

Podcast for Easter Sunday – 12th April 2020

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Chalmers Memorial Church

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Introduction

Hello and welcome to this Podcast for Easter Sunday. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church in East Lothian, Scotland. Wherever you are today I want to wish you a very blessed Easter.

Undoubtedly, our journey through Lent and Holy Week leading to Easter Day has been difficult and unusual for us all this year... unprecedented... something we would never ever want to repeat... something that has brought anxiety - perhaps even fear for some... all of which sits in seemingly stark contrast to the traditional joy of Easter Day... the day on which we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead... his overcoming of death... the resounding message of divine love and everlasting hope.

Today, the Church should be in proverbial party mood... ready to relax after the sober reflections of Lent and Holy Week.

But, as we will discover when we get to our Bible reading, that first Easter morning did not actually begin with jubilation. In fact, it began with searching individuals deeply worried and confused about what had happened to the body of their beloved friend – Jesus.

It's a reminder that, as we will be thinking about this morning, that Easter speaks to us not only of the days of celebration but also of the complexity of life.

If Easter is to be Easter, then it has to be able to speak to where we are... today we will seek to find what the gospel says to us where we are today...

Indeed, today we affirm again the glorious message that sits at the heart of the gospel:

Christ is Risen

He is Risen indeed!

Shall we pray? Let us pray.

Opening Prayer

Christ is risen!

Mighty God, we have no words that can express your power and our awe!

Christ is risen!

You raised him from the dead.

Blessing and honour and glory and power be yours, almighty God for ever and ever.

Christ is risen!

You raised him from the dead.

All creation sings the glory of the risen and victorious Son.

Christ is risen!

You raised him from the dead.

We are free from the power of sin and death.

Praise be to you, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mighty God, we have no words that can express your power and our awe but now we can affirm with adoring hearts that:

Christ is risen.... He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Father, for every time we have allowed despair to take possession of us, forgive us Lord....

For every time we have permitted sin to master our lives, forgive us Lord...

For our lack of trust in you, forgive us Lord.

For our fear of the unknown, forgive us Lord.

Reassure us now of your transforming and forgiving love.

May the joy of this triumphant day reach deep down into our hearts, making us new in your image, helping us to share in the victory of Christ.

We ask this for his sake and in his name and words we further pray together saying:

Our Father

Which art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – John chapter 20 verses 1 to 18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!'

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped round

Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?'

'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him.' 14 At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?'

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.'

16 Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'

She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher').

17 Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of his Holy Word and to His name be the glory and the praise.

Reflection

This isn't right folks... come on - be honest – it isn't right...

Surely this can't be Easter day?

No... We should be in Church today... we should be eating breakfast in a full church hall... and I, on the instructions of my wife, should be wearing an apron to stop me slithering myself with eggs and bacon...

We should be there as Sheila sets up the PowerPoint and the Praise Band tune up... and Duncan respectfully places the Bible in the Pulpit... and as Pamela puts the foot to the pedal in our opening Hymn – *Jesus Christ is risen today*... And we should be watching Tom Gordon bobbing up and down in time to the music – clapping his tambourine and playing the mouth organ... his wife Mary should be sitting near him playing a guitar too but looking as though she's trying to pretend that he's not with her... and Alastair playing alongside them both should be sporting his Black Sabbath T Shirt...

And you should be sitting there today too with a sense of expectation that something of that act of worship will shout "**Easter Day**" to us... before we take the daffodils, carefully picked from the Gosford Estate, from around the Church back home and to friends and neighbours – but leaving the jars they are in behind because Loreen needs those jars for next year, you know...!

And then, I should be standing at the door at the end of the service shaking hands but getting absolutely nowhere fast because everyone's is still sitting in the church singing the hymn the praise band are playing as folk leave...

That's what makes Chalmers Church special and it's what makes our Easter Day special... and it's what drags us out of the season of Lent... in one great big leap we are summonsed out of the Lenten journey and set on the Resurrection Road...

Can you feel the excitement of it all? Do you see the sights and sounds?

Or maybe, this year, that's become a little harder...

If it was hard enough to get into the Lenten mood at least we could identify that more sombre season of the Christian calendar with how we are having to live and how many of us are currently feeling...

Lent, after all, isn't one of those decisive seasons of the Christian year... It doesn't do anything in particular... instead it just makes us think of certain things... Its journey isn't what it does or where it takes us... It's more about how it makes us feel...

And, at the moment, we are pretty much in lockdown and, as the government tells us we aren't quite ready to come out of it yet...

Which might be affecting the way we feel about this Easter Day too.

A few days ago, I was reading an article by an American preacher and teacher by the name of Scott Hoezee and in that article – which was mainly aimed at preachers – he was reflecting upon what it has been like for preachers the world over to have prepared acts of worship and recorded them or even broadcast them from empty church buildings or even the front room of manses.

It's been weird and, for preachers who spend their whole year looking forward to Easter Day, the sense of that being the big preaching occasion of the year has, this year at least, been roundly knocked on the head.

Hoezee recounts the story of one of his friends who was conducting an Easter day service and was speaking with the children who were there on that special day. As he spoke about Jesus rising from the dead and then appearing to his disciples this preacher asks the children -“*What do you suppose was the first thing Jesus said to his disciples after he was raised from the dead?*” To which one little boy instantly leapt to his feet, flung his arms out wide, and declared “*Ta-Da!*”

As Hoezee suggests the power of the Easter act of celebration is fuelled by that sense of excitement at knowing Jesus has risen from the dead...

It is the big “*Ta Da*” moment...

But this year we sort of have to bypass the “*ta da's*” because we aint where we want to be today which leaves us with a question... a dilemma even...

If there are no “*ta da*” moments today, then how on earth are we supposed to celebrate Easter day?

Again, Hoezee's observations here are astute and, if we think about it, in many ways perfectly obvious.

It is simply to acknowledge what we probably already know about the Easter story narratives as we find them in the Bible, that none of them... none of them begin their recounting of the Resurrection of Jesus with anything like a “*ta da*” at all...

In Mark’s gospel, for example, at chapter 16 we find Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Salome bringing spices to the tomb where Jesus was laid on Good Friday. Jesus appears to them but rather going “*ta da*” the experience of meeting him leaves them, as Mark tells us, full of fear and trembling... and they flee the tomb as fast as they can...

In Matthew chapter 28 a small group of women, composed of Mary Magdalene and someone referred to as the “*other Mary*” make their way to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. Again, they meet Jesus, but the experience also leaves them full of what can only be described as a joy filled fear... They literally don’t know what to feel – afraid on the one hand and joyful on the other... each emotion sort of cancelling the other out...

In Luke chapter 24 the women go to the tomb where Jesus was laid and are brought to their knees trembling when an angel appears to them... they leave and tell the disciples... but most of them do not believe...

And here, in our reading from John chapter 20, which we read earlier on, it is Mary Magdalene who goes to the tomb alone and who is so distraught and confused at finding the tomb open that she daren’t even look inside but instead goes to fetch Simon Peter and another unnamed disciple.

And she does so, our reading at verse 1 says, “*while it was still dark*” ... the Greek word for dark, says William Barclay meaning sometime between 3am and 6am...

The sun had not even risen on the new day and there is Mary Magdalene making her way to the tomb to do all the things to prepare Jesus’ body for final burial that they had not been able to do on Good Friday.

It’s hardly a “*ta da*” moment, is it?

It’s still dark outside... just as it might still feel dark in our world today.

In fact, John goes on – at verse 11 – to describe Mary standing outside the tomb weeping...

Perhaps she is pondering the thought that Jesus’ tomb has been robbed... and if the tomb has been robbed then so has she... robbed of the right to say goodbye properly to Jesus... robbed of the right to offer Jesus the dignity that she so wanted to give to him but, which circumstances have now stopped her from doing so.

I have a spoken and met a few people in recent days who have been feeling like that as they journey through moments where there would normally be hugging and holding and crowds... stopped from entering a hospital ward... staring through a window at the grandchildren and smiling but holding back the emotion as well... standing apart at a grave side...

For them it’s still dark outside... and, at the moment they, and we, are left standing at an empty tomb asking where our “*ta da*” moment has gone.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that it hasn’t really gone anywhere at all.

Perhaps it just like the slow start to the Easter story that we find in the gospels... the tomb is empty... the questions fly around, and the queries are slow in settling...

But, folks, there is only one reason that that tomb is empty... only one reason... and no one has robbed it... There’s no jiggery pokery going on here... no sleight of hand... smoke and mirrors.

There's only one reason that that tomb is empty – and that is because Jesus has risen from the dead...

He's kept his promise... and after the slow start... after the darkness lifts... the realisation and reassurance will come – in its own time.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Prayer

Lord God, even though it doesn't much feel like it we know that this is still Easter day – the day we celebrate possibility... the day we bring hope to the forefront... the day we jump right to the heart of the gospel – that Jesus has risen and has brought salvation to the world.

This day, however, we bring before you those for whom the days may still be dark and who are finding the journey they are engaged on hard... whether they are struggling with isolation or who miss the hold... the hand held...

And we remember too those who must journey through the emotions of loss without that sense of togetherness that they need at this time.

Lord, bless them with the slow burning embers of an Easter Faith so that even although they might be standing this day at the door of an empty tomb with questions overflowing that they will feel comforted and strengthened by knowing that Christ has indeed risen from the dead.

Lord, we pray that you would bring Easter Day into the hospital wards and care homes of our land... that you would bring the power of love into hands that care and voices which sooth and ears that listen.

Bless those who are working so hard and giving up so much as they seek to care for others.

And Lord, before we finish our prayer, would you be with us...? In our homes... In our place of security and let us see the empty tomb too and then we too can meet with Jesus in whose name we bring these our prayers, Amen.

Benediction

We have come from darkness and despair

to hope and joy.

We have been transformed by new life.

Witness now and testify to the message of hope

That we have received this day.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.

And may the Blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you and all whom you love this day and forevermore, Amen.