**12th April 2020 Easter Sunday**

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**Call to worship**

Alleluia Christ is Risen

He is Risen indeed Alleluia!

Come with joy.
Come with praise.
Come with expectation and wonder.
He has been raised from the dead!
Come and worship our risen Lord.

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**1 'Christ, the Lord, is risen today!'
Hallelujah!
All creation join to say:
Hallelujah!
Raise your joys and triumphs high;
Hallelujah!
Sing, you heavens, and earth reply:
Hallelujah!**

**2 Love's redeeming work is done!
Fought the fight, the battle won:
see, our Sun's eclipse has passed,
see, the light returns at last!**

**3 Vain the stone, the watch, the seal:
Christ has burst the gates of hell;
death in vain forbids him rise
Christ has opened paradise:**

**4 Lives again our glorious King;
where, O death, is now your sting?
Once he died, our souls to save;
where's your victory, boasting grave?**

**5 Soar we now where Christ has led,
following our exalted Head;
made like him, like him we rise;
ours the cross, the grave, the skies:**

**6 Hail the Lord of earth and heaven!
Praise to you by both be given;
every knee to you shall bow,
risen Christ, triumphant now!**

A gathering prayer

Risen Lord Jesus,
we gather today to celebrate.
We gather to share in the joy of your resurrection.
The stone has been rolled away,
death has been defeated,
you have overcome all the powers of darkness.
May we know your risen presence with us today.
Amen.



A prayer of approach

Holy and risen Lord,
we come to worship you
on this special day, Easter Day.
We thank you for all you have done for us.
We lift our eyes to honour you, living Lord Jesus.
You have overcome death;
fill us with your joy and new life.
Amen.



A prayer of confession

When we have failed to recognise you as our Saviour,
when we have failed to acknowledge you as our risen Lord,
when we have doubted that you are with us:
forgive us, and fill our hearts with joy.

When we have not shared your good news,
when we have been too concerned with ourselves,
when we have not shared the joy of knowing you with others:
forgive us, and fill our hearts with joy.

When we have failed to bring hope to the hopeless,
when we have failed to bring joy to the joyless,
when we have failed to offer your grace to those who hurt us:
forgive us, and fill our hearts with joy.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Risen Lord Jesus,
we adore you and praise your name.
Today you defeated death and rose again.
You died on the cross that we might be free.
Thank you, risen Lord, that you did this for us,
so that we might enjoy the freedom of eternal life.
Risen Lord Jesus,
we love you, we worship you, we adore you.
Amen.



**Matthew 28.1-20**

**Sermon**

**I saw a cartoon yesterday which had a picture of Jesus coming out of the tomb but standing opposite were two policemen with their hand raised up. ‘Stay inside’ they shouted!**

Easter is usually a time when we get together with family and friends and church.

In the words of the Queen who spoke on Sunday: We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return: we will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again."

It was a hopeful message to a nation, indeed a world in a time of crisis.

We all need some hope.

The weather is good which always helps our mood.

And spring is being sprung which is always symbolic of new life and hope for us in the northern hemisphere, at least.

I read a post by Jo Swinney who parents founded the A Rocha Christian environmental charity but who were killed in a car accident in the last year. She writes ‘my mum used to talk about the dark places being the most fertile: wombs, soil, the depths of the ocean. May we all see new shoots of life pushing their way up to the light even now when things are so hard.

She then quotes a verse from the prophet Isaiah (43.19) ‘See I’m doing a new thing’

Easter is a day of hope. It was God’s new thing. A New Day for the world. It offers to us a new power for living - a power to get us through the greatest trials.

St Paul had an encounter with the risen Jesus that changed his life. He went on to preach the gospel, setting up some of the first churches. He risked persecution, ridicule, trials, suffering and eventually was executed for his faith in the resurrected Jesus. He wrote in his letter to the Philippians (3.10) *I want to know Christ – yes to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings,* *becoming like him in his death and so, somehow attaining to the resurrection of the dead.*

So, I want this morning to talk to you about the power of the resurrection.

The central claim of the early church was that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead. The central claim was not that he was a great teacher, a powerful healer, an inspiring leader, or that he was the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice – no matter how many academic and fictional writers try to rewrite history in their portrayal of Jesus. The crucial fact that the first Christians believed, was that Jesus had been bodily raised to life after being well and truly dead and buried. This is what they announced to a startled world.

And of course, people laughed at them and offered alternative explanations. He wasn’t really dead, they said. Or maybe the disciples stole the body. Or maybe someone else did. Or perhaps the women went to the wrong tomb.

Matthew deals with some in his account of the resurrection. His is the only account of the resurrection that includes the details of how the authorities try to bribe the guards to say that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus.

None of this of course proves that the Christian story is true. From the very beginning there has been room for doubt, and many have taken that option and doubt has an honourable place in the life of faith and can be good at times.

But Matthew is concerned that the doubt be located in the right place. There was no confusion about the details of burial. If you are going to doubt whether Jesus was raised from the dead it must be because you doubt whether the living God could or would do such a thing for Jesus, the Messiah, the one on whose shoulders rested the weight of the world’s salvation. That is what is at stake.

I spoke on Good Friday about who is in control? Who wears the crown, the corona (which is Crown in Latin)? At the moment we feel out of control. The virus reminds us that there are things we cannot control. Whereas the crown of thorns on Jesus points to the God who took the sin, suffering and death of the world and overcame with love and forgiveness – so we can hope that

Goodness is stronger than evil;
Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness;
Life is stronger than death;
Victory is ours through Christ who loved us.

Don’t be fooled by the idea that modern science has disproved the resurrection of Jesus. Modern science has done no such thing. Everybody in the ancient world, just like everybody in the modern world, knew perfectly well that dead people don’t get resurrected. It doesn’t take Einstein to prove that; just universal observation of universal facts.

The Christian belief is not that some people sometimes get raised from the dead, and that Jesus happens to be one of them. It is precisely that people don’t ever get raised from the dead, and that something new has happened in and through Jesus which has blown a hole through previous observations.

This is the launch of a new way of life, a new power for living, a new and unbreakable hope.

No wonder the women who went to the tomb that day were gripped by a mixture of terror and delight.

All the gospel accounts have similar but slightly different accounts of that Easter Sunday – which arguably strengthens their claim that it happened. If all the accounts were exactly the same you might smell a bit of collusion going on.

They all testify to an empty tomb. They all say women were the first to witness it. They all say angels appeared to give the first Easter message.

Many people in this crisis thank God for the human angels who are looking after them – be it in the health service, carers, or people doing their shopping. But I also know many people who claim to have known heavenly angels.

When 15-year-old Natasha Ednan-Laperouse died from a severe allergic reaction to an unlabelled Pret a Manger sandwich in 2016, her young face graced newspapers across the country and her story travelled the world. What failed to be reported at the time was that her father, Nadim, who was with her when she collapsed, had a powerful spiritual experience that ultimately led him to faith.[[1]](#endnote-1)

For most of his life, Nadim, 55, had no desire to know God and, in fact, found Christians “somewhat annoying...I just wanted to move away from them”. His daughter, however, had begun to explore Christianity at the age of twelve and, with the support of her best friend, Bethany, began attending a youth group at Everyday Church in Wimbledon. Two weeks before she died, Natasha told Bethany that she wanted to be baptised.

Natasha’s final day on earth was spent with her father and her best friend. They were looking forward to a trip to France. Bethany, who was 14 at the time, had never been abroad and Natasha was keen to show her where their family had spent many happy years holidaying. Natasha, Bethany and Nadim would fly to Nice while Natasha’s mum and brother stayed in London to host friends who were visiting from abroad.

Natasha had bought some sandwiches for breakfast but then on the plane she started to get an allergic reaction. Her condition quickly deteriorated. And despite two injections from an EpiPen she began to pass out. The flight stewards called for a doctor on board who started CPR. For the next hour and a half Nadim, the stewards and the doctor tried everything to save her life. All the while, Bethany, who was still in her seat, was praying non-stop.

By the time the flight touched down in France, Natasha had gone into multiple cardiac arrests.

Five paramedics stormed onto the plane –

Nadim was standing over Natasha’s body and had been talking to her loudly for 90 minutes: “I had this sense that I wanted her, through her unconscious state, to know somehow that I was with her and she wasn’t alone.

 “And then suddenly these five angels appeared. You can imagine that I’m not looking for this. I’m quite a lucid person, actually; I’m not someone who has funny moments as such. These five angels just appeared, and I knew they were angels because they were basically people with wings – and I had never seen that in my life before. From her head to her toes they were hovering over her, not waving their arms and flapping, they were all moving slowly, not in some frantic way; it was otherworldly.

“I would describe them as human beings, but with wings coming off their backs, more like butterfly wings, no feathers...the whole vista filled up with this very soft yellow light and they were made of yellow light as well. “I was so taken aback, and then it dawned on me what it meant...I just wouldn’t accept that, and I lifted my hand up and whooshed them away as if to say: ‘Get out of here. It’s not her time.’

That’s when I know Natasha died because her heart, the faintness, went, and the paramedics who had been actively doing what they’d been doing for at least half an hour were completely beaten.”

“The following Sunday, I was in Everyday Church Wimbledon for the first time in my life,” Nadim says.

“I’ve probably only missed a handful of weekends since then – that’s three and half years’ worth...In that time I have learned quite a lot about the Bible, God and Jesus”

 “I saw those angels. I know it was for a reason. Therefore, everything in the Bible is true. I don’t need to read it to know it’s true.”

“Things have happened in my life since Natasha has died that I would actually say are so unbelievable...God has definitely confirmed: ‘I’m here, I’m watching you, I’m hearing you and I’m with you.’”

Natasha never lived long enough to get baptised as she had hoped, but when Nadim went under the water at Everyday Church on 15 July 2018, he wore a T-shirt with her picture and name printed on it. “We went under the water together, symbolically, if you like,” he said.

Reflecting back on why he saw the angels that day on the plane and no one else did, Nadim says: “My view is that it was given by God for me to see for a reason. I can literally call it a lynchpin moment. Everything has changed for me.”

Everything changed for us that first Easter. A power was unleashed into the world to give us hope. A power for living, a power to bring reconciliation, a power to work for a just and peaceful world in line with God’s values of the kingdom, and a power to endure suffering and grief.

Our faith is not just words and rituals. It is not just empty beliefs and powerless actions. God is at work, the God of resurrection.

St Paul says in his letter to the Romans (8.11): *And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*

I saw the testimony that an Irish Pastor called Ian McClelland gave on how he survived covid 19. You can watch it for yourself on You Tube [[2]](#endnote-2) just type in ‘God sent a cleaner to pray’.

He said he was in hospital just moments away from ending up on a ventilator and he was gasping for breath. He thought he wasn’t going to make it. He cried out to the Lord and asked God to encourage his heart and strengthen him and bring him through. After a night from hell on the isolation ward, when no one else was allowed in, no family, no friends, no one from church, God sent him a cleaner.

The cleaner got chatting to him and told him to hang in there. Then he revealed that he had been a missionary in Nigeria for 14 years. A reminder that if it wasn’t for all the oversea workers in our health care we would be struggling. Anyway, the cleaner said God had used him to pray for people and strengthen people and he offered to pray for Ian. He asked God’s Spirit to visit him and heal him and touch his lungs, to spare his life and continue to use him.

Ian said after he left, he would periodically pass his window and give Ian the thumbs up.

That night Ian started to turn around. Could it have been the prayer of the cleaner? He doesn’t know for sure, but the Bible does talk about the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5.16).

He got his taste back and started to crave a packet of prawn cocktail crisps and a bottle of coke.

The following morning the cleaner was back and passed Ian a parcel through the door of his isolation room. He couldn’t go in but inside the bag was two oranges, a bottle of coke and a packet of prawn cocktail crisps. The cleaner said it was a gift from the Lord.

Ian said on the video clip, with tears in his eyes, ‘God is personal. God knows our every need and our every desire. Never underestimate what God can do with your life. God sent him a cleaner to help him.

The power of the resurrection is at work in our world. It can be at work in your life.

The angel in Matthew’s account tells the women that the disciples are to go to Galilee and see Jesus there, they meet him almost at once there near the tomb. That seeing will be a commissioning, a commissioning to a new work, a new life, a new way of life in which everything he told them before will start to come true.

We cannot today meet Jesus in the way the women did that morning. The danger is that we keep the resurrection in history – back in the past. The angel said to the women – he is not here he has been raised and he’s gone on ahead of you’. Why linger at the tomb when the Lord is at the heart of our living?

It is vital to Christian belief and experience that we can and should meet Jesus in spirit and get to know him as we worship him and learn from him. That personal and intimate relationship with the living Lord is central to what being a Christian means in practice. It gives you hope in all circumstances.

In the tragedy of death, such as 15-year-old Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, God reassures us that nothing can separate us from God’s love – a vision of angels gives her father that reassurance. In the case of Pastor Ian McClelland, it is receiving help from God via a cleaner.

Going back to the Queen: the poem ‘The Gate of the Year’ by [Minnie Louise Haskins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minnie_Louise_Haskins) remained a source of comfort to the Queen for most of her life. She handed a copy to her father, [King George VI](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_VI), and he quoted it in his [1939 broadcast](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Christmas_Message) to the [British Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire) at the start of the Second World War and she had its words engraved on stone plaques and fixed to the gates of the King George VI Memorial Chapel at [Windsor Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windsor_Castle), where the King was interred.  You may know these lines:

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied:
“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”
So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.*

We may not be able to go out much at present, but it is reassuring to know that in these times, the touching light and hand of God is with us.

Maybe you’ve been a long way from God. Maybe this crisis has turned you towards God. Maybe you are wanting to know more. I encourage you to reach out in prayer, read scripture, get in touch with other Christians, with me. We are all in this together.

I pray we all have the desire of St Paul to ‘know Christ, to be prepared to share in his sufferings but also to know the power of his resurrection.

May you know that the Lord is with you always, to the end of time and that nothing, not even death can separate you from his love. Because of Jesus, we will meet again.

Alleluia Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed, alleluia!

**Prayers of intercession**

God of grace,
we bring before you those who have no joy and no hope,
those who see no future, no light at the end of the tunnel,
those scarred by pain and sadness, those who grieve.
God of grace and resurrection power,
bring your joy and healing today.

We pray for those yet to hear your good news,
whether that is because they live in far-flung places,
or because they are closed to the message and the possibility of ‘What if?’
May we be Easter people, willing always to share the good news of hope, restoration and freedom to all those we meet –neighbours, friends and strangers alike.
God of grace…

We pray for those recovering from natural disasters
not just coronavirus but things such as earthquakes and hurricanes, famine, flood and poverty,
for all whose darkness is very real.
God of grace…

May all share in the joy of your resurrection.
Amen.

**Communion**

On the first Easter Day in the evening Jesus appeared to his disciples and stood among them and showed them his hands and his side and said, ‘Peace be with you!’

May the peace of the Risen Lord be with you all.

Earlier that evening he walked with disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were downcast because they thought their Lord had died and their hope was gone. Jesus explained the scriptures to them. But it was only that evening when they had a meal together and they asked Jesus to bless and break bread that there eyes were opened and their hearts burned within them with joy, because they realised their Lord was alive.

As we come to share in bread and wine and remember the Risen Lord is with us – may your hearts be full of joy too.

Let us pray:

Lord we remember the last supper you had with the disciples and telling them to do this in remembrance of you. We remember the first supper you had with them after you had risen and the joy that filled their hearts.

We thankyou that your love is stronger than death

That you live to pray for us forever.

We thankyou that you have taken away all that separates us from you and made us friends with you and one another.

We thankyou that your resurrection power is at work in our world and in our lives

Bringing us together, reconciling our differences and strengthening us by your love.

Send you Holy Spirit, the Spirit who raised you from the dead,

On these your gifts of bread and wine

That we may know your presence

Real and true and be your faithful followers now and always.

Our father….

This is my body…

This is my blood



A prayer for all ages together

*Give everyone a party popper and divide the church into five sections. After each line of the prayer, invite one section to release their poppers*.

As we think about earthquake and angels:
Let us celebrate with joy.
As we think about the stone rolled away:
Let us celebrate with joy.
As we think about Jesus raised to life:
Let us celebrate with joy.
As we think about new life and new hope:
Let us celebrate with joy.
As we think about Jesus with us today:
Let us celebrate with joy. Amen.



**In Christ alone my hope is** found,
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe.
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

A sending out prayer

Do not be afraid, the Lord is with you

Go in joy

Go in Hope

Alleluia Christ is Risen

He is risen indeed Alleluia.

1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2020/April-2020/I-saw-angels-hovering-over-my-daughter-s-body> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pup5pgEY7FI> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)