

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The Third Sunday of Easter
18 April 2021*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: Sing to God with joyful songs; tell of God's wonderful deeds.

P: Let us call on the name of the Lord with praise.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of glory, you cause the sun to rise and chase away the shadows of night. You raised Jesus Christ from death to life so that we might be born anew. Fill us, now, with the power and peace of your Holy Spirit; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful One, you search our hearts and know us. Help us to see and acknowledge our need for your mercy. Forgive our false hope and unexamined prejudice. Forgive the illusions we fall for. Forgive the falsehoods we tell ourselves, and others, and you. Dispel the fears that blind us to your presence. Give us courage to turn to you for forgiveness and healing. Let your love find a home within us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Living God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread, open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever.
Amen

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "If we have died with Christ, we shall also live with him." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Holy One, open our minds to understand the Scriptures, and fill us with joy at the presence of the Risen Christ. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 4 *(A Plea for Help)*

Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
 You gave me room when I was in distress.
 Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.
 How long, you people, shall my honour suffer shame?
 How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?
 But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself;
 the Lord hears when I call to him.
 When you are disturbed, do not sin;
 ponder it on your beds, and be silent.
 Offer right sacrifices,
 and put your trust in the Lord.
 There are many who say, 'O that we might see some good!
 Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!'
 You have put gladness in my heart
 more than when their grain and wine abound.
 I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
 for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St Luke 24: 36b-48 *(The Risen Jesus allays the disciples' fear and opens their minds to truth.)*

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.

He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?'

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Luke 24:41 *“They were disbelieving and still wondering.”*

Jesus’ Resurrection is the big pill we’re asked to swallow. Is it hallucinogenic, or does it ‘open the doors of perception’? If we’re aloof but admiring of Jesus, we may feel it’s wise to step back from the brink of this mystery, to be safely disbelieving yet still wondering. ‘Open’ to God? Sure, but not *too* open, lest we fall for something foolish.

So, our answer might be this: “Jesus’ *teachings* give one food for thought, that’s for sure. He’s on par with Socrates, Confucius, and Buddha. Maybe even Oprah. But I’d be a fool to swallow that big pill called Resurrection.”

Are we ‘brave’ to say this, or just timid?

America’s third President, Thomas Jefferson, said something like this. He was a brilliant man. But flawed too. The man who penned “All Men are Created Equal” kept slaves and enriched himself on their labour. Yet he was massively in debt when he died. Still, he thought he was much smarter than any first century ‘peasant’ or present-day ‘Christian’ – by which he meant he was not as *gullible* as they are.

He took a pair of scissors to the four Gospels – literally. He cut out all the ‘superstitious’ bits – no angels at Jesus’ birth, no temptation story, no healings, no miraculous feedings, no Transfiguration, and certainly no Resurrection. Jefferson was blind to the meaning those ‘peasants’ saw in these events. They embarrassed him, so he censored them.

Jefferson’s ‘creed’ could be put this way: “Jesus was a man. Jesus died. Jesus is still dead. But we still have some of his ‘teachings’ in the Scriptures. It’s up to you to follow them if you want. And that’s that.”

The Christian creed, on the other hand, though it’s interested in what Jesus said and did, is more interested in who Jesus *is*. It’s about following a *Living* Lord.

Jefferson called his censored Bible, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Its closing words are these: "There they laid Jesus and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre and departed. *The End.*"

It's a thinner volume than the one he plagiarised from. It makes for a thinner life too. For example, it admonishes you to forgive your enemy. But that's not easy to do, is it? So, you'd better be strong-willed and self-reliant. It's all on *you* now. If you need divine mercy, Jesus is no help to you. He's dead, remember?

This is not Christianity. This is dogmatic moralism, the shrill religion of judgmental secularism. It overestimates human intelligence and underestimates human wickedness. It conveniently requires no Lord.

The sceptic's sticking point – the real 'stumbling block', as St Paul called it – has always been this: that there should be a God who lives a human life, dies a human death, and rises to a new kind of life that no one has words to describe.

Something about this offends us. All of us. Something in us doesn't want this Lord. To trust in his Resurrection would turn us upside down and backwards.

The last time the disciples had seen Jesus, he was dying on a cross. Then his dead body was sealed in a tomb, cut off from the world. At that point, the life these disciples had lived with him died too.

We feel this when people we love die. Our life with them is over. It's entombed in memory now. Memory can re-enact the past, but it can't add anything new. The dead cannot say a fresh "I love you" or "I forgive you." We'll never feel their hand in ours again.

The disciples mourned Jesus' death by enclosing themselves in the upper room, cut off from the world. Fear, grief, and the loss of hope had slammed and bolted that door. Maybe they were angry at Jesus, too, for promising something he didn't deliver. Maybe they were angry at themselves for being so gullible.

That's when Jesus came to them in his *risen* life, and said, "Peace be with you. See my hands and feet. These wounds are emblems of my love. Touch and see."

Just as God opened the tomb and raised Jesus, so Jesus opened the door to that upper room, and then the door to their hearts and minds.

St Luke says, "he opened their minds to *understand the Scriptures.*" Why? Why should we need to 'understand the Scriptures'? It's not to take away doubt and wondering. Doubt and wondering are the very forms our faith so often needs to take. How can it not? But the scissors of censorship are never the right tools. We need our eyes *opened* to faith's mystery and meaning.

The Scriptures are the big story of God's whole work in Creation and Salvation. And Jesus' Resurrection applies that big story to our little lives, here and now.

"I will always be in touch with you," he says. "Be my living witnesses, my Church. Let my living truth and peace come alive in *your* life."

The good news is that Jesus' open tomb doesn't just open the doors of perception, it opens onto new life. It resurrects the truth of who we really are, the truth God has placed deep down inside each one of us.

This truth is precious. Our 'real selves' are not forever dead, as we'd feared in our glummiest moments. The Gospel touches us when we feel its promise and hear its call to share in his Resurrection. We want this Lord after all.

The bad news is that this can never be just one more 'recreational hallucinogen', a tranquilising, optional 'add-on' to the business of living our lives. The Risen Christ calls us to the brink of mystery, and then beyond. He will turn us upside down and backwards.

It's a big pill, and solid. It can't be nibbled, but only swallowed whole.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy God, you call us to follow in the way of you Risen Son, and to care for each other with words of comfort and deeds of love in the sorrows and trials of life. We lift up our hearts to offer prayers for the Church and the world.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church. We long for the comfort and joy of your sanctuary. We miss the faces of friends. When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, let your loving touch call us to life again. Walk beside us. Make our hearts burn within us at the sound of your voice and open our eyes to your glory.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We hold before you those who are exhausted by illness and fear. We pray for those who will die alone. When the shadow of death is falling, make bright with your presence the path that passes through darkness.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch when night falls. Give your angels charge over those who lie awake with worry. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for scientists and researchers, who push back the frontiers of the knowledge of your creation. Sustain them in their work. Teach us to use the knowledge yielded by their efforts in ways that are loving and just.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of life, open our hearts to your power moving around us, between us, and within us, until your glory is revealed in our love of both friend and enemy, in communities alive with your justice and mercy, and in the healing of all that is broken.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We thank you for those who have died, who loved us well, and for the comforts of memory. Stay with us, Lord, when the day is far spent, and night is at hand. Kindle our hearts on the way, that we may recognise you in the Scriptures, in the breaking of bread, and in each other...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, source of deliverance and help, do not let our hearts be troubled, but fill us with such steadfast confidence and joy that we may sleep in your peace and arise in your light. As our Saviour has taught, so we pray:

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, the power and the glory, for ever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**