Home Service Sheet for Sunday 17th  April 2022 (Easter Sunday)

Call To Worship:        Psalm 118:14-18

The Lord is my strength and my song;
   he has become my salvation.
Glad songs of salvation
   are in the tents of the righteous:
“The right hand of the Lord does valiantly,
   the right hand of the Lord exalts,
   the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!”
I shall not die, but I shall live,
   and recount the deeds of the Lord.
The Lord has disciplined me severely,
   but he has not given me over to death.

Opening Prayer (Hippolytus)

Christ is Risen: The world below lies desolate
Christ is Risen: The spirits of evil are fallen
Christ is Risen: The angels of God are rejoicing
Christ is Risen: The tombs of the dead are empty
Christ is Risen indeed from the dead, the first of the sleepers,
Glory and power are his forever and ever, amen.

Hymn:               Christ the Lord is risen today by Charles Wesley
<https://youtu.be/ztugxIfwP4c>

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say: Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply: Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Dying once, he all doth save, Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Love’s redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids Him rise, Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

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 trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Bible Reading:        John 20:1-18

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and 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.” So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” - and that he had said these things to her.

Reflection
Although we know the Easter story so well, I think it’s very interesting to note the different details recorded for us by the four Gospel writers. Mark gives us the most incomplete account, which leaves us to make up our own mind about whether Jesus is risen from the dead, although we are clearly led in that direction through the evidence presented, and by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Matthew and Luke clearly present the risen Saviour to us, with compelling evidence that His risen body was still a physical body that could be touched and could eat fish. John gives us the fullest account that can be split quite nicely into two.

In verses 1 to 10 it is very much down to the disciples to interpret what the empty tomb could mean. Some believed that Jesus was risen and others were confused by what they found at the tomb. In some ways we could say that this reflects how many people think today about Jesus’ resurrection. No-one alive today was an eye witness to the risen Lord, and so we have to rely on the evidence in Scripture, the trustworthiness of God and the witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirits. Some people believe that Jesus was who He said He was, and that He died for us and rose again. Others are unsure what to believe because it is outside of their own life experience.

The first witness in our Bible reading today is Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ known female followers. From the perspective of the ancient world she is not a reliable witness, as she is not a man, and yet she is the first one mentioned by John. Her initial thought is that someone has removed Jesus’ body from the tomb for, as yet, unknown reasons. It makes sense because normally dead men don’t get up and walk, and yet as we discover, she is wrong. It’s a theory that people still hold on to today as it would mean Jesus didn’t raise from the dead, and therefore we could largely ignore Him, His life and His teachings.

There are several good reasons, however, why this theory of the body being moved doesn’t stand up to close scrutiny. Firstly, how did the truth manage to remain hidden for almost 2000 years, with the most powerful people at the time having a vested interest in proving that Jesus remained dead? Secondly, the tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers. If they had deserted their posts and allowed someone to steal the body of Jesus they would have been put to death by the authorities, yet they gave an account of angels and being terrified by supernatural happenings. Thirdly, the most likely people to have stolen the body would have been Jesus’ followers. These were the very people who willingly died for their faith over the coming years, proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. Do you really think they would have died for something they knew to be untrue? No, none of this makes sense. Jesus’ body was not stolen, rather He rose from the dead, as He said He would, and He is God’s Son and the risen Lord.

We are not finished with Mary’s role on Easter Day, though. In verse 11 we pick up with Mary who is back outside the tomb, upset as she believes that her Lord’s body had been stolen. However, within a few short verses her world is turned upside down. She sees two angels inside the tomb who ask her why she is weeping. She answers, turns around and there is Jesus, although she doesn’t recognise Him at first. This points us towards a possibility that Jesus’ resurrected body looks somewhat different. She is not the only resurrection witness to fail to recognise Jesus, although she could be blinded by grief. Scripture does not clarify this for us.

Mary continues in her belief that Jesus is still dead, right until Jesus speaks her name and her eyes are opened to the amazing truth. At this point she addresses Him as ‘my teacher’. She now realises that it is the risen Jesus who stands before her alive. Jesus then speaks to her again, saying, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” What are we to make of this, and how should we respond today? Jesus is alive, and has ascended to the Father where He intercedes for us in His role as our great High Priest.

Yet, even today there are many people who neither know that Jesus is alive nor who He is. The job that was given to Mary is also given to each of us – to tell others that Jesus is alive! More than that, in fact; we are to faithfully proclaim the Gospel story. Even though we are all sinners, dead in our sin, Jesus came and died for us, paying the price for our sin. On the third day He rose again, showing that death is not the end and that He had won the victory over sin. By faith in Him we may be forgiven and adopted into God’s family. Through faith, with repentance, we may inherit eternal life whereby we will live with God forever. This is what the world needs to hear this Easter Day and every day, for it is the most important message of all! Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You that no one is beyond Your ability and desire to be saved by grace through faith in Christ. Increase our longing and love for You today, and help us to live by faith and not by sight. Thank You that Your Word is altogether true and trustworthy and prevents us from being influenced by the circumstances that surround us rather than looking to Jesus and trusting Your Word. Thank You that we have each been born anew and placed into Your eternal family. Look down in compassion and grace on lost souls and bring many more into Your kingdom, we pray. On this Easter Day we thank You that Jesus died to pay the price for our sins and thank You that He rose again so that we might have His abundant, resurrected life within us. To You belongs all the praise and glory for ever and ever, amen.

Benediction

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 each of us that which is well-pleasing in His sight. May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us now this Easter Day and forevermore, amen.