

Norwich Area United Reformed Church
Worship on Sunday 11th April 2021
Led by Revd John Potter,
Preacher: Revd Pauline Rate

Call to worship

Come, let us gather for worship,
for God is here with us.

Come, bring your praises,
for God is here with us.

Come, bring your prayers,
for God is here with us.

Come, bring your doubts and your fears,
for God is here with us.

Come, bring your joys and sorrows,
for God is here with us.

Come and worship the seen and the unseen God,
the God who loves us as we are,
the God who gave us his Son, our crucified and risen Saviour.

Come, let us worship him,
for God is here with us.

Hymn All heaven declares

Prayers of approach and confession

Christ, who stood among the disciples
Showing them your hands and feet to take away their doubts.
We welcome you.

Christ, who met with the disciples,
eating in their presence to help them see.
We welcome you.

Christ, who spoke to the disciples
opening their minds to reveal God's promises.
We welcome you.

Christ who stands among us

meets with us, speaks to us
Have mercy on us.

If we are ruled by doubt, have mercy on us.
If we live in fear as if you are still dead, have mercy on us.
If we fail to be your hands and feet, have mercy on us.
If we read Scripture but do not grasp the Gospel,
Have mercy on us.
If we do not forgive as we are forgiven, have mercy on us.

As he came to his disciples, Jesus comes to us, holds out his hands, welcomes us into his love, forgives our sins and restores us to life, that we may walk in his way forevermore. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Gospel

John 20.19-31

¹⁹ It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. ²⁰ After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." ²² Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴ One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!"

²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!"

³⁰ In his disciples' presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. ³¹ But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life.

Reflection Thomas reflecting (Stages on the Way)

Hymn 635 Put peace into each other's hands

The New Testament reading Acts 4. 32-35

³² The group of believers was one in mind and heart. None of them said that any of their belongings were their own, but they all shared with one another everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God poured rich blessings on them all. ³⁴ There was no one in the group who was in need. Those who owned fields or houses would sell them, bring the money received from the sale, ³⁵ and turn it over to the apostles; and the money was distributed according to the needs of the people.

The Sermon

What a difference a day makes

‘What a difference a day makes. 24 little hours’. There is a popular song originally written in Spanish in 1934 by Maria Grever, a Mexican songwriter, given English words by Stanley Adams and popularized by the singer Dinah Washington, and sung by many others over the years.

Today, and in the next few weeks, the lectionary readings explore what a difference a day made to people’s lives – that’s one particular day – the day of resurrection. I’m sure when we look at history over the centuries, we could find many occasions where people say: ‘that was the day that changed the world’. But Easter is the day of all days that changed the world – because it’s about the beginning of a new creation bursting in on this world. The day of resurrection is the first day – a new day, a new life, a new creation. Jesus has gone through death and out into a new world where death itself had been defeated and life in all its fullness could begin at last.

And now he appears to his disciples and brings the reality of the new creation with him – bursting with life and physicality as the disciples discovered for themselves. To this broken, sad, fearful group of mixed-up people with such raw emotions, Jesus brings the signs and gifts of the new creation.

As we heard at the end of the reflection about Thomas, Jesus brings peace – that occurs 3 times in the reading today. ‘peace be with you’ – shalom or salaam is, of course, a common greeting in the Middle East. But there seems to be some greater significance to the word here – it connects with words from John 14 where Jesus says to his disciples, ‘My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.’

This isn’t just a phrase to calm fears and anxieties. As you may know ‘peace’ or ‘shalom’ has a much wider meaning – it’s about healing, wholeness, forgiveness, restoration or making complete. We know how difficult it is to achieve that kind of peace in our own lives and in the world – it can only truly come when all that destroys shalom is no more – it can only come when the new creation begins. Jesus comes to the disciples locked in all their fears and says, ‘Peace be with you.’ Now they will be free, and whole, and life can begin again as they are transformed by Christ’s gift of shalom. What a difference a day makes! Actually, when I looked up

information about the song, I discovered that the original song in Spanish by Maria Grever had different words and it was called "When I Return to Your Side" – which also seems entirely appropriate for today. Jesus returns and stands among his disciples and says 'Peace be with you'.

But he will not be physically present for long, so he brings another gift – Jesus breathes on the disciples so that they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Genesis, the wind or breath or spirit sweeps over creation and brings order out of chaos and life into the world. Now on new creation's first day, a wind sweeps through the room – the breath of God's spirit comes to bring unity and healing and power and life into these people who are going to be the agents of God's new world.

For Jesus' third gift is a new task. Jesus will no longer be with them and the disciples' task is to be engaged in the activity Jesus has begun – bringing shalom, reconciliation, forgiveness and new life into the world. Part of that may also mean confronting the world with the reality of its injustice and sinfulness – that is all part of God's message to a muddled, confused and rebellious world. But God's aim is always to bring in the life of the new creation – and Jesus gives the disciples the Holy Spirit to enable them to carry out their new task.

What a difference resurrection day made to these disciples!

And the resurrection's transforming power continues to be experienced in the new community of the Early Church as we heard in the reading from Acts. The resurrection makes a difference not only to the relationship between an individual and God, but also to the relationships within the new community and the relationships between the believers and the wider society.

This experience of community – the sharing of food and the material wealth of the community is driven by faith and a theological conviction that in Jesus Christ, they were one people. The resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit were sure signs that the new creation had begun – so the believers in the Early Church committed themselves to live in a way where the poor are blessed and the meek inherit the earth. Many of the early Christians came from ordinary working backgrounds and were vulnerable to changes in economic circumstances. Although the family was usually the protector of individuals who fell on hard times, the more cosmopolitan and mobile nature of the Graeco-Roman world meant that both Jewish and Gentile people didn't always have family there to support them. But now, in the new creation, there is a new family, a new household in Jesus Christ, made up of rich and poor alike, and a new way to live. Shalom is not only spoken but acted upon as people share their goods and resources and support each other in times of need. As the risen Jesus was present with his disciples in a very real and physical way, so the new community of believers becomes the body of Christ to each other.

Some years ago Roots magazine put it this way:

The hearts of Jesus' followers were full of love for each other and for God and they shared everything. They used their mouths to tell people how Jesus had risen from

the dead. They laid down money from the sale of possessions at the disciples' feet – which was handed out to those in need.

And that's just as relevant for us today. 'What a difference a day makes'. The day of resurrection is still making a difference, just as it did to the disciples in the locked room and to the new community of believers. But now, we are the people to continue the work of Jesus, living the life of the new creation, bringing shalom – speaking words of love and forgiveness, and finding practical ways to share all that we have and are with others. There are so many ways individual Christians and churches across the world are bringing healing and hope to people in their communities – supporting those in need, working to protect the environment and campaigning to make the world a fairer and more just and compassionate place. And we do all this because of the resurrection of Jesus, because we believe that God can and does continue his work of new creation.

There are times when we might find it hard to continue to fulfil the task – we struggle with our faith and doubt, and although we are grateful for a gradual easing of lockdown, we are fearful about the safety of venturing out into a new future and we might prefer at times to stay behind closed doors! We also know that our human shortcomings, even in the church, betray our high ideals, as the Early Church soon discovered.

But when those difficult times come, then Jesus stands by our side again, holds out his hands which bear the marks of his sufferings and the understanding of the imperfections of humanity, and he says, 'peace be with you'. And it makes all the difference as he breathes the life-giving transforming power of his Spirit into us, and turns us round to go out to bear witness in word and action, to the One who is our Lord and God, alive for evermore. Amen.

Hymn 278 I know that my Redeemer lives

Prayers of intercession

Behind closed doors... afraid.

That was how Your disciples found themselves
that first Easter evening.

Risen Lord,

You appeared and said,

"Peace be with you."

In the world today so many places lack peace –

Those places where lockdowns are in place,
people indoors struggling with relationships,
a lack of space and freedom applying added pressures.

Those wrestling with emotions

because they have not been able to be beside some of their loved ones
as they would have liked at significant moments –
from birthdays to serious illnesses.

Those patients, residents and staff,
in hospitals and care homes in so many places around the world
where staff are stretched,
where resources are scarce,
where illness either threatens or dominates.
Those suffering the pain of bereavement.
Those living in places of turmoil where wars still rage.
Those people and situations uppermost in our minds
which we lift up to You now in this silence....

Silence

So many places lack peace –
Breathe on these situations.
May Your peace offer some respite
in the midst of today's concerns
and may it point to better days to come.

As well as peace

You gave the Holy Spirit;
God present with us in all we do.
May we be guided by that Spirit,
to offer help and convey peace
wherever that is possible.

Hear our prayers,
through Jesus Christ, our risen Saviour.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn 237 God came in Jesus

The blessing

The power and the peace of the risen Lord be with you to renew you and fill you.
The grace and the goodness of the Lord of life be with you as you go out to do his
will.

And the blessing.....