**26th April 2020**

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Call to worship

Alleulia Christ is Risen

He is Risen indeed alleluia!

Come, walk with him.
Come, talk with him.
Come, feast with him.
Come, worship Jesus, our risen Lord.



**HYMN:**

**Come, people of the Risen King**Who delight to bring Him praise
Come all and tune your hearts to sing
To the Morning Star of grace
From the shifting shadows of the earth
We will lift our eyes to Him
Where steady arms of mercy reach
To gather children in

Rejoice, rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!
One heart, one voice; O Church of Christ, rejoice!

Come, those whose joy is morning sun
And those weeping through the night
Come, those who tell of battles won
And those struggling in the fight
For His perfect love will never change
And His mercies never cease
But follow us through all our days
With the certain hope of peace

Rejoice, rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!
One heart, one voice; O Church of Christ, rejoice!

Come, young and old from every land
Men and women of the faith
Come, those with full or empty hands
Find the riches of His grace
Over all the world, His people sing
Shore to shore we hear them call
The Truth that cries through every age:
"Our God is all in all"!

Rejoice, rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!
One heart, one voice; O Church of Christ, rejoice!

Rejoice, rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!
One heart, one voice; O Church of Christ, rejoice!

Stuart Townend CCCL 532553

A gathering prayer

God, we gather as your people.
We come to walk a journey together,
to talk and to share along the way,
to meet and to know Jesus.
Help us to marvel at all that Jesus has done for us. Amen.



A prayer of approach

Risen Saviour, risen Lord,
We approach your throne with the knowledge
that you died for us and rose again.
Hallelujah, risen Lord Jesus.
Hallelujah. Amen.



A prayer of confession

Risen Lord, we are sorry
that we fail to recognise you in our midst,
that we are too preoccupied with ourselves.
We are sorry
that we let you down,
that we feast and don’t invite others to share with us.
We are sorry
that we welcome friends but not always the stranger,
or anyone who makes us feel uncomfortable.
Forgive us, Lord.
Help us to be generous people,
our church, our homes – and our hearts –
always places of welcome. Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Father, we thank you that you come out and meet us
where we are.
We worship and adore you.
We thank you that you walk the road with us, that you treat us
as an equal even when we fail to recognise you.
We worship and adore you.
You always love us, always care for us, always want to eat
and drink with us – such is your love.
We worship and adore you.
Thank you, Lord, that you are not a stranger, but our friend.
We worship and adore you. Amen.

Our Father….



**Focus scripture: Luke 24:13–35**

A lot of us are having fun learning new tricks with social media and video conferencing to stay in touch during this pandemic. A friend sent me a cartoon of the disciples having a zoom video conference. There is a square for Jesus but no picture. Jesus says ‘Hey!’. Simon Peter says, ‘How on earth is he in the meeting?’ Thomas says, ‘unless he turns his camera on I will not believe it!’



Seeing is believing! Rod spoke last week on the gospel account in John where Doubting Thomas says he can’t believe Jesus has been raised from the dead unless he sees the nail marks in his hands and side.

Today’s passage is again about the struggles with belief about the resurrection and experiencing the risen Lord with us. It is about a journey from fear and despair to faith and hope.

In Luke 24 we have two disciples – Cleopas and perhaps his wife – who are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, talking over the events of the preceding days and the puzzling story of Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus in the garden. They are sad, disappointed, and confused. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, come to bring political deliverance for Israel.

As they walk along, Jesus comes near them, but they do not recognize him. He asks about their conversation, and they tell him the story of the previous week in Jerusalem. Jesus unpacks for them the Hebrew Scriptures – stories of Moses and the prophets that tell how the Messiah must suffer in order to bring about God’s plan for salvation.

When they reach Emmaus, the two urge Jesus to stay with them because it is almost evening. Jesus has a meal with them. Though he is the guest, he takes the role of host – blessing and breaking the bread, and giving it to them. The table is the place where these two disciples came to know Jesus more deeply. Jesus vanishes, and the two return to Jerusalem to share their joy with the others.

Today I want to focus on what it means to be alongside others. What it means to be alongside each other in this time of crisis. What it means for Jesus to be alongside us.

First of all what does it mean to be alongside each other. These two disciples, Cleopas and his partner, are depressed, downcast and despondent. Things change when a stranger comes alongside them.

These are of course difficult times of isolation and social distancing. I did a funeral this week of one of our dear members who had died of Covid 19. Only five guests were allowed to gather at the crematorium we all had to keep our distance when the natural instinct is to physically console each other with handshakes and hugs at this time of sad loss. Someone’s physical presence had been removed from us and the least we wanted to do was come alongside those who grieve.

I know for many of you living alone this time is difficult. Conversely, I’m also aware of those for whom living with dangerous and violent partners or children is also hard.

We are all having to find new ways of relating and supporting each other and finding ways of being supported. Just a telephone conversation and a friendly voice on the other line can help. I know some people are desperate for contact but feel embarrassed to ask. I hope you can find people who you can just ring to say hi, how are you doing? I know we have our own team of pastoral elders set up in this church to do that, I hope you find some contacts yourself.

I think its been wonderful how the nation has rallied to support each other at this time and many towns and cities have organized volunteers to act in a supportive way. Streets have come together. We have been mindful of those putting themselves in harms ways in the health service and care homes especially, but also in food deliveries and shops, refuse collectors, delivery personnel and so on.

They have been there for us and they have received the nations appreciation and generosity.

Attention has been drawn to how the world has come together in this crisis, with countries helping one another out. We needed a delivery from Turkey this week of PPE equipment to help supply our health service. About 40% of those working in the health service are from Black Asian ethnic minorities, many from overseas. The virus knows no boundaries and makes no discriminations.

Many developing countries are facing this crisis with nowhere near the health care systems that we are privileged to have. Will we be alongside them as they have been alongside us?

Christian Aid week in a fortnight’s time usually gives a focus and outlet for the church to recognise that our neighbours are not just across the street or in our own country – but we have brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe, and humanity, made in the image of God calls on our care and love.

Obviously Christian Aid week is going to struggle this year because of social distancing and they are facing a drop in their income of at least £6 million. So I and many others are taking up the challenge to do 300,000 steps in May as a focus for sponsorship and raising much needed funds to help our neighbours in poorer countries.

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Poor communities are hit the hardest by coronavirus. It’s affecting families living in overcrowded refugee camps, and many vulnerable people who have no water to clean their hands.

With your support, we can limit the impact of the virus, with life-saving soap and water.

Your gifts will save lives.

Coronavirus impacts all of us. But love unites us all. Now is the time to reach out to our neighbours near and far to be alongside each other.

I am hesitant that by taking this literal step I may disturb the weather.

I saw a cartoon the other day which had a picture of a main street in Britain with cars going down it, people walking with umbrellas up and the rain coming down. The caption said ‘Britain in Winter’.

Then it had another picture of the main road with cars going down it and people walking out with umbrellas and the rain coming down and the caption said ‘Britain in summer’.

Then it had a picture of the main road with no cars on it and no pedestrians and the sun shining and the caption said ‘Britain in quarantine’.

I wonder if there will be a sequel with the main road no cars no pedestrians but rain and the caption ‘Simon Helme 300,000 steps in May!’

We walk alongside each other in this crisis and may we know the support of each other. Captain Tom of course is number one in the pop charts just before his one hundredth birthday – with his version of ‘You’ll never walk alone’. Let’s hope we can indeed walk on with hope in our hearts.

As a Christian I would say that our true everlasting hope is through Jesus Christ. Worshipping the NHS and making it sacred is misplaced. They are only human after all.

The Emmaus story of course is focused on the companionship of Jesus and the difference of it makes when Jesus walks alongside us.

In the King James Version of the Bible, the invitation of the two travellers for Jesus to stay with them for the evening reads, "Abide with me; for it is toward evening and the day is far spent,” words which were the inspiration for that beloved hymn, "Abide with me/Fast falls the eventide." The hymn was written by Henry Francis Lyte, for 25 years the vicar of the parish at Devonshire, England. He was 54 years old, broken in health and saddened by dissensions in his congregation. On Sunday, September 4, 1847 he preached his farewell sermon and went home to rest. After tea in the afternoon, he retired to his study. In an hour or two, he rejoined his family, holding in his hand the manuscript of his immortal hymn.

Despite what most think, Lyte's "eventide" has nothing to do with the end of the natural day but rather the end of life. "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day/Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away." The words are about the faith that faces life and death fearlessly and triumphantly in the light of the cross and the empty tomb....East of Easter. Thus Lyte could conclude, "Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee/In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me." Lyte died three months later.

If we have known the abiding presence of Jesus we will have transformed lives. When the truth of the gospel grabs you, your eyes are opened to see God’s love and God’s ways. Your heart burns. When we hear something that is true and right, we feel it deep down - there is a kind of bodily resonance that occurs. We even respond with the words, “that really moved me.” Luke here in this passage refers to this as heart burn:

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Obviously we don’t have the physical presence of Jesus with us now. Christians believe we have the spiritual presence of Jesus with us. How do we know the spiritual presence? How does Christ abide with us today?

Prayer is the key. Prayer is being still and centring on the presence of Christ. I’ve been reading Pete Greig’s book *How to Pray: a simple guide for normal people*. I commend it to you. You can get it on kindle. I’m not on commission!

I know many people are spending lockdown by learning new hobbies or taking online exercise classes. What about learning more about prayer? Learning how to abide with Christ?

Pete Greig heads up the 24/7 Prayer movement and the book links into a free website [www.prayercourse.org](http://www.prayercourse.org) That website has free sessions that go through the book – whether you read it or not.

It also has downloadable advice on different types of prayer – what they call a toolkit for prayer:

How to pray the Lords Prayer, how to pray the Psalms, how to pray creatively,

How to practice the presence of God; how to lament, how to intercede, how to do silent prayer, contemplation. Fasting, speaking in tongues.

How to turn parenting into prayer, warfare prayer.

Lots of really great material to ponder on and develop your prayer life and abiding with Christ.

The scriptures have always been a way for us to get close to Christ – reading them with the Spirit’s inspiration our hearts can burn within us. There are lots of free bible reading plans and commentaries to help us understand the scriptures and the Christ they testify to – things like the Bible in One Year course <https://www.bibleinoneyear.org/>

And the URC sends out by email daily devotions <https://devotions.urc.org.uk/>

Hopefully they are a way not only to know about Jesus but to help you know Jesus – as if the words you are reading are words that the Lord is addressing to you.

When Jesus drew near Cleopas and his partner walking on the road to Emmaus, they were despondent and downcast. They called Jesus only a prophet not the Messiah, because whilst they had followed him they saw him get crucified and therefore thought he was not who he said he was – a failed messiah, their hopes dashed.

Jesus said, ‘how foolish you are’. Usually in the bible when people are called fools it has to do with them denying there is a God or being sceptical that God is at work for good in the world and they lose hope. (e.g. Ps 14.1; Luke 12.20)

Jesus explains from the scriptures God’s plan and turns their attitudes and mood around.

Pete Grieg in his book ‘How to Pray’ describes how once a dark cloud of despair descended upon him one morning when he became inexplicably and overwhelmingly fearful about the future. I know many of you may be in that position, worried about your jobs or your career prospects as a result of this crisis.

Pete said that he realised that although this feeling was very powerful it may not be true. He reached for his Bible and found Jeremiah 29.11 and began to read it.

***11****For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.****12****Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.****13****You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*

Instead of just reading this verse and thinking ‘how nice’, he felt challenged to take this promise seriously and apply it to his situation.

‘I choose to believe that the Lord has a plan for my life and that he’s in charge! I refuse to panic. I’m not going to be afraid. I reject the lie that I’m continually missing out, that everyone else is moving ahead. That I’m getting left behind.’

His mind turned to Romans 8.1

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*

‘Get off my back Satan!’ he cried. ‘I can see what you’re trying to do and Im not giving in. Stop accusing me. Stop lying to me. I’m seated in the heavenly realms with Christ. He’s on my side. I’m not going to feel guilty or ashamed. I’m clothed in the righteousness of of Christ. Get lost!’

He found his mood changing as a result of this prayerful resistance. One of the reasons to spend time regularly in scripture is to sharpen the sword as they say – St Paul described the word of God as the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.14). When God speaks to you through his word it’s not just to bring solace to your soul and light to your path but to arm you with the truth you desperately need for the fight of your life.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It’s easy to forget how much control we actually have over our minds. The 20th-century preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, *“Have you realised that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself*?” **[[2]](#endnote-2)** Our tendency is to let our minds run where they want with a constant stream of thoughts. But Lloyd-Jones points out that the psalmist’s response was usually to talk back, to refuse to allow his “self” to dictate his thought life. Three times, in Psalms 42 and 43, he asks himself, “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?” Then instructs himself: “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”

Talking to yourself isn’t a sign of madness, it’s a sign of wisdom. You get to choose, in lockdown or in liberty, in coronavirus or in radiant good health, whether to be discontented with your lot, or whether to trust in, lean on and praise your Saviour and your God. Which will you choose today?

Then finally we sense the presence of Christ not just in prayer, through reading the scriptures but also in acts of blessing and thanksgiving. Cleopas and his partner’s eyes were opened to see Jesus when Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it.

Many see this as symbolic of communion or the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper – it has resonances in scripture with the Last Supper, but also the feeding of the 5000 when Jesu took bread, blessed it and broke it.

But it speaks to me of the times in life when we feel the closeness of God because of the blessings we receive – it may be the sunset over the hills, the fragrance of a flower, the love and appreciation of a friend, the delivery of much needed food – all can be sacramental acts – where we glimpse something of God’s graciousness towards us and God’s providence, God’s provision and care for our lives- God coming alongside.

In this month’s Reform magazine, a number of URC ministers were asked How is God with us in this pandemic? Susan Durber wrote[[3]](#endnote-3):

‘There is a new ordinary now, and it is much more suffused with the presence of God because I am longing for God and looking for God…. And finding God in my dining room with a candle lit and no words more clever than my tired heart can frame in the moment.

Whenever in my life I have faced trauma or sorrow, I have found that God is waiting for me and saying something like: ‘I’ve got you’. I am not naïve or blithely optimistic about the future and I find it hard to say ‘All shall be well’. But I do believe and trust in the God who was present in the manger, on the cross and in the tomb. And I hope always in resurrection’.

Burning hearts, eyes opened—are these not indications of an Easter power and presence within us, the gift of the risen Christ’s Spirit? Burning hearts, eyes opened to the promise of resurrection and new life, with the good news that fear and death do not have the final word, that love is stronger than hatred, that peace is indeed a possibility.

If our hearts are on fire because we have known his love and presence we are never the same again and we are witnesses to all that he was and did and said and this matters because through Jesus we believe we see what God is like, and that matters – because that ultimately is decisive. So through Jesus we see God who is passionate about justice, who didn’t tolerate evil and oppression. The God who went after the unloved and outcast of society who included all because all were loved children of his heavenly father – Our Father in heaven, not my father in heaven. He forgave all from the cross – he carried the sins of all humanity at Calvary not just the good people. All have sinned, all fall short. All need God’s mercy.

And Jesus says to us ‘peace be with you’. ‘You are my witnesses’. May our eyes be opened and our hearts burn.

Lord help us be alongside each other in this crisis, helping our neighbour. Lord be alongside us, abide with us we pray. May our hearts burn with the fire of your love and our eyes be open to your grace and hope.

. Prayers of intercession

Lord,
we pour our stories out to you,
right where we are.
Meet with us, here and now;
quieten our chattering minds and draw us close,
so close that we can feel your presence and hear your voice.
Warm our hearts until they burn within us.
Open our eyes so that we can see.
Tell us *your* story
and reveal our place in it.
Lead us on, into your way.

Living Lord,
we bring to you the needs of the world.

We pray for those who consider themselves to be strangers
and outcasts.
Help us always to welcome the stranger, whatever the cost,
not sitting comfortably and ignoring people we think
don’t fit in,
not taking the easy way.

May our homes and churches be places of welcome,
hospitality and love,
that all may have the chance to recognise and see you
in the warmth of those around them.

We pray for countries where food and water and basic medical supplies and health care is in short supply. May they receive the support of others coming alongside ast this time of need.

Help us not to be selfish, but always to consider others.
Lord, we long for the day when all in society will be equal.
May we be a part of making that happen.

We pray for those who are lonely and have no one
to eat with them. At this difficult time of isolation may we find ways of contact and coming alongside our neighbours, so that love
and friendship can flourish, and all can enjoy the feast.

We particularly remember those who are ill, those who are suffering, those who have died or are dying, those who mourn. Bring your presence alongside them and grant them hope in their despair, light in their darkness.

Risen Lord Jesus,
as we feast with you,
help us to recognise you in all people, places and situations.
Amen.



 **Lord Jesus Christ you have come to us**You are one with us, Mary's Son.
Cleansing our souls from all their sin
pouring Your love and goodness in
Jesus our love for you we sing,
living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ now and every day
Teach us how to pray, Son of God.
You have commanded us to do
this in remembrance Lord of you
Into our lives your power breaks through,
living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us
Born as one with us, Mary's Son.
Led out to die on Calvary,
risen from death to set us free,
living Lord Jesus help us see
You are Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ I would come to you
live my life for you, Son of God.
All your commands I know are true,
your many gifts will make me new,
into my life your power breaks through,
living Lord.

A sending out prayer

Lord Jesus,
as you walked on the road to Emmaus,
walk with us on the roads we travel.
Help us to know your presence with us,
and to be your presence to others.
And, at the end of the day,
may we all enjoy your feast.
Amen.

1. Pete Greig, How to Pray, Hodder, 2019, p186-87 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/5-ways-to-fight-for-contentment-during-lockdown> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Reform Magazine, May 2020, p23 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)