

A month of Sundays – April 2021



Preston Ribble Circuit

Ministry Team

Easter Sunday – 3rd April

Call to Worship: Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Hymn: Thine be the glory, risen, conquering son, endless is the victory thou o'er death has 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 has won.*

Prayer and Lord's Prayer:

Lord, we come to you as children to their loving parent. We share the ups and downs of our lives with you. When we cry on your shoulder, may we know the comfort of hearing you call us tenderly by name, and the new dawn of resurrection in our lives.

God of resurrection, ever renewing, every reviving, we adore you for your life-giving presence. Son of Man, newly risen, sorrow made joy, we adore you for your sacrificial living and dying. Holy Spirit, breezing among us this Easter morn, we adore you for breathing new life into us. Amen.

Lord, we love the joy of Easter Sunday, but sometimes our wrongdoing trips us up. We feel so sorry for the ways in which we let you down. We are sorry for the way in which we have not done as you asked. But we know in the warmth of your resurrection life we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven

Reading: John 20v2 (Mary) went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.

Reflection: (Rev Barbara Pettitt)

'Bacon sandwiches and Salvation' is an A-Z guide about Christians written by Adrian Plass. Under Easter Eggs: edible reminders of the resurrection, made of chocolate, filled with sweets and wrapped in shiny coloured paper, just as our Lord was.

I wonder who 'they' are? Mary comes running to two disciples saying, 'they' have taken the Lord. I wonder who she thought has taken him? The Roman authorities or Jewish leaders? 'They' have taken the Lord. It might not matter a great deal; but it's the kind of detail that interests me. It's a desecration, an outrageous abuse of the dead. One thing is for sure the fact that Mary believes 'they' have taken the Lord indicates she wasn't thinking about resurrection at this point. She's thinking someone has stolen his body.

Put yourself in Mary's place. A devout follower of Jesus, she's having a hard time letting go. Grief, loss, love have brought her to the tomb early. She comes to do what she can for the body of the man she loves. Her emotions are probably running wild, feeling lonely maybe, deserted by God perhaps, even angry with God possibly. Shocked at the way it all ended, and to cap it all someone has moved the body. That's what brings her running to the disciples. Not that she thinks he's been raised, but that she can't find him and do what she needs to do in the aftermath of her loss. I think I understand her situation.

Its only when she returns to the empty tomb that Jesus appears to her, but she thinks he's the gardener. Jesus says just one word, her name; 'Mary' and in that moment she knows it is Jesus. Wow! Just wow! At Jesus insistence she goes back to the disciples she and tells them: 'I have seen the Lord'.

Mary has moved from despair at Jesus loss to joy and awe at his resurrection. Nothing will ever, could ever be the same again.

The risen Jesus meets with his friends, personally, intimately, at unexpected moments, unexpected places. His risen presence transforms grief and doubt to joy, peace and faith. I pray we will each find a fresh sense of the risen Christ in our lives. Amen.

Intercessions:

Let us bring our prayers for the needs of all people to our heavenly Father.

We pray for church, as it continues to seek new ways to be church, for all its' people, that we might worship and serve you in all things.

We remember all who have died during this pandemic, and those who have cared for them, for loved ones unable to be present. We pray for the covid vaccination program, that this might be a positive thing in our world. And we remember the work of dedicated doctors, nurses, teachers' and shop workers all those on the front line. We thank you for them and their hard work. Risen Lord chase away our fears and help us to celebrate your resurrection with joy despite the strange circumstances of our continued different way of life.

Loving God bless each one of us afresh this day. Amen.

Hymn:

*Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes;
He arose the victor from the dark domain,*

And he lives forever with his saint to reign:

He arose! He arose! Alleluia! Christ arose!

Death cannot keep his prey, Jesus my saviour; he tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord.

Blessing: Lord, as we continue our journey with you this week, as we seek to live out our faith every day, be with us, surprise with your love, nudge us when you want us to see or do something new – for Jesus' sake. Amen.

2nd Sunday 11th April

Call to worship

We come from a world confused about truth.

We come with our own uncertainties.

Let us bring the darkness of human understanding into the presence of God, who is light.

Let us bring the story of our search for truth and share in fellowship the things we have heard and seen and touched.

Opening Prayer

God, whose light shines in the darkness, shine on us today.

God, made known to those who met Jesus, touch us through the experiences of our lives.

God, who gave Thomas what he asked, give us what we need – that we too may come to believe.

Amen.

Bible reading: John 20: 19-31

Reflection (Rev Karen Le Mouton)

I think we can all imagine what kind of feelings the disciples were experiencing locked away inside a house, fearful for their lives. I am sure many of us have experienced similar feelings during the various periods of lockdown with the threat of the virus, having witnessed so many people sadly losing their lives.

Due to fake news, misinformation, and a lack of understanding people have doubted the reasoning, testing, timing, and effectiveness of the vaccines. Yet over time those with the knowledge and expertise have patiently taken each issue and given a variety of evidence to clear any doubts. They have also used those who have experienced receiving the vaccines to advocate and share the positive and good news of having the vaccine for themselves.

Doubting Thomas, as this story is so often referred to, often has connotations that are negative; but they need not be. If we doubt something like academic or medical test results, we discuss them with a teacher or doctor. If we have doubts about an electrical appliance, we talk to an electrician. When things really matter to us, we doubt because it is essential for our wellbeing. Doubt is not taking for granted what we are told or assume or believe. Thomas is doubting what the other disciples said about seeing Jesus alive. It was so important to him that he had to know for himself.

Frequently, I get scam phone calls saying they are from the Bank, or Amazon, or even telling me my car has been in an accident! How do we know or test what is true? Truth is tested by questioning and through conversations. Just as it was for the

first followers of Jesus: when what Thomas heard was hard to believe, he needed to know the truth, to find out for himself.

‘Blind faith’ is not what we are called to. God created us as thinking human beings who are curious, creative, questioning, and capable of problem solving, both individually and collectively. Jesus used parables to enable people to think about, and wrestle with what he was saying. When you do this, then you know for yourself the truth that has been revealed to you. A friend once told me that she became a Christian because she heard the story of ‘doubting Thomas’. She had felt that she could not make the commitment to invite Jesus into her life because she had doubts. However, because Jesus accepted Thomas and acknowledged his doubts, this made her realise that it is okay to have questions and doubts; Jesus would accept her and meet her right where she was. She only had to put her trust in Jesus and bring her doubts and questions to him and those around her.

In the same way that people are trying to help those with doubts about the vaccine to resolve them, we need to talk to other Christians, read and study what the Bible and other Christian authors say about what is in doubt. Once we have wrestled and found out what we can, we bring our doubts and questions into the open and lay them before Jesus. You, of course, may decide to do this as a first action! But don’t forget what we have learned from the *Methodist Way of Life* – we are part of a Christian community where we learn and care for each other in order to grow in our faith! Share your doubts, do not let them remain silent, gnawing away at you. Do remember, there will always be mystery with God that we need to acknowledge, and be able to live with, until we meet face to face, where nothing will be masked or hidden away... all will be revealed. Hallelujah!

Prayers

Let us pray for a world in need of peace:
peace between warring nations,
peace between conflicting political ideologies,
peace between peoples of faith.

Let us pray for a world in need of love:
love for people who have lost their self-respect,
love for friends who have become alienated,
love for relatives who have lost their affection for each other.

Let us pray for a world in need of hope:
hope in the midst of despair when all seems lost,
hope when evil seems to be winning,
hope for a better future for everyone.

Let us pray for a world in need of joy:
joy when there is cause for celebration,
joy where there is a reason to give thanks,
joy as a means of sharing in the wonder of creation. **Amen.**

Blessing

Father, your Son Jesus did not reject Thomas. Help us to value questions and questioners, and not to reject either when they are awkward; to discern what kind of evidence is appropriate and trustworthy in different situations; and to have the courage ourselves to be questioners and seekers of truth. May the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all now and for ever. **Amen.**

3rd Sunday 18th April

Call to worship

Come to us, O Christ, as the wind that blows the autumn leaves, as the song that soothes the troubled child, as the melody that lifts the anxious spirit. Fill us with affection for you that is unbounded, desire for you that is unrestrained and a yearning for you that throws caution to the winds, and this for your own love's sake. Amen. (Richard Rolfe 1300-1349)

Prayer

God of love, greater than we can imagine, thank you for living in us and loving through us. May all that we do flow from your indwelling Spirit and our deep connection with you and all creation. Help us become a community that honours life in all its forms and all its fullness and hear our hearts' longings for the healing of your world, our home. For the sake of the kingdom we pray. Amen. (Sheryl Anderson, Liverpool District Chair)

Reading - Mark 6.45-51

Immediately after Jesus had finished feeding the 5000+, he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them, so they could not use their sails. Shortly before dawn he set out towards them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down.

Reflection - Reverend Ray Borg

This reading from Mark's gospel is so famous, even those who do not identify as Christian know about Jesus walking on water. It is a remarkable story which I have preached on many times. On each occasion I have found something that made me curious and encouraged me to get my bible commentaries out.

But recently I was bowled over by something in this passage which felt like Jesus was speaking directly to me and I would like to share it with you for two reasons; to show you just one example of how God can "speak" today and in the hope that you will be encouraged by my experience.

But first I need to provide you with some context.

Throughout Lent my wife Karen and I have been using Tom Wright's book 'Lent for Everyone - Year B' using the gospel of Mark. Most days we have sat together and read the passage and then taken it in turn to read Tom's reflection.

As many people in the Circuit now know, my next posting will not be a circuit appointment. I have been accepted by the Methodist Church as a Mission Partner and shall serve my last appointment in central France. Part of the deal is that I have to be able to speak French fluently by next summer.

For the past year I have been using an easy-to-read French bible for my daily devotions and I was quite comfortable using it. But it was limited, so I moved to a more advanced French ecumenical translation and, unsurprisingly, I started to struggle with more complex verbs and grammar.

On the day of this reading from Mark I really struggled to read the story in French. At one point in the reading I came to a full stop and my gut twisted into a knot, because in that moment I seriously doubted my ability to become fluent in French. It was a show-stopper moment and I remember saying to God in my mind "I don't think I'm going to be able to do this!"

I held all this inside and we began to read Tom Wright's words. I had covered most of Tom's points in previous sermons and if I'm honest most of it washed over me. My mind was already playing out an embarrassing if not tragic scenario.

Then Tom drew our attention to Jesus' words when he said to the frightened disciples "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." Those words pierced through my pre-occupations, worries and doubts and lodged straight in the very core of my being. It's as if Jesus was standing there in our lounge and saying those very words to me personally. It was visceral and moved me greatly. In fact, I am getting emotional just typing these words and I'm sniffing like I have a cold. During the thoughts and words that followed it transpires that God was in that wobble with me and used the words in Mark's gospel and Tom Wright's focus on Jesus' words to bring me back to the truth of the matter.

You see, the idea of becoming a Mission Partner was not our idea. It developed out of a comment made by one person which led to an email, which led to a conversation in which the idea of applying to become a Mission partner was lobbed in. This was definitely God who had taken our dreams, desires, passions and plans to serve beyond my retirement from the active work and it was God who re-modelled it all in order to bring the good news of his grace to people in another land.

What God did that day when I had a serious wobble, was to remind me that this is his idea, his project and his plan and that it would be his enabling that will make it possible. I realised I needed to acknowledge that point and to return to the oars of my verb and grammar books and not be afraid, because his grace will be made available as the plan unfolds. After all, it is only when Jesus got into the boat that the wind eased, the rowing got easier and maybe the sails could be deployed. It was a salutary lesson and I was grateful for it that day.

And just in case you think this is some sort of fairy tale, let me disabuse you of that delusion. I am still trying to get my head around direct and indirect pronouns, reflexive verbs in several tenses and pronunciation. I am still rowing hard, but one thing I do; forgetting what is behind I strain forward for what is to come in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit will go ahead of us, drip feeding us just enough to get us through each conjugation and each comprehension exercise so that we may be the bearers of good news to those whose language we shall twist and to whom we may serve as a sign of God's grace and love.

And if that does not encourage you, we don't know what will !!!

Prayer

Lord God, we praise and thank you for those moments in our lives when you step right into our embattled boat and tell us to take courage, see that it's you and not to be afraid.

We bring before you ourselves and all those who are facing overwhelming situations which tower above them like some phantom menace. We pray that through your Holy Spirit they may come to know that you are in their boat with them. May they come to realise that no matter how large the challenge, you have the resources to match it and that over time your love guarantees that you will feed out just enough for us to take one more step.

We pray especially for those who are at their wits' end, those who are ready to throw in the towel. We hold them up before you and pray that they may hear Jesus say "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid." Amen

Blessing

So may the blessing of almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit guard our hearts and minds as we continue to walk life's path, whether it is rough or smooth, hard rowing or a breeze with full sail. Amen.

4th Sunday 25th April

Call to worship

The Lord is my good shepherd – and yours.
The Shepherd knows you –and he knows me.
Come and walk with him beside still waters.
Come and have your soul restored.

Opening Prayer

Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd;
always there, always watchful. Your fold is the space you hold
for us, where we know we are loved. Although dangers
surround us, and in foolishness we may stray,
you have our back. So many sheep, yet you know us all by
name. Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd.
Amen.

A prayer of confession and forgiveness

Lord, are we sheep or are we wolves?
For sometimes it seems that a killer instinct is more valued in
this world, and we become one who preys on communities
rather than living in community.
We may not be aware of it, for the ways of the world are
seductive and we slip into wolves' clothing without thinking. We
make bad choices – how and where we spend our money – not
thinking of the exploitation that may have taken place. Lord,
Good Shepherd, forgive us these times – when the wolf lurks
beneath. Remind us that, as Christians, we are creatures of the
fold. Bring us back to the community of love and life as it should
be lived. Amen.
Lord, who lays down your life for your sheep,
how can we doubt your forgiveness?

Arms once stretched out upon a cross
now close in embrace as we return;
enfolded, may we know the fullness of love
that lives to forgive, and forgives that we might live. Amen.

Readings: Psalm 23

"THE LORD IS MY PACE-SETTER"

The Lord is my Pace-setter; I shall not rush. He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals. He provides me with images of stillness, That restore my serenity;

He leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind,
And His guidance is peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret, for His presence is here. His timelessness, His all importance, will keep me in balance.

He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with His oils of tranquillity. My cup of joyous energy overflows!

Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours, For I shall walk in the peace of my Lord, and dwell in His house for ever.

Psalm 23 (A Japanese Translation)

Reflection

This psalm compares God to a shepherd, a familiar figure on the middle eastern landscape for many centuries. The image is one of all-embracing care and blessing, providing food, drink, guidance, protection and victory. There is an inner sustenance too that comes from the relationship between the shepherd-like

God and his flock: 'he restores my soul' with goodness, mercy and the fellowship experienced in worship and prayer.

A group of older people living in a block of low-rise inner-city flats looked forward to Mondays. Mondays was when their bins were emptied. Why would these people so look forward to having their bins emptied (apart, perhaps, from the obvious reason of getting rid of smelly rubbish)?

Over several years, the residents and the binmen – and women, though they were mostly men – had got to know each other by name. The binmen never stayed very long; they were always rushing on to the next bin and the next street – schedules to fulfil! But while the bins were being emptied, or those few moments, the binmen and residents exchanged gossip and asked after each other. And the binmen asked especially after those they hadn't seen for a while. For some of the residents it was one of very few points of human contact during their week. For some of the residents it was just a bit of Monday morning fun, but for others it was a lifeline. They felt – they knew – they were not all alone; they were part of a community. And in that community, relationships mattered. And in that community, they felt cared for. Relationships make us feel cared for.

Then, without warning – or that is how it felt to the residents – it all changed. The old well-known team of binmen were given a new area to work. Monday mornings weren't the same for the residents. They now had to get used to a new group of binmen – and women – or 'waste management and disposal technicians' as they were now called. They had to start building their relationships all over again. The sense of being a community was certainly diminished for a while. Some residents said the changes made them feel less cared for.

Coping with the pandemic and its aftermath during this past year has provided many challenges to our sense of community,

and some very good opportunities too. What do you think God might be calling us to do that will help us build relationships and make sure everyone in our community feels cared for?

Prayers of Intercession

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:
for politicians striving to hang onto power and influence,
for leaders of the nations who have forgotten to serve the
common good.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:
for those who follow the fashions and frivolities of today at the
expense of tomorrow, for those who get swept along by the
crowd on tides of prejudice and easy judgements.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:
for those who wander off on their own, to escape from reality,
for those who are led astray, away from safety and well-being.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:
for those who take what they have for granted,
for those who are unable to give thanks for the things they
have.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

The blessing of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon
us and remain with us always. Amen.