in the word “pneuma”, so we can readily understand what it means for Jesus to breathe on his disciples. Nevertheless, it does seem a bit of a strange thing to do. But here’s the thing: this word “pneuma” also means “spirit”. So Jesus didn’t breathe on the disciples – he, as it were, *spirited* on the disciples. As Walter Brueggemann puts it: “He gave them spirit. He performed artificial respiration on his bedraggled followers. He said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’ which is the Spirit of Jesus. He gave them the surging gift of surprising life, so unlike the lifeless charade of the [Roman] empire that only knows about violence and control but knows nothing about giving life.”

And so with the extra-special Easter gift of “pneuma”, God’s Holy Spirit, Jesus passes on the best, most meaningful present of all, making each disciple a new creation in and through the grace of God. Equipped with the Spirit they turn away from their weird, mixed up experience of Easter Day, looking instead to fresh horizons, beyond which will lie a life of faith tied up in forgiveness and reconciliation, in healing and wholeness and in quite uncharacteristic bravery. This work would be tough for them in their world, just as it remains tough for present day disciples in today’s troubled world.

And who are these disciples of our age? Who are these people who follow in the footsteps of Peter and Andrew and James and John? Of Paul and Barnabas? And of all the saints who, down across the generations, have struggled against the injustices, and the many and varied apathies which seek to cloud the vision of God’s Kingdom on earth? Who are these people breathed on by the Risen Christ?

They are the very Body of Christ. Amen.

## Praying for others

Risen Lord Jesus,  
may you bring signs of new life and hope for all in this troubled world.  
We know that many people in recent days have experienced intense loss and grief  
in Ukraine, especially those who have lost children in the conflict.  
Be close to them now as they battle to move forward in hope.

We pray for a movement towards peace in Ukraine and  
away from further destruction. We especially ask that those considering the use of  
chemical weapons would step back from such a drastic course of action.

We thank you for all those in this country who have reached out  
with hearts of compassion to welcome refugees. May our government act more  
swiftly to ease the process of bringing traumatised people  
to a place of safety and support.

For all those who struggle to believe in your love at such difficult times,  
may the care and compassion of your people give them renewed hope.  
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morrison considers immigration:*

Last week I wrote about Polynesian sailors who crossed the Pacific Ocean to New Zealand.

As you all know I watched the latest series of Surgeons: At the Edge of Life. What, I hear you ask, is the link between these two – Maoris and surgeons? Well, many things struck me watching the excellent BBC2 series. But one of them was the background of the surgeons. The majority of those filmed were of immigrant stock. And, of course, Maoris are immigrants. Many of the surgeons were first generation immigrants and many more second or later generation immigrants. It's hard to tell from a name but they, or their ancestors, hailed from Greece, the middle east, the Indian sub-continent, Africa and Eastern Europe. It made me wonder, and not for the first time, what would we do without people who up sticks and move here permanently? They bring a new perspective, new ideas, new ways of doing things. They often bring energy and commitment and very hard work. Judging by the Surgeons series some of our finest hospitals would grind to a halt without these incomers.

We often fear the incomer but aren't we all of incomer stock, at some point? You can make a pretty powerful case that the British are largely immigrants, if sometimes from a while ago (Romans, Norman French, Angles and Saxons, Norsemen, Celts, Picts to name but a few). In fact, if you go back far enough, we're all immigrants. Humans evolved somewhere in Africa so, unless you live exactly at that spot, everyone is of immigrant stock. Let's celebrate and welcome the newcomers, after all they're one of us!