**Easter Day 4th April 2021**

**Call to worship**

Alleluia Christ is risen. He is Risen Indeed alleluia!

**A prayer of approach**

In our mind’s eye, we behold our feet in sandals,
heads bowed in sorrow as we walk a dusty path in cool morning air.
The scent of the embalming spices we carry wafts around us,
the texture of the linen rolls clamped between arm and body smooth to the touch.
Ahead of us looms the tomb.
We lift our eyes to face the cold stone at its mouth,
the boundary between life and death.

But it is not there – the boundary has been breached.
He is risen! Alleluia!

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, we love the joy of Easter Sunday,
but we may not have walked through Holy Week.
We may not have been humbled by Jesus’ hands washing our feet.
We may not have tasted the bread and wine of his last shared meal.
We may not have known the primal fear of Gethsemane,
or the bewilderment of the disciples at his betrayal.
We have not known the way of sorrow to Golgotha,
the blood, sweat and tears of a crown of thorns
and the weight of a cross that will bear our dying body.
Therefore, Lord, we confess our failure to feel at one with Jesus
in his dying as well as in his resurrection life.
As we celebrate our risen Lord, we remember the man of sorrows
who died for our sins, and we bow our heads in penitence.
**Amen.**

 **Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, in the warmth of your hands washing human feet,
**we are forgiven.**
Lord, in your willingness to drink the cup of suffering for us,
**we are forgiven.**
Lord, in the wide embrace of your arms upon the cross,
**we are forgiven.**
Risen Lord, in your emerging from the tomb,
death is defeated.
**We are forgiven.**
**Alleluia! Amen!**

**John 20.1-18**

**SERMON**

John records in his gospel that Mary goes to the tomb while its still dark. She is full of grief having seen Jesus die. She finds the stone in front of the tomb removed and the tomb empty. She can’t even touch the body. She runs and tells Peter and John who also go and check it out. They leave believing the body has been taken. But Mary remains, perhaps looking for something to hold on to in this time of upheaval.

Mary just stands outside the tomb and cries. As she cries two angels appear to her asking why she is crying?

They have taken my Lord away she says. At this she turns and sees Jesus but doesn’t recognize him. Jesus asks her ‘who is it you are looking for?’

Mary thinks he is the gardener.

‘Tell me where you have put him and I will get him’ she pleads.

Jesus says her name ‘Mary!’

Then she recognizes him and cries out ‘Rabboni’ Teacher.

Jesus says ‘don’t hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father but go and tell my brothers’.

Mary, as the first witness of the resurrection, goes to the disciples and says, “I have seen the Lord!’

It is a moving and vivid story.

 It connects so much with what we have been through in the last year of this pandemic.

**There has been grief and heartache, separation and loss.**

126,000 more deaths because of Covid 19. Some of those deaths where loved ones weren’t allowed to be near the dying and deceased. Funerals where people were separated from each other, socially distanced and restricted in numbers, not allowed to meet up afterwards to laugh and cry and hug each other in usual ways of offering support and comfort.

I read the story of Evelyn and Tony Horsfall this week[[1]](#endnote-1). When Evelyn’s cancer became terminal, she moved into a care home. While there she and her husband contracted coronavirus. Tony was hospitalized in intensive care for nine days then he recovered. But as Evelyn’s symptoms worsened the couple were separated for a month and then Evelyn died in July last year. She was 723.

Tony shared his story openly on his Facebook page and his own practical strategies and advice for others who may be struggling.

He says:

* Find good people to talk to, who will listen to and reflect back to you as you share.
* Daily exercise, regardless of the weather and walk and talk with friends.
* Schedule conversations for the lowest points in your week. For him it was evenings and weekends that were tough.
* Keep a sense of perspective.
* Seek outside help to maintain your spiritual poise. He listens to Christian devotional apps to feed his soul even when he is low.
* Cultivate gratitude and thankfulness. See what you do have. Be grateful for people who are there for you.
* Sing and praise God, our true hope, right into the storm.

Mary in the story of the first Easter does many of these. She talks to someone, she grapples for a sense of perspective, she finds hope and gratitude in her experience. She goes out singing God’s praise.

There has been loss with more people unemployed and others facing economic hardship; many lacking social stimulation, parents juggling jobs and over seeing home schooling and mental health issues across the board. More than half of 16-25 year olds were ‘always’ or ‘often’ anxious – the highest levels ever recorded.

**Secondly, emotions are expressed in this story**

Across the UK lockdown restrictions are lifting, many have been able to go back to school, and tens of millions of people have had at least a first dose of a vaccine. How does this make you feel? Excited? Happy? Nervous? Worried? This week’s Gospel shows us that different emotions are natural. [[2]](#endnote-2)

The passage is all about emerging – from mourning and sadness into celebration – from darkness into light. The women see the empty tomb and at first are afraid, but then come to realize what has happened. Jesus’ body hasn’t been taken – Jesus has been raised from the dead!

The Easter story is amazing. First and foremost, it is amazing as one of the most important passages for the Christian faith: Jesus lives – life and love are stronger than the powers of evil and death. This is a powerful message. But so too is this passage a source of encouragement for those facing change – for it shows us that it is natural to be confused and emotional when change comes at first.

Like the women at the tomb, we are all experiencing change at the moment: in our lives and in the world. But good things are coming, and we can allow ourselves to look forward with hope to what we have missed.

**Thirdly, as well as change there is mystery in this story**

Mary missed Jesus – she didn’t recognize him at first. I know many people’s appearance has changed during this pandemic. Most of us haven’t seen a barber or a hairdresser in months and our lockdown hairstyles are wild. Will we recognize each other as we come back?

The idea of someone coming back from the dead appears alien to modern culture, although it is a feature of many contemporary stories – albeit usually ones from the ‘horror’ genre. Sometimes the horror is mixed with comedy – e.g., in contemporary Hallowe’en – but there is still an element of existence beyond the grave being somehow threatening, and the risen dead intending harm to the living. In contrast, the mystery of Easter says that the risen Jesus brings not terror but joy to the living. His appearance (to Mary, and later to others) is a touching place of hope, not horror.

In the Gospel story, there is a marked contrast between Mary’s response to the empty tomb and that of the two male disciples. As soon as Mary finds it, she runs to tell others, then returns to the scene where she remains weeping. Peter and the other disciple, however, neither weep nor spread the news but simply go home. It feels as if they have turned their backs on the mystery – all that they ‘believed’, seemingly, was that the tomb was empty. Because Mary gives herself over entirely to the emotion of grief she stays by the tomb, and because she ‘stays with it’ she enters more deeply into the mystery – and encounters the risen Jesus.

**Fourthly the mystery is the transformative Resurrection hope**

The resurrection is a mystery.

Can we prove it? No. Can we show the evidence. No. At least not in a way that would satisfy a modern investigation. And as we know – any ‘investigation’ would only lead to counter claims.

And yet…here we are, in this place, thousands of miles and thousands of years away from that tomb, confidently proclaiming – as we do again and again – ‘He is risen!’

We are in a touching place – a place where our lives touch a mystery that we cannot fully understand or explain. But it is a place where hope is real. A place where we catch a glimpse of a different world, a world where our God reigns, and things that we can only dream of, are not only possible but actually happening. What was it he said? I have come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, forgiveness, peace, pray and believe…

Rev Canon Dr John Polkinghorne died last month. He was an eminent scientist having PHDs in mathematics and Physics and was the President of Queens College Cambridge. But he was also an Anglican Priest. His scientific credentials were impeccable – but he was also able to speak to ordinary Christians intelligently, and with a real pastoral concern. He had no trouble believing in the resurrection. He compared it to cyberspace – something that we have all had to become more familiar with during this pandemic as a means for keeping in touch.

He wrote:

We have become used to the concept of cyber space[[3]](#endnote-3)- the realm of information accessible through our computers. That world is one of human contrivance, a world of virtual reality. But people are much more than computers. Our powers of thinking, including our access to meaning and to mathematical truths that cannot be established within the confines of the purely logical formulation we may be considering, show that we transcend the limitations of the merely computational.

One might ask what all this has to do with the human soul and coherent hope. What-ever the soul may be, it is surely the real person, linking what we are today with what we were in the past. That real me is certainly not the matter of my body, for that is changing all the time, through eating and drinking, wear and tear. We have very few atoms in our bodies that were there five years ago. What provides the continuity is surely the almost infinitely complex pattern in which that matter is organized. That pattern is the real person, and when we talk about the soul, that is what we are referring to. The infant science of complexity theory encourages us to take this kind of thought very seriously.

In these terms, we can understand in a coherent way the great Christian hope of a destiny beyond death. That hope is to be expressed in the classic terms of death and resurrection, and not in spiritualist terms of survival. Death is real and a real ending, but it is not the ultimate end, for only God is ultimate. The last word on human destiny does not lie with the fact of death but with the greater fact of a faithful Creator and a merciful Redeemer.

Of course, as far as embodiment in the matter of this world is concerned, the individual pattern that is the human soul will be dissolved at death. It makes sense, however, to believe that God will hold that pattern in the divine memory and then reembody it in the environment of the new creation at the resurrection of the dead.

We can take with all due seriousness all that science can tell us about ourselves and this world and still believe that God will remember the patterns that we are and will recreate them when we are resurrected into the life of the world to come. As Christians we know that this is not a mere theoretical possibility, for we have the resurrection of Our Lord as the foretaste and guarantee, enacted within history, of the destiny that awaits us all beyond history.

Like Mary perhaps we are still hanging around the mystery of the empty tomb, trying to hold on to something in this time of upheaval.

Tim Farron the Christian Liberal Democrat MP has written that after the disappointment at Christmas when family get togethers were cancelled at almost the last minute, has Easter become the new Christmas? Marks and Spencer say that demand for Easter eggs has risen 86% and that sales on its wider range of Easter products has shot up by 3000%.

He says ‘We brace ourselves here in the Lake District for the arrival of thousands of visitors this Easter weekend because people are eager to get out and to travel, but I think they are even more hungry for social interaction and for something to celebrate – and Easter gives them that opportunity.

In my experience as a Christian with a modest public profile, Easter and Christmas are the two times of year when the media will tolerate you saying something vaguely religious.

And the pandemic is the event that has also prompted many to ask the big questions – what’s life all about, why are we here, am I answerable to anyone except me?

So, I hope and I pray that Easter will be a much bigger deal this year and that through the get togethers of friends and family and the slightly contrived festivities, there will be real opportunities for the gospel to be shared – in person and through every form of media. After all, Easter is a series of events documented in history. If they are true, and I believe that they absolutely are, then everything changes. If Easter really happened, then there is a God… and we know his name.

Easter all began when Mary heard her name and went and told someone else of her experience. The Lord knows your name. He speaks of hope and new life to us this day. Who are you going to tell?

**Prayers of intercession**

Resurrection God, to you this Easter Day we bring our prayers for those whose lives touch ours however constantly or fleetingly, for all are your children and for all of them you gave your life and this day give your rising.

We, with the world's people, have travelled a tough and painful pandemic year, sharing burdens, pains, fears, confusion, anger and death, and through it all you have walked with us. For all those who have not felt your presence, who do not feel your presence, did not feel your guiding hand, the warmth of your breath, the calming of your words, the sureness of your step,

For them all in this moment:
**Resurrection God, we pray.**

For those who have struggled with journeys:
- actual journeys that have had to be made, for health and well-being, for escape and survival.
- faith journeys that have been sorely tested, with familiarity of surroundings changed, with companionship parted, new worship methods explored.
- spiritual journeys and encounters that have inspired lives or taken them way beyond their comfort zone.
- relationship journeys of loving or being loved, of not loving or not being loved, of changed roles and responsibilities.

For them all in this moment:
**Resurrection God, we pray.**

For those who have struggled to simply hold life together, emotionally or financially. For those who have been on furlough, laid off, made jobless, those who have had to work longer, harder, deeper.

For them all in this moment:
**Resurrection God, we pray.**

For those who have worked tirelessly through the year to provide us with the care we need across the health services and beyond. For scientists and doctors, nurses and auxiliary staff, porter, cooks, cleaners, admin staff.

For them all in this moment:
**Resurrection God, we pray.**

As we have read of political decisions that send Jesus to the cross, so we think of political decisions taken here, near and far away. In a global world of wealth and poverty, greed and generosity, may politicians be helped and supported, guided and strengthened to think not just of their own needs but the many needs of the wider world.

For them all in this moment:
**Resurrection God, we pray.**

For all people of faith, especially at this Eastertide, striving for peace and companionship, striving for harmony and meaning.

For them all in this moment:
**Resurrection God, we pray.**

For this is Easter and you are our risen God and in you we trust,
into your care we recommit ourselves and all those on our hearts today.
**Halleluijah, Halleluia, Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

God of new life and new beginnings,
we have been drawn here today
to encounter again the mysterious story of life everlasting.
Help us, like Mary, to stay close to this mystery,
to embrace our emotions,
to hear you when you call us by name,
and to experience new wonders.
**Amen.**

1. Premier Christianity Magazine, April 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Joe Allen is an undergraduate student studying Theology at the University of Exeter. The son of an Army Chaplain, he was born in Lancashire and has lived across the UK.*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/easter-day/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.elabs.com/van/Polkinghorne-How\_the\_resurrection\_makes\_sense.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-3)