

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 4 APRIL 2021 – EASTER SUNDAY

This material was prepared for the Narromine Uniting Church. At Narromine, each week there is a team to assist with worship, and it is a member of the team who leads Prayers of the People – so none is provided here. That will probably be the case for the next few weeks. I hope this material is helpful as you mark the most significant and joyful of Christian festivals.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God our Father,

We offer you our thanks and praise for the wonderful news of Easter morn.

The nightmare of the crucifixion,
which has beset us over the past days,
is now behind us.

The stone has been rolled away; the bandages cast off;
the tomb is empty; for Christ has risen.

The power of death has been defeated,
and the dead hand of sin's mighty power over us has been broken.

The whole creation has been relieved of its deadly burden,
and new life has been proclaimed.

In ways that are beyond our ability to fathom,
you have reached out to us in love and mercy and grace.

We can only come to you in humility,
and with thanksgiving and praise.

You are God, and we your creatures stand in awe and gratitude before you.

And yet, even as we say those words, our God,
we confess to you that we remain in thrall of sin's alluring ways.

We so easily succumb to temptation;
our best intentions are so easily jettisoned by the momentary lapse
that returns us to the clutches of the sin we thought we had escaped.

Sometimes our sins are wilful disobedience,
but more often, they happen almost before we know it.

Our minds, which should reflect the love that you have invested in us,
wander into hatred, callousness or indifference.

Where we should give willingly and with generosity,
we find our old habits of greed and selfishness invading our thinking.

While we know that we should serve others before ourselves,
our worldliness continues to place ourselves at the centre of all things,
and all else into subservient orbit around us.

Every day, our God, we realise again our need for a saviour.

So we come once again to your throne of mercy,
confident, not in anything we ourselves can bring,

but in the saving blood of Jesus Christ,
who died that our sin might be dealt with and forgiven.

So we come in Jesus' name, humbly to seek your mercy and forgiveness.

Amen

2 Declaration of Forgiveness

The good news of Easter is that our sins can be forgiven.

The writer of I John assures us with these words,

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins

and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

In the Christ who truly rose,
who is indeed alive,
our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God

3 **Bible Readings** –

John 20:1-18

I Corinthians 15:1-11

4 **Sermons:** See below

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples,
“I have seen the Lord.”*

Mary’s life was changed,
for the resurrection is indeed a life-changing experience.
So go now, as those whose lives have been changed,
to love and serve the Lord.

The blessing of almighty God,
Father, Spirit and the gloriously risen Son,
be with you now,
and abide with you evermore.

Amen

SERMON

I once heard the State Minister for Transport, Andrew Constance, speak at the Sydney Institute. He is a true visionary, very future focused, with all sorts of innovative ideas. And one of the futuristic things about which he's very enthusiastic is autonomous vehicles – self-driving cars, trucks and buses. It's not that he's a nerdy type of bloke; and I'm sure he's no fool. The reason for his enthusiasm is because he's convinced they'll be far safer than vehicles driven by human beings. It's the *safety* aspect that drives him.

And that's because of a life-changing event in his life. At some stage – I don't recall if he said when – he was on an horrific car accident. In a way that nothing else could possibly do, it rocketed road safety right up his priority list. If – as the enthusiasts insist – autonomous vehicles will be safer, he will do everything he can to expedite and facilitate their adoption in NSW. That car crash changed his life forever.

Life changing events are exactly what the words say. They make an impression on you that's so powerful, and so indelible, that your life will never be the same again. Sadly they can be painful or difficult experiences – a severe illness, the loss of a job, a relationship breakdown, being the victim of a serious crime – that sort of thing. Happily, though, they can also be nicer experiences – experiencing the love or kindness of others, for example. I wonder what life-changing events have shaped your life. Sometimes we have to dig deep within ourselves to find them, because we do try to bury our most painful experiences away somewhere where we think they won't be able to hurt us anymore.

The two passages we have today for Easter Sunday are about life-changing experiences. So powerful were those experiences that they did more than just change the individuals who underwent them; they literally set in train an ongoing train of changes that reaches right down to our own time. The life-changing experience was, of course, the resurrection of Jesus.

We've read the passage from John's gospel countless times before. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb on the morning after the Sabbath. She sees that the stone sealing the tomb had been rolled out of its place. She immediately assumes that the body of Jesus has been stolen, and runs to tell Peter and another disciple, who everyone assumes is John himself. They come running. John reaches the tomb first, sees the bandages cast aside, but doesn't immediately go in. Peter catches him up and – impetuous as ever – goes straight into the tomb and observes the bandages more closely. John follows him in and observes the same things.

Later, Mary meets the risen Jesus, whom she mistakes for a gardener. Incidentally, Lauris and I once saw a painting of Jesus in one of the galleries in Germany, and he was wearing a hat. Apparently there are quite a few painting of Christ wearing a hat, but this was the first one I'd ever seen. But he was wearing a hat; because *gardeners* wear hats, and Mary had mistaken him for the gardener.

As I said, we've heard the story countless times before. We heard it as children in Sunday School, and we hear one version or another of it every Easter Sunday. And the trouble is that when you do hear a story over and over again, the repetition can rob it of its power. We know the story all too well, we know how it ends; there's no need to sit on the edge of our seat. Our mind might even begin to wander; our immediate concerns may seem far more interesting than that same old story. And we become blasé about what the story is saying.

And if that happens, we miss the point that, for John and Mary, these were life-changing experiences. Not fairy tales for children, but experiences that saw their lives turned upside down,

their direction completely turned around, and their understanding of life, and their priorities, radically changed. These folk had seen the one upon whom they had pinned all their hopes nailed to a cross, suffer an agonising death, his bleeding body carried off, wrapped in linen, and laid in a grave. They had been devastated. They had spent the next days in mourning and shock. And then, on Sunday morning, at the tomb, all that dramatically changes. The gospel writer tells us that when John enters the tomb, and sees the bandages cast aside, “he saw and believed.” “He saw and believed.” When Mary realises that her gardener is actually Jesus, alive once again, she runs to the other disciples and proclaims, “I have seen the Lord!” How can we miss the power of those revelations? How can we overlook how life-changing such experiences must have been? The resurrection of Jesus is a life-changing event.

If we turn to our other reading, from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, we can see just how life-changing it was for Paul. In the passage, Paul rehearses the story of the resurrection – how Christ had first appeared to Peter and the other “inner circle” of disciples, subsequently to James and the others who became apostles. On one occasion in particular, there were five hundred men and women, all of whom witnessed the risen Jesus.

The fact is that, for *most* of these folk, we have no idea how life-changing, or not, witnessing the resurrection was. But then Paul comes to himself.

Last of all, he writes, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Now let’s recall that what Paul says about having been a persecutor of the church is no exaggeration. In Acts we read just how determined he had been to stamp out the new Christian movement, and to punish those who had proclaimed the name of Jesus. Acts also tells us of his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road. I guess we hardly need to labour the point that that was a life-changing experience for Paul. But in our passage from I Corinthians, Paul makes his own statement about it.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

“I worked harder than any of the other apostles,” Paul says, acknowledging that this had only been possible because of the Holy Spirit working through him. With the result that the believers in Corinth, as well as the believers in a number of other churches of his foundation, had come to believe in Jesus Christ, the Risen One, as Lord.

From persecution to proclamation; indeed the former persecutor now one of the persecuted. In every possible way, Paul’s life had been turned around by his encounter with the risen Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is a life-changing event.

When I was a teenager, a Presbyterian, I underwent Confirmation classes with our minister. He was a pretty prominent churchman, so I’d better not give him a name. I was the only one in the Confirmation class, so I spent a number of Sunday afternoons with him in his study in the manse. It was my first encounter with liberal-thinking Christianity, and as a very young Christian, I found it a bit off-putting, though in my own maturity, I’ve come to realise that he was a wise and thinking man.

But what I did find awkward at the time, and I have never been able to reconcile, was the fact that he clearly did not believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ. He never put it quite a bluntly as

that, but it was pretty clear nevertheless. Jesus lived on in his teachings; Jesus lived on in his good works, and in the good works he inspired others to do. So yes of course Jesus lived on – but not quite in the way that Christians have understood for millennia. You’d hardly call it “resurrection”.

I’m sure you’ve encountered that kind of thinking too. Lauris and I met it again quite recently. Some of you will be aware that we’ve only worshiped at St Stephen’s for about nine years. Prior to that, we were at a local suburban congregation. For a number of reasons, we felt we had to leave, but we continued to participate in a Bible study group that “hung off” that congregation. We’d been away over one Easter, and returned in late June. Three months after Easter, when we all got together again, our Bible study friends were *still* talking about the fact that they’d come to realise that the minister had no belief in the resurrection. To say they had been shocked on Easter Sunday would be a gross understatement. I might add that most of *them* subsequently left that congregation too.

Why do we find such attitudes in the Church, indeed among some clergy themselves? What else has led them into the ministry?

Why do we hear Christian people talking about Jesus as a great teacher, and about living by “Christian values”, but refusing to accept the reality of the resurrection? It does seem a fairly pointless and futile faith. Upon what is it ultimately based, if there is no resurrected Jesus Christ?

Paul encountered people who denied the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, even back in his own day. He had some sensible and sobering words to offer, in this same letter to the Corinthians, in fact in the same chapter, a tad further on:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, he writes, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ— whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Indeed, it all starts with the resurrection. And Paul is right: if there is no resurrection, not only is there no forgiveness of sin, but we are pitiable, gullible fools.

Believing in the resurrection does defy logic. It is beyond human experience. It is in the realm of the miraculous. The easy response is to reject the very idea. You might recall that, when Paul addressed the Council of the Areopagus in Athens, his audience was interested – but only up until he mentioned the resurrection. At that, most of them scoffed and walked away.

But the reality is that, not to believe in something just because you can’t explain it is to embrace a closed mind as if it were a virtue. Believe me, I don’t understand, and certainly can’t explain, lots of things. The thing that most immediately comes to mind right now is Bitcoin. I have *no idea* how that works – and certainly don’t want to invest in it, thank you. But just because I don’t get it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Hundreds of billions of dollars most certainly prove it does! Yes, believing in the resurrection is hard, but to refuse to do so because it’s beyond our immediate experience is the true hallmark of “people most to be pitied”. Because it *is* miraculous. And because it *is* miraculous, it is also *life-changing*. No more could Mary Magdalene, no more could John, or Peter, no more could Paul, no more could James and the other apostles, no more could any of the five hundred who saw the risen Jesus all at once – no more could *any* of them explain the resurrection any better than we. But they believed, and their lives were changed. As people down

through the centuries have believed, and their lives have been changed.

Because in the resurrection of Jesus is the proof God has provided, of the wonderful truth that is at the centre of our Easter celebration. It's the truth famously recorded by John in his gospel, the truth which lies at the heart of how and why lives *are* changed by the Easter event.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Hallelujah. Christ has risen. How can our lives ever be the same again?

Amen