

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

EASTER SUNDAY

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Isaiah 60 & Psalm 118)*

- One: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!"
- All: **The light of God's Easter miracle shines upon us all!**
- One: He who was dead is now risen and alive forevermore.
- All: **"This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes."**
- One: So rejoice and shout and sing "Alleluia!" for Christ is risen!
- All: **He is risen indeed!**

***HYMN OF PRAISE** "Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain" GtG 234 *(Verses 2-4)*

2. 'Tis the spring of souls today: **Christ has burst his prison,
and from three days' sleep in death as a sun has risen.
All the winter of our sins, long and dark, is flying
from the Light, to whom we give laud and praise undying.**
3. **Now the queen of season, bright with the day of splendor,
with the royal feast of feasts comes its joy to render;
comes to glad Jerusalem, who with true affection
welcomes in unwearied strains Jesus' resurrection!**
4. **Neither could the gates of death, nor the tomb's dark portal,
nor the watchers, nor the seal hold you as a mortal:
but today, among your own, you appear, bestowing
your deep peace, which evermore passes human knowing.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

We can scarcely take it in, O God: for our sins, Christ died; for our saving, he was raised from the dead. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." But we hold back. The news is too good to be true, so we choose not to believe it. We have a hard enough time loving ourselves; is it any wonder that we doubt how you can love us? Remove the grip of doubt from our hearts and minds. May we not be complacent about our sinfulness and wrong-doing. May we not

deceive ourselves into thinking that we haven't done anything terribly wrong. But may we also know full well the depth of your saving love and the joy of the life you offer. Forgive us our sins, and restore us to wondrous life in fellowship with you. For it is in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, that we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from I John 4)*

One: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven."

All: **"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent the only Son into the world so that we might live through him."**

One: So rejoice and be glad and believe in the good news!

All: **For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are loved, we are given new life. Amen! Alleluia!**

***RESPONSE OF PRAISE** "Halle, Halle, Hallelujah!" *(refrain)* GtG 591

Halle, Halle, Halleluja!

Halle, Halle, Halleluja!

Halle, Halle, Halleluja!

Halleluja! Halleluja!

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THE WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Almighty God,
by the power of your Spirit
roll away the stone
and reveal to us the Word of Life. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READING

JOHN 20:1-10 (Common English Bible + Today's English Version + New Revised Standard Version)

Introduction: All four of the gospels share the story of that first Easter, each with something of their own flavor for the story. Today, we read the story as John shares it with us.

1 Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." 3 Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and he went straight into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there 7 and the cloth which had been around Jesus' head. It was not lying with the linen cloths but was rolled up by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in; he saw and believed. 9 They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

SERMON “While It Is Yet Dark” by Pastor Bill Vincent

One evening, a number of years ago, I was with a couple when her father died. After spending some time with them, I headed home and arrived back at the house around 3:00 in the morning. It was still dark outside, as it would be at 3:00 in the morning, even though the moon shone brightly. It was one of those suspiciously warm days of March. And as I paused on the back porch, I heard a bird singing. Now, I think of birds singing as an indication of sunrise, a sign heralding the dawn -- a dawn which/that, in this case, was not yet visible.

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. (Jn.20:1)

Easter comes while it is yet dark -- comes to us, even in our darkness.

Imagine Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb:

Was she giddy with joy and anticipation, excited? No!

She was crushed, grieving; down and out because her Lord was gone; despondent, in a daze. The other disciples -- had they given up? -- they weren't even around.

Even after she, and the others, discovered tomb empty, she (Mary) was weeping: “Where have they taken him?” she asked.

Confused, uncertain, in turmoil.

Does this sound familiar to anyone? Can anyone identify with Mary?

We think of Easter morning as, “Oh, this is exciting! Just wait till you see what happens!”

But was Mary thinking that? No!

The one she loved dearly was gone.

Life as she knew it was shattered.

Any hope she might once have glimpsed was nowhere to be found.

She was in the dark.

But did God's Easter wait till she was happy and smiling before it came? Did God's Easter wait till she pulled herself together? Did God's Easter wait till she had bought a new dress and gathered together with all her favorite family and friends?

No! Easter came while it was still dark.

Easter comes while it is yet dark. For Mary. And for us.

We are not exempt from the pain and anguish and darkness, like what Mary and the disciples might have experienced. We know all sorts of darkness, sometimes brought on by ourselves and our stupid choices, sometimes not being our fault or brought on by us, but it simply is because that's the way life is.

We experience the darkness of our own minds, our own ignorance and misunderstanding (or our not wanting to understand).

-Mary (after our passage, when she is questioned by the angels at the tomb):

"They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!" (v.13)

-Peter and the other disciple:

They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead.
(v.9)

We know a darkness within: our own inner turmoil and shame at something we have done; fear and embarrassment at something that has happened; an inner anguish and pain over our own shortcomings, or imagined short-comings due to the disapproval of others.

There is that darkness without that closes in upon us from the viciousness and resentment, the bitterness and animosity experienced in too many relationships. The one-up-manship. One group setting themselves up over against another. Us vs. them.

And yes, the darkness of the world, of nature -- a darkness that simply is, for now, part of the arena upon which our lives are played out: a darkness that includes killer viruses that resist treatment or spread quickly, far ahead of our ability to stop them; tornadoes that wreck people's houses and their lives; floods that wash away years of work and take away years of life; death (in all its many forms) that stalks us and those we love.

And don't even ask about the future. Facing the future with uncertainty and so many questions. We are in a fog, a cloud; we cannot see what comes next. We are in the dark.

And into our darkness, the light shines, even before the dawn.

**The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.** [Isaiah wrote]
(Isa.9:2)

And John, at the beginning of his Gospel affirms confidently, for himself, for us, for the world, that

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
(Jn.1:5)

And never will.

In the midst of our darkness -- even here, God is with us, with hope and life, power and peace, and a simple, yet profound, presence.

Gloria and Bill Gaither understood this when they wrote,

**Because He lives I can face tomorrow;
Because He lives all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living
just because He lives.**

Easter comes while it is yet dark, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." (Ps.23)

For Easter is hope in the God whose power has defeated death and the darkness.

God's wonderful act of love and grace, of unimaginable possibilities and vibrant hope -- this Easter comes to us even while it is yet dark, even while we are yet dark, or stand in the darkness, or even bring our own darkness upon us.

For when it is darkest, that is when Easter shines brightest, offering us release from the shackles of death and despair, release from the burial clothes of self-centeredness and selfish preoccupation, release from hopelessness and the deadly snare of always having done things my way. God dawns upon us, breaking us free from the crippling effects of fear, the crush of pain, the grip of uncertainty.

God comes to us in Easter dawn, offering us newness of life, and a new lease on life, and a new way of life, and the best life ever; giving us courage, and strength, and the hope to go on.

Now let me be clear: None of this is to say that Easter comes the way we expect, or the way we sometimes insist it come.

Remember: the people were expecting a Messiah warrior, with power and might.

Well, the Messiah came, but not with the power and might the people were looking for. He came with a power that baffled most. He came with a life that befuddled many.

The Apostle Paul bore witness to this when he spoke of the "thorn in the flesh" that he experienced. We have no idea what that "thorn" was. Paul prayed for it to be taken away. It was not. But he did receive this response to his prayers: God said, "My grace is sufficient for you."

It may not have been the answer he was expecting, but it was an answer nonetheless. Maybe not the life he expected, but it was life nonetheless.

Easter comes while it is yet dark, even *into* our darkness.

And when we have a hard time believing that,

-remember the bulb which lies buried in the stone-cold earth, lifeless during winter; but with the warmth of spring erupts into the beauty of the lily.

-remember the caterpillar that weaves its own burial clothes and closes its own tomb, only to burst forth in the splendor of the butterfly.

We may be wrapped in a cocoon of loneliness and despair. We may feel buried beneath the frustrations and obstacles of life. But even here, in our darkness, Easter comes -- to us, to you, to me, and to the world.

And when Easter comes, something strange and wondrous happens, beyond our vision, beyond our comprehension. Something happens in the realm of mystery and faith. Something not to be explained away, but proclaimed and believed.

**This is the Lord's doing; [the psalmist writes]
it is marvelous in our eyes.**

(Ps.118:23)

The mystery is not that all our questions are answered, or all our problems are solved, or all our troubles relieved.

But that we are given life:

-empowered to address our questions, not in fear, but in faith;
-empowered to tackle our problems, not helplessly, but hopefully;
-empowered to face our troubles, not with loathing but with love.
Because God has given us life.

And when you have a hard time believing that, remember: his tomb is empty.
And remember the bird singing at 3:00 in the morning.

Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali philosopher and poet, once noted,

Faith is the bird that feels the light (and sings) when the dawn is still dark.

(Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) was a Bengali philosopher, poet, and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913)

(https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rabindranath_Tagore)

The bird knows.

When we know, then we can face life with that peace which passes all understanding, even in the midst of the storms, even in the midst of the uncertainty, even in the midst of the darkness. For we know that Easter has come to us, even when we may not exactly see it.

Easter has come.

God has come.

Never to leave us alone. Even in the darkness.

For Easter comes, while it is yet dark.

Comes. To you. To me. To the world. Even now.

Alleluia! Amen.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the love of God,

and the communion of the Holy Spirit,

we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,

whom alone we worship and serve.

With believers in every time and place,

we rejoice that nothing in life or in death

can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Let us unite our hearts in prayer, saying,
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the Church throughout the world,
that as we celebrate the feast of Jesus' resurrection,
even in new and different ways,
we may renew our faith and strengthen our witness
in Jesus' name.
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For pastors, teachers, and ministers,
that they be wise in leadership, humble in service, and fearless
in the face of difficulties;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the governments of the world and its leaders,
leaders of this country and around the world,
that they may practice compassion,
work with each other,
and reject policies that use death and suffering to their own ends;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For our planet Earth,
that we may be good stewards of its resources
and share together in its abundance;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For delivery drivers who deliver goods,
for grocery store stockers who stock shelves;
for police officers who police,
for fire fighters who fight fires;
for teachers who teach,
for healthcare workers who care for the health of others, and for their own;
that you may watch over them and care for them
as they seek to care for others;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the poor and the stranger,
that they may receive a place of refuge, hope, and hospitality;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the sick and those in distress,
that they may find healing for their pain

and know your rest;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For our neighbors,
that together we may dwell in health and harmony;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For our enemies,
that we may love them
and be agents of reconciliation in the name of Jesus;
God of Resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty God,
receive these prayers we offer,
and by the power of your Holy Spirit
use us for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ,
our Risen Lord, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who 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, forever. Amen.

OFFERING

Invitation

God has given us life in the resurrection of our
Lord Jesus Christ.
In gratitude, let us offer our hearts and the fruit
of our labor to God's service.

**Doxology GtG 606*

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise God, all creatures here below;
praise God above, you heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**
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**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Joyfully we have heard the good news. Joyfully let us give, O Lord.
By your grace, we receive forgiveness and new life. By your grace, we share
in the bounteous goodness of this world and enjoy the fruits of our labors.
Accept these offerings we bring as a token of our dedication to you and**

service toward our neighbor. Use these gifts, and use us as well, to share the message of Easter joy with all the world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***HYMN** "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" GtG 232

1. **Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!
suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!**

2. **Hymns of praise then let us sing, Alleluia!
unto Christ, our heavenly King, Alleluia!
who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia!
sinners to redeem and save. Alleluia!**

3. **But the pains which he endured, Alleluia!
our salvation have procured. Alleluia!
Now above the sky he's King, Alleluia!
where the angels ever sing. Alleluia!**

4. **Sing we to our God above, Alleluia!
praise eternal as God's love. Alleluia!
Praise our God, ye heavenly host, Alleluia!
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia!**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Go from here renewed and strong,
knowing that the Lord is alive, almighty, and present.
Look for the blessings that await you this week.
Weep with those who weep.
Rejoice with those who celebrate.
Tell the story of hope.

Now may the truth of the empty tomb—
the astonishing reality of Jesus' resurrection—
keep you fearless and sure
that you will see the Resurrected One
again and again in this life.
May the power of God's endless love

surround you and guide you,
this day and always.

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