

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

*The 5^h Sunday in Lent
10:30 a.m.
29 March 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord.

P: Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Everlasting God, you hold all things in your hands: space, time, and all creation. No darkness of despair can finally eclipse your glory; grant us your peace. You are light in the darkness; shine upon us now. Open the gates to your kingdom and welcome us into your mercy. Call forth our worship and receive our praise, silent and spoken; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful God, we are frail creatures of a passing day. We confess our fears, our doubts, and our confusion. Cleanse our hearts and renew a right spirit within us. Take away the burdens we can no longer bear. Relieve our sorrow for past mistakes we cannot change. Open the path to a future in which we shall all be changed, more and more, into your image and likeness.

Lord, have mercy upon us;

Christ, have mercy upon us;

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Most holy God, your Son came into the world to call us forth from the dark tomb of death, to heal our illness from within, and to fashion your whole creation to a truer beauty of your hand. Breathe your Spirit into our lives, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, feel his joy within us, and serve him all our days; through the mercies of Jesus Christ our Saviour. *Amen.*

A Prayer for Illumination

O God, in the suffering of Christ, you share with us the depths of our darkest despair. By his rising from death, give us new light to guide us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 130 *(A poem of hope for people in dire straits.)*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

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

The Gospel Reading for the Day

St John 11: 1-45 *(Jesus visits the grave of Lazarus and brings him to life. It's a long story!)*

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So, the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through

it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So, the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory

of God?’ So, they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Gospel Reading.

St John 11:44 Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

It’s as though Jesus addresses, not the grave diggers, but Death itself. Like a latter-day Moses confronting Pharaoh – “Let my people go!” – Jesus frees Lazarus from slavery to death: “*Unbind him, Death, and let him go!*”

Much of the time, we plod life’s treadmill already wearing our graveclothes, our lives made stagnant by dashed hope, unfulfilled promise, and losses that mount with passing years. We fall “half in love with easeful Death.” Our power for joy atrophies like an unused muscle, and we die a bit more inside. The door to our heart seizes up, closed to all feeling. We harden. “For a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.”

When Jesus shouts at Lazarus (and at us), “Come out of your tomb and live!”, he summons us to something more than biological survival. “The glory of God is a human being fully alive,” said St Irenaeus. To be *fully* alive – to be living ‘in Christ’ as St Paul would say – is more than keeping this lump of flesh warm, fed, and watered. It’s to be ‘spiritually’ alive, animated by love, awakened to truth, and desirous for goodness and beauty.

Yes, as we enter old age, our bodies slow and stiffen. Our shadows lengthen. All our roads lead not to Rome, but to the grave. Lazarus is ‘us’. And yet (though it’s so staggering we can’t quite believe it), Jesus Christ calls us to a life so much larger than our defeats can annihilate or death can destroy. But this life comes to us not by bypassing death and defeat, for we *all* fail at things and we all die. Jesus Christ calls us not to shrink from this death, nor from the risks of love that wound us on the way, for that would be to hide from life. He only promises that the powerful voice of his love will accomplish the very thing it commands: “Unbind him, Death, and let him go.”

No one’s life lacks sorrow and pain. To live is to be vulnerable. To love is to be *very* vulnerable. Even Jesus wept. Of *course* he wept. Was any human heart more open

to divine risk than Jesus was? For the glory of God is the human Jesus, fully alive. He didn't grin like a Disney cartoon. He didn't tell Mary and Martha to cheer up because he'd have their brother 'up and talking' in no time. He shed hot tears at the tomb of his dead friend. Jesus knew life's pain and grief; the pain of living truthfully and the grief of loving fully: he lived it all, the bitter and the sweet. So, he wept at the sorrow of it all, too, at the high cost of living fully and well – not by having many mansions and much money, but by passing through the dark valley, the 'depths'.

"Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice." To pray for life in the midst of death is not to sidestep sorrow and deny that death. It's to trust God from our very depths – even the grave itself – from which God, and only God, will call us back to life.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy One, we lift up our hearts with praise and thanksgiving. Hear our prayers for the Church, the world, and each other, through Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We pray for the whole Church of Christ in every corner of the world, and especially today for the people and friends of Elmwood Avenue Church. Do not let us scatter and fall away. Keep us one within your one body. Help us manifest your love in our care for each other and for all our neighbours, until this crisis passes. Hasten the day when we can return to the sanctuary we love, to share once more the bread and cup of Holy Communion, and to praise you with psalms and hymns, with the sound of the organ and many joyful voices.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those made ill by the COVID-19 virus. Bless the sick and dying, those who love them, and those who care for them. Protect them from harm. When they grow weary give them strength to endure.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for health care workers, pharmacy staff, janitors, drivers, grocery clerks and suppliers, and all whose essential work puts them at greater risk. Bless the hands made raw from scrubbing and washing, the shoulders bearing the weight of great responsibility, the brows furrowed with worry, and the feet made weary from standing, serving, and walking to and fro.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those who are alone and lonely. Hear their cry from the depths of their isolation. Bring light to their darkness, and free them from the prison of loneliness.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those who feel overwhelmed, who feel they have had enough of physical isolation. Bless those who show a brave face, but weep with worry in secret; and bless those who weep openly with us, whose tears acknowledge our own.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those who lead at every level of government. Give them wisdom to do what is right for those most vulnerable and impoverished, so that everyone in our rich land may have shelter, food, warmth, and security.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

Blessed are you, Holy One. Come quickly and stay with us. When we see the worst, give us hope. When we feel lost, find us. Restore us to ourselves, to each other, and to you, in the power of your great love...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

Gracious God, let your holy love, shining through the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, shine through our darkest hours, until we come at last to those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, which you have prepared for those who love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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**