THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
Issue 210 31st March 2023
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Today's Bible reading

Luke 24:1-12 ("The Resurrection of Jesus")

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. 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)
The strife is o'er (CH:412)

The Lord is Risen: He is Risen indeed!
Alleluia!

Happy Easter!

As celebrations go, the gospel of Luke is slow to show us much joy and smiling on that first Easter Day. Sunday morning starts with a group of women going to the tomb of Jesus who had died on a cross little more than 36 hours earlier. They came not with the intention of finding an opened grave and a resurrected friend, but with some kind of plan to give the body of their friend a dignified preparation following the end of the Sabbath rest.

We cannot know how they might have felt on that early morning journey, yet we should remember that these people are true disciples. Recall that they shared a true devotion to Jesus, made clear in their bravery that early morning in Jerusalem. It was the women who went to the tomb "at early dawn" with their spices. They might have had every reason to stay away, not knowing whether they might have become wanted criminals in danger of arrest, like Jesus before them. Others might have been deterred from leaving the safety of home, but such fears would not hold them back in their mission that day. Rising early, they set off with their spices, ready to do what was necessary.

Yet on their arrival, they received quite a shock, discovering that the stone over the mouth of the tomb had already been rolled away. Had other people thought the same as they had thought, but had got there before them? Or maybe there had been a break-in with body snatchers making off in the night. The women simply didn't know what had happened, so perplexed were they by what they were seeing before them.

Just then two men in dazzlingly bright garments came to them with a question so well suited to Easter Day: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" In those few simple words the women's presumptions were turned right around. This was no place for spices, because there could be no question of them being needed for Jesus.

Then this bold declaration which changed the lives of those present at the tomb, while also changing the history of the world: "He is not here, but has risen."

Easter is something which not only happened. Easter is something which happens again and again, and in our experience. Curiously perhaps for what is the Christian faith's most important festival, Easter is something which we need to be reminded of, perhaps because we too can come to it with presuppositions which need challenging. We have presuppositions over the supremacy of death in our world, yet the Good News of the Resurrection makes us reconsider all that we know, in turn forcing us to restructure our thinking, our living, our being around the experience of our Easter faith.

But all of this can be hard to take in, as those female disciples had discovered, and as the male disciples were about to discover for themselves:
Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

Oh yes, the rumour of resurrection may easily seem "an idle tale", yet Peter had enough curiosity to go to the grave and to check those reports for himself. And when he arrived there, I really wonder what his reaction might have been.

For us today, we naturally consider Easter to be cause for celebration, because for us today there is nothing in the story which speaks to us of being perturbed or scared. It is truly a time to rejoice at the triumph of God over sin, of life over death. And although the Easter accounts across the four gospels are far from scientific, with so many grey areas, the message is clear. In the words of St Paul, less than a generation after the event, the reality of Easter gives us confidence in a resurrection which spans a whole lot more than just Jesus:
Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. [1 Corinthians 15:12-14]

And so today we celebrate not one Resurrection but countless resurrections. And this we need to take seriously. On the 24th day of December at our evening services I frequently remind our congregations that Christmas Eve leads on not to a day of joyfulness, but to a whole season, as we are encouraged to mark the 12 days of Christmas. This we do in church, of course, but also in homes and across communities in all sorts of great and wonderful ways.

But the birth of Jesus with its 12 days of celebration represents only the second most important festival of the Church. Our pre-eminent festival - the one which is big enough to outshine even the glories of Christmas - is where we have arrived at today: Easter. And what is our period of joy which starts today? A full 50 days from start to finish! Imagine that: first Easter Day, and then another full seven-week period of celebration, all meant to inspire us to wonder at the Resurrection.

Think of where we have just come from, across the long weeks of Lent - a period of spiritual discipline in which our thoughts are set firmly on the journey of Jesus to the Cross. Sometimes all of this spiritual focus is matched by self-denial of some sort, whether through the banishing of chocolate or drink or dull sloth or whatever. The point is that in Lent (as in Advent before it) we are getting ready - and getting ready for something big and impressive. You might find that a boring or pointless way to live, yet many folk positively like challenges and targets, and they see the endpoint of Easter as a goal which can be reached not only in their calendars and diaries, but also in their hearts and minds.

Well, now that target of Easter has been reached and we are called to live lives of celebration which go from now right the way through to Pentecost in the middle of May. So let's pause to reflect on what we could do to celebrate Easter not just now but for the days and weeks to come. If we focused our individual living and also our church life on living out the celebration of Easter as a season, what change would that bring to you … to me … to our church … to our community … to our world? This shouldn't be a perpetual smile-fest in which everyone looks happy on the outside while silently wishing deep inside that we could just be a bit more bland and ordinary once more. But what it should be is a recognition on our part that the Christian faith is the Resurrection faith.

If we are Resurrection people should we not be using this whole wonderful season to spread the joy … and the hope … and the grace … and the beauty … and the light … and the life … and the love … and the care … and the assurance … and the rebellion … and the encouragement … and the forgiveness … and the healing … and the dignity … and the Good News of Resurrection all around?

Well, shouldn't we? Amen.

Praying for others

Risen Lord Jesus,
raise your people, we pray, to believe that all things are possible,
that nations can make peace, that men and women can love their enemies,
that justice can prevail and the meek can inherit the earth.

We pray afresh today for countries at war, that leaders see the horror of their ways,
feel the depth of the suffering which their actions cause,
and choose another path, your path to peace.

We pray for a world renewed, where love is the answer to all strife,
and forgiveness is its healing balm,
where simple kindness, trust, and respect amongst people is the norm.

We pray for fairness and equality, that there is food for all,
education for all, medical attention for all, a home for all.

We pray for freedom, for hostages and prisoners of war,
that for them life can be all you would have it be:
healthy, happy, wholesome, home again and with their families.

We pray for release from the power of evil, the addiction of greed,
the obsession of supremacy, all of which destroy perpetrator and victim alike.

Let no one be deprived of the light that streams from your empty tomb,
the light that shines into the darkest places of cruelty and suffering,
the light that ends all sorrow and pain.

For you are alive, radiant and with us all, now and always.

Amen.

Weekly Updates …

Easter Day services: Our services will take place in three places at three times over the course of the morning:
8am Communion on Longniddry Church lawn (remembering the clock change!);
9.45am All-age Celebration at Longniddry Church;
11am Easter Worship at Gladsmuir.

Jars of Grace 2024: A quick reminder that any Jar of Grace donations of coins notes or cheques can now be brought to our services. The proceeds of the count will go to help a school in Kalimpong, Eastern Himalayas, to buy books, balls and bangles. (If you would like to make an electronic donation, please see Douglas or Robin.)

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 3rd April for the next friendly gathering. All welcome!

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet 07766 574123).

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

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