



# WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



***THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST***

## 4<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2021

## EASTER DAY

<b><u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u></b>	<b>PARISH OFFICE:</b> Please phone or use e-mail to make contact TEL:01252 331161; e- mail: <a href="mailto:office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk">office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk</a> <b>BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS &amp; BAPTISMS</b> – phone for an appointment on 01252 321517 or 331161 <b>WEBSITE:</b> <a href="http://www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk">www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk</a>
Acts 10 v 34 - 43	
1 Corinthians 15 v 1 - 11	
John 20 v 1 - 18	

### **ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN!**



### **SHOEBOX UPDATE**

**265,975** That's how many shoe boxes were sent last year spreading joy and giving children an opportunity to learn about Jesus. Our boxes went to Moldova, Serbia and Bosnia. Thank you.

I would love it if we could be more 'green' this year. Wooden pencils, wooden handled skipping ropes, wooden yoyo or truck. Cotton facecloth, sisal soap bag, bamboo toothbrush and metal pencil sharpeners are all good. See if you can think of some more. Barbara Rose.

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### **EASTER GREETINGS**

Fr Keith and Carol wish you all a very Happy Easter and pray that you will be richly blessed by Jesus, our Risen Lord, in the days and months ahead! Alleluia!

As the Covid restrictions begin to be relaxed, we are all looking forward to getting back together socially, in ways that have been denied us for many months. It is still too early to be putting specific dates for social events in our diaries, but, as the 'roadmap' unfolds, we hope that that will be possible soon. In the meantime, we will go on offering worship online and on our website, as well as in our church building. We will also be offering some more study and discussion sessions, via Zoom, in the coming weeks.

In the past many of us have enjoyed visiting other countries and meeting people from different cultures and backgrounds. At present, many of our neighbours and friends in those places, are suffering a third wave of the Covid Pandemic. This Easter let's not forget those whose lives and livelihoods are once again under greater threat, and remember them, especially, in our prayers.

The message of Easter is about new life and fresh hope. Jesus has promised that He is with us always, even to the end of time. As we celebrate with joy all that He has done for us, may we be inspired anew to stand alongside those around us who are suffering. Pray that God will energise us to do all that we can to help others rise from their troubles and assure them of God's constant love in Christ Jesus.

If you would like to talk to us at any time please phone us: Carol – 01252 313239. Keith – 01252 321517

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### **READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – EASTER 2**

Acts 4 v 32 - 35; 1 John 1 v 1 to 2 v 2; John 20 v 19 - end  
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Please pray for the souls of all the recently Departed, among them: JULIA HAMPTON; JOY DUNN; MOUGHAN DOWNS; STEVE EVANS; RITA WHERRELL; DOROTHY MILLARD; LIONEL COUSINS

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**PCC MEETINGS** - Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> April at 7 – 30 pm on Zoom and Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April 7 – 30 pm on Zoom

**CARE AND SHARE** - tins, packets, UHT milk, tea, coffee etc. for the shelves outside church, please leave items on the shelves or on the doorstep of the Rectory.  
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**ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN** - If you would like prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 This is a confidential service.  
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**BIRTHDAYS** - Congratulations to all who are celebrating a birthday at this time especially; SUE SMITH (5<sup>TH</sup>); TONY WHELTON (6<sup>TH</sup>); JOHN YOUNG (9<sup>TH</sup>)

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### **QUOTES FOR EASTER WEEK**

"If man had his way, the plan of redemption would be an endless and bloody conflict. In reality, salvation was bought not by Jesus' fist, but by His nail-pierced hands; not by muscle but by love; not by vengeance but by forgiveness; not by force but by sacrifice. Jesus Christ our Lord surrendered in order that He might win; He destroyed His enemies by dying for them and conquered death by allowing death to conquer Him." - A.W. Tozer

## SOME THOUGHTS FROM FR. KEITH FOR EASTER DAY

Since the start of the first Lockdown, I have been keeping a daily diary. In the entry for Maundy Thursday last year, when the church was completely closed, I see that I came over to check the everything was OK and commented that it felt like a fridge in here, whereas outside it was summer. I might as well have said it felt as cold as a tomb!

We've come a bit of a way along the road of recovery since then, but my impression of this building last Easter got me thinking. To a passer-by, at that time, St Peter's may well have appeared tomb like, a place devoid of the life that it had once had. But the truth was quite different of course. The building was 'lifeless' but St Peter's, that is to say, us, the people, was still very much alive. We may not have got as far as online videos at that stage, but we were still sharing written services and keeping in touch with one another. The 'tomb' was empty, but life was going on elsewhere – just as it was on that first Easter Day 2000 years ago. Indeed, the real life of the church is always to be found in its' members, who, together, form Christ's Body, rather than in any structure built by human hands.

Jesus' friends were amazed to meet Him again and see that He was alive. Then they began to believe, at last, what He had already told them about the resurrection-life. In the upper room that same evening He breathed on them so that they would receive the life-giving Spirit. They too would then come alive and be able to help bring others alive too.

Easter is all about new life and new energy. From what had appeared to be a disaster on Good Friday, God brought fresh hope and the promise of a future beyond the bounds of human understanding. Sins forgiven and death defeated, a new beginning for all who were prepare to claim it for free.

We still face much uncertainty about our immediate future. The pandemic isn't over yet, and there may well be more hardships to face. But, whatever lies ahead for us, one thing we can be certain of is that the new life we are celebrating today cannot be taken away from us, if we stay faithful to Jesus. He will walk with us, as he did with the disciples on the Emmaus Road, and, like them, we will recognise Him in the breaking of bread.

We live in a society that, by and large, looks at buildings like this and sees them as dead places. We read of declining numbers in church going and churches turned into flats or nightclubs. Nonetheless, there is also a great hunger for the spiritual life. Many people are looking for something that they can rely on, beyond what they saw as 'certainties' before Covid struck. There is much healing to be done, both in terms of health, relationships and well-being. I believe that God is calling us to break out of the 'tombs' that have confined us, and spread Jesus' message of life in all its' fullness to a world that is searching for a 'new normal'. We have the Good news that the new beginning starts with the Easter Story and now, more than ever, we must share it.

We need to be seen as an 'Easter People' full of Life and Hope. Rather than talking of 'going back' to what life was like before Covid, let's learn from those first disciples and take courage to break out in new ways with Easter Joy. Let's show people that Jesus is alive today, and allow ourselves to be fired up anew in His service. Jesus sent Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples she had seen Him, now He sends us to share the love that we have found in Him. The Spirit will show us how, if we trust God and keep believing!

## Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday

*(A recording of this service is available to view now on the St Peter's website.)*

### EASTER SUNDAY

*If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand.*

*(L) Alleluia, Christ is risen!  
All: He is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

*(L) O Lord, open our lips  
All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.*

*(L) In your resurrection, O Christ,  
All: let heaven and earth rejoice. Alleluia.*

*A candle may be lit*

*Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation,  
to you be praise and glory for ever.  
As once you ransomed your people from Egypt  
and led them to freedom in the promised land,  
so now you have delivered us from the dominion  
of darkness  
and brought us into the kingdom of your risen Son.  
May we, the first fruits of your new creation,  
rejoice in this new day you have made,  
and praise you for your mighty acts.  
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
All: Blessed be God for ever.*

*This hymn is said or sung:*

*Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!  
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!  
Who did once, upon the cross, Alleluia!  
Suffer to redeem our loss, Alleluia!*

*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!*

*But the pain which He endured, Alleluia!  
Our salvation hath procured, Alleluia!  
Now above the sky He's king, Alleluia!  
Where the angels ever sing, Alleluia!*

*(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before us;  
let us pray with one heart and mind:*

*All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,  
so may the light of your presence, O God,  
set our hearts on fire with love for you;  
now and for ever. Amen.*

*(L) Christ our passover lamb has been sacrificed for us.  
Let us therefore rejoice by putting away all malice and  
evil and confessing our sins with a sincere and true  
heart.*

*Pause to call to mind our sins and then we confess them:*

Jesus Christ, risen Master and triumphant Lord,  
we come to you in sorrow for our sins,  
and confess to you our weakness and unbelief.  
We have lived by our own strength,  
and not by the power of your resurrection.  
We have lived by the light of our own eyes,  
as faithless and not believing.  
We have lived for this world alone,  
and doubted our home in heaven.  
In your mercy, forgive us.  
Lord, hear us and help us.

(L) God of love and power we ask you to  
forgive us and free us from our sins,  
heal and strengthen us by your Spirit,  
and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. Amen.

*The collect for Easter Sunday:*

Lord of all life and power,  
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son  
overcame the old order of sin and death  
to make all things new in him:  
grant that we, being dead to sin  
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,  
may reign with him in glory;  
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit  
be praise and honour, glory and might,  
now and in all eternity. Amen.

*Read Acts 10 v 34c – 43 then Psalm 118 v 1 – 2, & 14 - 24  
concluding with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as  
it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

*Read 1 Corinthians 15 v 1 - 11*

(L) Alleluia, alleluia. I am the first and the last, says the  
Lord, and the living one;  
I was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore.

*All: Alleluia.*

*Now read John 20 v 1 - 18*

*Fr. Keith has written some thoughts for today – see above,  
before the start of this service.*

*Now pause for your own reflections.*

(L) Let us affirm our faith:

*All: We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and  
unseen.*

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of  
God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God,  
Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not  
made, of one Being with the Father; through him all  
things were made. For us and for our salvation he came  
down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit  
and the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he  
was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and  
was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance  
with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is  
seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again  
in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his  
kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the  
Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has  
spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of  
the world to come. Amen.

*All: Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us:  
so let us celebrate the feast,  
not with the old leaven of corruption  
and wickedness:  
but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

Christ once raised from the dead dies no more:  
death has no more dominion over him.  
In dying he died to sin once for all:  
in living he lives to God.  
See yourselves therefore as dead to sin:  
and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Christ has been raised from the dead:  
the first fruits of those who sleep.  
For as by man came death:  
by man has come also the resurrection of the dead;  
for as in Adam all die:  
even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

*We now say 'The Benedictus' together:*

*All: The Lord is risen from the tomb  
who for our sakes hung upon the tree. Alleluia.*

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦  
who has come to his people and set them free.
- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦  
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦  
to save us from our enemies,  
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦  
and to remember his holy covenant.
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham  
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦  
holy and righteous in his sight  
all the days of our life.
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the  
Most High, ♦  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦  
by the forgiveness of all their sins.
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
- 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the  
shadow of death, ♦  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

*All: Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.*

*All: The Lord is risen from the tomb  
who for our sakes hung upon the tree. Alleluia.*

*Prayers of intercession now follow*

We pray to Jesus who is present with us to eternity.  
Jesus, light of the world,  
bring the light and peace of your gospel to the nations.  
We especially pray for the Yemen and Myanmar at this time.

Jesus, Lord of life - in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, bread of life, give food to the hungry  
and nourish us all with your word.  
We give thanks for all who contribute  
to our Care & Share, foodbanks and  
supermarket collection points.

Jesus, Lord of life - in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, our way, our truth, our life,  
be with us and all who follow you in the way.  
Help us as a church to draw people into your way.  
Deepen our appreciation of your truth  
and fill us with your life.

Jesus, Lord of life - in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, Good Shepherd who gave your life for the sheep,  
recover the straggler, bind up the injured,  
strengthen the sick  
and lead the healthy and strong to new pastures.

Jesus, Lord of life - in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, the resurrection and the life,  
we give you thanks for all who have lived and believed in  
you, and this week we remember: JULIA HAMPTON; JOY  
DUNN; MOUGHAN DOWNS; STEVE EVANS; RITA  
WHERRELL; DOROTHY MILLARD; LIONEL COUSINS  
Raise us with them to eternal life.

Jesus, Lord of life - in your mercy, hear us,

Joining our prayers to those of Mary, Peter and all the  
saints we pray together

*All:* Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of  
your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

*The following hymn may be said or sung:*

Thine be the glory risen conquering Son  
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won  
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away  
Kept the folded grave clothes where Thy body lay.

*Thine be the glory risen conquering Son  
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won*

Lo! Jesus meets us risen from the tomb;  
Lovingly, He greets us scatters fear and gloom.  
Let the church with gladness hymns of triumph sing,  
For her Lord now liveth; death hath lost its sting

*Thine be the glory risen conquering Son  
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won*

No more we doubt Thee, glorious Prince of life,  
life is naught without Thee aid us in our strife  
Make us more than conquerors through Thy deathless love  
Bring us safe through Jordan to Thy home above.

*Thine be the glory risen conquering Son  
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won*

*Let us pray:*

(L) God of glory,  
by the raising of your Son  
you have broken the chains of death and hell:  
fill your Church with faith and hope;  
for a new day has dawned  
and the way to life stands open  
in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

(L) God of Life,  
who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son  
to the death of the cross,  
and by his glorious resurrection  
have delivered us from the power of our enemy:  
grant us so to die daily to sin,  
that we may evermore live with him  
in the joy of his risen life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(L) May the God of peace,  
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,  
that great shepherd of the sheep,  
through the blood of the eternal covenant,  
make us perfect in every good work to do his will,  
working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight;  
and the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us and  
remain with us this day and always. Amen.

(L) Alleluia, Christ is risen!  
*All:* He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

(L) Let us bless the Lord. Alleluia! Alleluia!  
*All:* Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

*All:* May the souls of the faithful departed, through the  
mercy of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory.  
Amen.

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## Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,  
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God, make speed to save us.  
O Lord, make haste to help us.

In your resurrection, O Christ,  
let heaven and earth rejoice. Alleluia.

*A candle may be lit*

Blessed are you, Sovereign Lord,  
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
to you be glory and praise for ever.  
From the deep waters of death  
you brought your people to new birth  
by raising your Son to life in triumph.

Through him dark death has been destroyed  
and radiant life is everywhere restored.  
As you call us out of darkness into his marvellous light  
may our lives reflect his glory  
and our lips repeat the endless song.  
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Blessed be God for ever.

*This hymn may be said or sung:*

Ye choirs of new Jerusalem,  
your sweetest notes employ,  
the Paschal victory to hymn  
in strains of holy joy.

How Judah's Lion burst his chains,  
and crushed the serpent's head;  
and brought with him, from death's domains  
the long-imprisoned dead.

From hell's devouring jaws the prey  
alone our leader bore;  
his ransomed hosts pursue their way  
where he has gone before.

Triumphant in his glory now  
his sceptre ruleth all;  
earth, heaven and hell before him bow  
and at his footstool fall.

While joyful thus his praise we sing,  
his mercy we implore,  
into his palace bright to bring  
and keep us evermore.

All glory to the Father be,  
all glory to the Son,  
all glory, Holy Ghost to thee,  
while endless ages run.

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,  
so may your mercy come down upon us  
to cleanse our hearts  
and set us free to sing your praise  
now and for ever. Amen.

*A Psalm is said: Mon 135; Tue 136; Wed 105; Thurs 106;  
Fri 107; Sat 145 ending with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.  
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between  
the two readings we say:*

*All* God raised Christ from the dead,  
the Lamb without spot or stain. Alleluia.

- 1 Blessed be the God and Father ♦  
of our Lord Jesus Christ!
- 2 By his great mercy we have been born anew to a  
living hope ♦  
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the  
dead,
- 3 Into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and  
unfading, ♦ kept in heaven for you,
- 4 Who are being protected by the power of God through  
faith, ♦  
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
- 5 You were ransomed from the futile ways of your  
ancestors ♦

- not with perishable things like silver or gold
- 6 But with the precious blood of Christ ♦  
like that of a lamb without spot or stain.
  - 7 Through him you have confidence in God, who raised  
him from the dead and gave him glory, ♦  
so that your faith and hope are set on God.

*All* Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

*All* God raised Christ from the dead,  
the Lamb without spot or stain. Alleluia.

*Readings:*

Monday Exodus 12 v 1 – 14; 1 Corinthians 15 v 1 -11  
Tuesday Exodus 12 v 14 – 36; 1 Corinthians 15 v 12 - 19  
Weds. Exodus 12 v 37 – end; 1 Corinthians 15 v 20 - 28  
Thursday: Exodus 13 v 1 – 16; 1 Corinthians 15 v 29 – 34  
Friday Exodus 13 v 17 to 14 v 14; 1 Cor. 15 v 35 - 50  
Saturday: Exodus 14 v 15 – end; 1 Cor 15 v 51 - end

*After the second reading we say:*

The Lord is my strength and my song:  
he has become my salvation.

I shall not die, but live,  
and declare the works of the Lord.

Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit.  
The Lord is my strength and my song:  
he has become my salvation.

*Gospel Cantic: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)*

*All* The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone. Alleluia.

- 1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit  
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on  
his lowly servant.
- 2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the  
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his  
name.
- 3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation  
to generation.
- 4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered  
the proud in their conceit.
- 5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting  
up the lowly.
- 6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the  
rich away empty.
- 7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to  
remember his promise of mercy.
- 8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and  
his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.  
Amen.

All The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone. Alleluia.

*Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.*

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

*This hymn may be said or sung:*

Alleluia, alleluia!  
Hearts to heaven and voices raise:  
sing to God a hymn of gladness,  
sing to God a hymn of praise.  
He, who on the cross a victim,  
for the world's salvation bled,  
Jesus Christ, the King of glory,  
now is risen from the dead.

Christ is risen, Christ, the first fruits  
of the holy harvest field,  
which will all its full abundance  
at his second coming yield:  
then the golden ears of harvest  
will their heads before him wave,  
ripened by his glorious sunshine  
from the furrows of the grave.

Christ is risen, we are risen!  
Shed upon us heavenly grace,  
rain and dew and gleams of glory  
from the brightness of thy face;  
that we, with our hearts in heaven,  
here on earth may fruitful be,  
and by angel hands be gathered,  
and be ever, Lord, with thee.

Alleluia, alleluia!  
Glory be to God on high;  
Alleluia! to the Saviour  
who has gained the victory;  
Alleluia! to the Spirit,  
fount of love and sanctity:  
Alleluia, alleluia!  
to the Triune Majesty.

Let us pray:

Lord of all life and power,  
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son  
overcame the old order of sin and death  
to make all things new in him:  
grant that we, being dead to sin  
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,  
may reign with him in glory;  
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit  
be praise and honour, glory and might,  
now and in all eternity. Amen.

God of life,  
who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to  
the death of the cross,  
and by his glorious resurrection  
have delivered us from the power of our enemy:  
grant us so to die daily to sin,  
that we may evermore live with him  
in the joy of his risen life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great  
mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,  
for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

All: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all evermore. Amen.

Let us bless the Lord. Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.

May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy  
of God, rest in peace. Amen

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## **SERMON FROM BISHOP ANDREW**

*'So great a cloud of witnesses'*  
*1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-8.*

A prolonged Holy Saturday: that was the idea of a working group of bishops and liturgists as we prepared for Holy Week and Easter last year. At that point we were still suffering from the shock of the closure of our church buildings. Daily death rates from Covid-19 were climbing towards their first peak of 1000 or more. Supermarkets were running out of flour and toilet paper, as panic-buying set in. Churches were having to reinvent themselves, with even the oldest of dogs needing to learn the newest of technological tricks.

And that's the background that led to the conclusions of that working group, encouraging us to find hope, even in the midst of quote 'this prolonged Holy Saturday of emptiness in which we find ourselves'.

It was a phrase that I instinctively rebelled against, and I rebel against it still. It's partly that it bore an uncomfortable resemblance to those evocative words from the lips of the faun Mr Tumnus in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe':

*'It is winter in Narnia, and has been for ever so long... always winter, but never Christmas'.*

It's partly because even at that point it was clear that this new take on Holy Saturday could be prolonged for a very long time, and that the idea of hope combined with Holy Saturday simply didn't add up. But at the heart of my objection was the sense that the year 2020 needed the glorious reassurance of Easter Day like no other year in my lifetime: that if the message of Easter had to be delayed until people stopped dying, then we'd fundamentally missed the message of Easter!

A year on, and the Covid situation is considerably more hopeful, though most of us come to *this* Easter service, mourning the death of friends or family members over the past 12 months. My own mother-in-law Hazel died in her care home in Harpenden just eight days ago, and we're currently in the process of organising a Covid-restricted funeral, as so many other families have had to do before us.

And here's where our Easter readings bring not just comfort in an emotional sense, but what the writer to the Hebrews calls a 'sure and certain hope', indeed an 'anchor for the soul'. Because the common element in the lectionary readings set for today is the concrete theme of witnesses: not of a vague and speculative set of beliefs in the afterlife which have somewhat surprisingly come to be accepted by a third of the world's population; but of a series of historical events as witnessed by a remarkable number of apparently trustworthy people willing to stake their lives on them – events which if true turn our whole understanding of life and death and the very meaning of human existence – indeed the meaning of the existence of the whole cosmos - completely on its head.

Our reading from the Book of Acts gives us a great introduction to this theme, as St. Peter embarks on a brand-new experiment in his new-found calling to fish for people: fishing in a Gentile pond for the very first time, after his highly successful Jewish fishing exploits on the Day of Pentecost. In addressing the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius, Peter speaks of how he and his fellow apostles were *witnesses* of Jesus' ministry from his anointing by the Holy Spirit, to his healing ministry in Galilee and Judea, to his death on the cross – and then to his risen presence too, where we 'ate and drank with him' after he rose from the dead, before being commissioned to spread this good news far and wide. For good measure, Peter adds, there were even witnesses of a rather different kind *before* Jesus arrived on the scene: the prophets who testified about him that everyone who believed in him would receive 'forgiveness of sins through his name'.

Our gospel reading picks up the theme too, though at this point it was the empty tomb and the neatly-folded head cloth that confronted that first witness, Mary Magdalene, and the two apostles who came to join her: not a resurrection encounter as yet, but still enough, for the apostle John at least, to 'see and believe'.

But it's our epistle reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that really brings the point home - one of the very earliest of all the New Testament writings, dating back to just twenty years after the events it describes. Because the risen Jesus, writes Paul, appeared to Cephas (that's Peter) and then to the twelve. Next he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still alive. Then he appeared to his own half-brother James – now that may explain how one of Jesus' initially sceptical family members ended up leading the church in Jerusalem. And then, following a further appearance to the apostles, he appeared to Paul also as to one 'untimely born'.

It's an impressively lengthy and varied list, and all the more impressive because – when read in context – Paul wasn't presenting some kind of 'evidence for the resurrection' here: he was rather spelling out the common ground on which he and all his readers agreed. It's true that there were plenty of divisions in the Corinthian church, not least between those who rated Paul highly and those who didn't. It's for that reason, perhaps, that Paul spoke of his own extraordinary experience on the Road to Damascus in quite such modest terms – one 'untimely born', as he put it, literally a 'miscarriage', leading to that description of himself as the 'least of the apostles'. But here's the common ground, the primitive Christian creed, that bound them all together: that

*'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve'....*

... and then to a whole lot of others.

There's an implied invitation here, just in case any of Paul's readers are wavering at this point. Most of the 500 of those resurrection witnesses are still alive, he writes – in other words, 'Go and talk to them about it if you'd like to have it from the horse's mouth'. And Paul's list as a whole goes a long way in explaining one of the great mysteries that has perplexed more secular historians over the years: just how a tiny Messianic movement emanating from one of the most introvert and self-contained of all ancient cultures and culminating, apparently, in the brutal execution of its founder – can have made such an extraordinary impact across the Roman empire within a generation of its inception.

So why am I rather labouring this theme, twelve months after a working group of bishops and liturgists wrote of 'this prolonged Holy Saturday of emptiness in which we find ourselves'. It's really to make the simplest of points, and one that I can't ever imagine hitting the headlines: 'Bishop says that the Resurrection of Jesus actually happened'.

The Resurrection of Jesus actually happened. 'Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!' And as Paul continues in his first letter to the Corinthians, that truth has astonishing implications. First, it holds out the reality of life beyond death: through the cross of Christ, as he puts it, 'death has lost its sting'. Secondly it speaks of a resurrection that is somehow physical – of resurrection *bodies* like Jesus' resurrection body - though physicality of a quite new kind, as different as the plant is from the bulb from which it sprang. And finally it points to a greater transformation still – the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, which is God's ultimate plan for all that He has made. But that's a theme for another day.

Because today – whatever the future twists and turns in the Corona-coaster ride that lies before us – today is Resurrection Day. Today is the day that reminds us that – though we grieve following quite such an appalling and disorientating year – we do so not as those who have no hope, but as bearers of a most extraordinary and revolutionary message of all time.

In this increasingly secular age we get used to justifying the Church's existence in the works of charity that we initiate: in the food banks and the debt centres, in the counselling services and the homeless shelters: and these are all good things – very good things - a wonderful overflow of our love for God and our neighbour, and a cause of great thankfulness, not least given the extraordinary efforts of so many of our churches in this past Covid year. But as we become so adept at telling *that* story – at reminding the Government, for example, of just how many billions of pounds we're saving them through our remarkable volunteering efforts – how easy it is to neglect the other story: the story of a Christ who died, a Christ who is risen, a Christ who will come again – a Christ who is calling all of humanity to be reconciled to God our Heavenly Father, and has provided all that we need for that reconciliation to take place.

And so in response to my almost embarrassingly simple message today, perhaps it would be good to pray an almost embarrassingly simple prayer: 'Lord, help me to remember that the Resurrection of Jesus actually happened, and to live in the reality of that sure and certain hope, that anchor for the soul'. It may be taking this verse somewhat out-of-context, but as we combine the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 with the list of those who met with the risen Christ in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, let's be stirred afresh by that magnificent challenge that the writer to the Hebrews hold out to us:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

'Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight – and the blessing of God Almighty be with you now and always. Amen.