

NAURC worship 18th April 2021
Led by Revd Ian Bloomfield

Welcome

Reading: Isaiah 51:1-6 (NIV)

'Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD:
look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many.
The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.
Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.
'Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation:
instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.
My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.
The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath;
the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.
But my salvation will last for ever, my righteousness will never fail.

Hymn: Now thank we all our God

Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done,
in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mother's arms
hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours to-day.

O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son, and him who reigns
with them in highest heaven,
the One eternal God,
whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Prayers

Almighty and everlasting God, we come before you to bring our thanks and praise. We thank you for the beauty and perfection of Your creation. We thank you for Your love for us, for the many blessings that You give us, and that You are always with us. We thank you for the privilege of being counted as Your children, that in spite of our failings, we are

forgiven and our relationship with You is restored, because of the salvation offered through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

We thank you that the way to You is open, both in this life and the next, that we have a sure and certain hope of eternal life in Your kingdom. Help us as we worship You today, to know Your presence with us. Help us to focus on You and to be open to Your Holy Spirit guiding and inspiring us. You know our every need and you welcome us, however we are feeling. If we are in need of comfort, or peace, hope or healing, may we be assured that you are caring for us.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Introduction

In the account of resurrection morning, John's gospel tells of the women visiting the tomb, an angel speaking to them, and then Jesus appearing: He asks Mary why she is crying, and who she is looking for. She doesn't recognise Him and thinks he is the gardener, until He speaks her name. John 20:16 reads:

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher').

In the parallel passage in Luke's gospel, chapter 24, a group of women including Mary Magdalene have been to the tomb and found it empty and an angel had spoken to them; they told the other apostles, who were sceptical, though Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself. Jean is going to read the next section of Luke's narrative for us:

Reading: Luke 24

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognising him.

¹⁷ He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?'

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?'

¹⁹ 'What things?' he asked.

'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.'

²⁵ He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' ²⁷ And

beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going further. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.'

³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

Hymn: Led like a lamb (Graham Kendrick © 1983 Kingsway's Thankyou Music)

Led like a lamb to the slaughter
In silence and shame,
There on Your back You carried a world
Of violence and pain.
Bleeding, dying, bleeding, dying.

*You're alive, You're alive,
You have risen, Alleluia!
And the power and the glory is given,
Alleluia, Jesus, to You.*

At break of dawn, poor Mary,
Still weeping she came,
When through her grief she heard Your
voice
Now speaking her name.
Mary, Master, Mary, Master!

At the right hand of the Father
Now seated on high
You have begun Your eternal reign
Of justice and joy.
Glory, glory, glory, glory.

Sermon

Like many others, these two people from Emmaus had been up to Jerusalem, probably for several days since they seem to know most of the events that had taken place. Now they are walking back home. There were probably others making a similar journey – certainly they don't seem surprised that a stranger decides to walk with them and don't question his journey. Jesus asks them what they are talking about, giving the impression of being ignorant about all that has taken place. Why does He do that?

Jesus wants his followers to express what has happened. Sometimes we need to speak things out – to talk through something: recounting events can help us to get them clear and ordered in our own minds. Mary – tell me why you are crying. Cleopas – tell me what you have seen and heard.

God is everywhere and knows everything – and yet He wants us to talk to Him. He wants us to talk to Him, to tell Him our joys and our sorrows, to be open and honest with Him. We are familiar with the hymn that starts "What a friend we have in Jesus".

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry

Everything to God in prayer!

And later:

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

God doesn't say "yes, I know, you've already told me", or "I already know that", He wants us to talk to Him, He is our listening ear, always willing to hear what is on our hearts and minds.

Cleopas and his companion, quite possibly his wife, will have been devout Jews - they have been up to Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Passover. But they seem also to have been amongst Jesus' followers - why else would verse 22 refer to "some of our women" amazing them by finding the empty tomb? They may well then have watched the crucifixion, and will have heard some of his teaching – which makes it all the more remarkable that they don't recognise him. The options would seem to be that either he appeared different, or that though the body had disappeared from the tomb they did not believe in a physical, human form resurrection, or thirdly that they were somehow kept from seeing – a spiritual blindness. But, whatever the reason they, like Mary in the account from John's gospel, don't realise it is Jesus and so they recount the events from their perspective.

Then Jesus responds:

²⁵ He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

So Jesus sets about reminding them of scripture, Moses and the Prophets, all the Old Testament teaching that foretold of the coming Messiah, and of what would take place when the Messiah came. We could at this point ask the question "so which scriptures did He quote?" We could think of some of the verses that we roll out at Christmas – from Isaiah, and Micah. Or Isaiah 53:5 "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed". All of that is true and good, but there is more to it than that, for it is woven in to the very fabric of the story of the people of Israel themselves. A holy people created in the Garden of Eden, but who fall away from God's presence. Enslaved in Egypt, and then set free – the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts taking the place of the sacrifice of their firstborn. Much later in history, suffering through the tyranny of pagan empires during the Exile in Babylon, but later being reinstated to favour and rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Israel, God's holy and chosen people, suffered for sin in order to be restored and set free. Jesus does the same, taking the place, suffering for all our sakes that we can be set free.

They must have been quite impressed with Jesus' exposition of scripture and perhaps the cogs were turning, the "little grey cells" were processing the information and it was beginning to make sense. And yet, and yet there is still an element of uncertainty in their minds, a missing piece in the jigsaw. They have spoken of the angels, and the absence of

Jesus' body in the tomb, but, like Thomas, they haven't actually seen Jesus and they are not fully convinced. Jesus was special, Jesus was God's Messiah, they are getting used to the idea that the body is no longer dead and buried, but they haven't grasped the idea that Jesus is fully alive as a human being still.

They have enjoyed his company and wise teaching as they have made their journey. Although we don't know at what point Jesus joined them, their walk from Jerusalem will have been 2-3 hours and it's gone quicker with His company. Now they are home and, as the day draws to a close, they offer hospitality to this stranger who they been with. They prepare a meal. Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks for the food set before them, and breaks the bread up to share it.

At that moment, they see Him. Was it something He said? Or the way He said it? Perhaps they have been told of Jesus' words and actions in that upper room? We cannot tell from this gospel account the detail of how the revelation took place, but it did. But, just as Mary recognised Jesus when he spoke her name, suddenly, in that simple action of sharing bread, they understand: Jesus – You are Jesus! All that teaching from scripture as they walked along the road – it all makes sense now. That's why He was able to explain it all so well!

We are told that He "disappeared from their sight". I imagine that, as the penny drops, as they realise who their visitor is, they look at each other for confirmation that they are both thinking the same thing and then turn back to Him – but he isn't there.

How often is Jesus present with us but we do not recognise or acknowledge Him? Do we recognise His voice or His actions? Are we open to the presence and prompting of the Holy Spirit?

We are not puppets on a string. We have free-will. God delights in us having choices and freedom. But there are many times when He also has a plan, a purpose for us. There are many opportunities for us to be His hands, His feet, His listening ear – if we choose to do so. Cleopas and his companion urged Jesus to stay with them, for it was late. This was good Jewish hospitality, not the oddity of inviting a stranger in to the house that it might seem in our culture. But they still had to offer, it was a choice. We are told that Jesus "continued on as if he were going further". Jesus made no expectation on their hospitality, they had to take the initiative and ask. Indeed, they had to "urge him" to stay, they needed to be persistent and steadfast in their desire for him to be their guest. What are the parallels for us? When do we need to persist in seeking to do what is right and good?

In Emmaus, all has become clear. They now understand why they had felt so stirred by Jesus' teaching from the scriptures as they walked along the road; they have had an encounter with the living Jesus that they need to share with others. So, though it was evening and either dark or getting dark, they get up at once and hurry back to Jerusalem – another couple of hours walking. Again a sign that they had been close to Jesus and the disciples in those last days, they know where to find the eleven. Can you imagine the excitement? There are the disciples discussing the fact that Jesus has appeared to Simon Peter (and I guess Thomas was still being a little sceptical at this time) and these people hurry in to the room and say that Jesus has appeared in Emmaus too!

What have been our encounters with Jesus? That moment when a word of scripture seems to speak right in to our personal situation. The answered prayer that lifts our spirits to acknowledge God's goodness to us. That moment when we are alone in the countryside or looking at the night sky, and see that magnificence of God's creation. All of

us are here this morning because there have been times in our lives when we have experienced our God and have accepted the truth and reality of His presence in our lives.

The response of these two weary travellers was to hurry back to Jerusalem to share the good news. They were part of a community, brought together through a shared desire to follow Jesus. Being part of a community is important – we are not designed to function alone. The Old Testament gives us models of community: sometimes through family, such as the story of Ruth and Naomi, and Naomi's relative Boaz; sometimes through structure, such as the 12 tribes of Israel and their respective roles in Exodus; sometimes through worship, such as the people coming together to rebuild the temple after the exile in Babylon.

In the New Testament we see the community of followers of Jesus and the shared hospitality. Later, in Acts 2, we read about the fellowship of believers who held everything in common as they lived and worked together – supporting each other and giving to those in need. A number of the New Testament letters, written by Paul and others, go on to give guidance on corporate worship and fellowship. Whilst it is important to recognise that for certain individuals, for a period of time or occasionally for their whole life, God calls them to live a life of prayer and recluse, this is not the norm for most of us.

Cleopas and his companion go back to the community of believers that they have been with – with some amazing good news. But this same community of believers had been supporting each other over the weekend: comforting each other in their shared loss of Jesus – the pain of separation, the horrendously cruel and agonising death by crucifixion, the fear and uncertainty about what would happen next. 2000 years later, around the world, we see would-be political leaders being imprisoned or assassinated by political dictatorships: their supporters daring to protest, but also being in fear of being similarly treated.

Although the words used can be varied, most wedding ceremonies include vows which speak of “for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health”, an acknowledgement that the union being formed is a commitment in all circumstances. When we welcome people in to church membership, they promise to be faithful in private and public worship; to live in the fellowship of the Church and to share in its work; to give and serve, as God enables them, for the advancement of His kingdom.

We have lived through a year in which community and fellowship have been hugely challenged through the restrictions on movement and gathering, and yet those restrictions have actually heightened the need for contact with others. Amidst the negatives of loneliness and isolation, there have been some positives – such as the need to socialise online has enabled the housebound to join in where they could not before.

Now we are beginning to emerge. We need to hold on to those aspects of this last year that have been positive – a greater social awareness, a recognition of needs, taking time to care, an opportunity to grasp what really matters rather than being superficial. But we also need to move forward, to step out, to reach out, to be more inclusive and more welcoming rather than ploughing our own furrow, to look around at what others are doing and to seek to work with them.

As we are allowed to gather again, in our Sunday worship, in our coffee mornings, our bible study and prayer meetings, our social and craft clubs, our children's groups, how can

we do these things better, more together? Who can we invite along? How can we support their needs? Who can we journey with?

Jesus, come and walk with us. Open the scriptures to us. Show us how we are called to live, in harmony with You and Your creation, and in partnership with all who are in the community in which you have placed us. Amen.

Verse 32 of our passage from Luke speaks of a “fire burning in us” or, as the NIV puts it “were not our hearts burning within us when he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us”

Our next song, “Jesus be the centre” invites Jesus to “be the fire in my heart”.

Hymn: Jesus, be the centre ©Michael Frye, 1999 Vineyard Songs

Jesus, be the centre
Be my source, be my light,
Jesus.

Jesus, be the Centre,
Be my hope, be my song,
Jesus.

*Be the fire in my heart,
Be the wind in these sails;
Be the reason that I live,
Jesus, Jesus.*

Jesus, be my vision, be my path, be my guide, Jesus.

Prayers of intercession

Jesus, our hope, our light, our guide. Thank you that you came to show us the Father. Thank you that You are the Way, the Truth and the Life. Thank you that you are our friend, a brother who journeys with us. Thank you that you gave your life so that we can inherit eternal life with you.

We give thanks for the many people over the years who, like Cleopas, having had an encounter with Jesus take that next step of telling others the Good News. We thank you for their willingness to serve, in both word and action, sharing your Love in practical ways. We pray particularly for those who make personal sacrifices or put themselves at risk to do so: for those living and working in countries around the world where Christians are persecuted for their faith, where religion is either forbidden, or a different religion is state-enforced. We pray for the protection of all who put aside their own needs to serve you, and pray that they would be strengthened in their faith by knowing the reality of Your presence with them.

We pray for those places in our world where there is conflict and unrest. We pray particularly today for Northern Ireland, where tensions often stated as being between protest and catholic, but which are much more about political ideology and allegiance than about faith, have resurfaced again. Whilst it is difficult to see a solution to some of the underlying problems, we pray for those who seek to bring reconciliation, and that those who encourage violence would see the futility of their ways. We pray too for the mounting tensions in Ukraine, and the consequent deterioration in relations between Russia and the West.

We pray for the forgotten – those caught up in long-term war zones that tend to disappear from the headlines, yet continue to suffer daily the consequences of war and oppression – fear, homelessness, death and life changing injuries, poverty and starvation. We remember amongst many places the situations in Syria, in Yemen, in Afghanistan. We pray too for the unrest and uncertainty in Hong Kong.

We pray for those in the United States of America caught up in the recent spate of police shootings. We ask for your comfort for the families impacted by these deaths, and pray that there would be changes in the attitudes towards the carrying and deployment of weapons.

We pray for our own churches, here in the Norwich Area, and across the country, that as restrictions are eased and we are able to once again open our buildings, that you would guide us in the way forward. Help us to reach out to our communities, not just to those who have been a part of our church life in the past, but to those for whom an encounter with You would make such a difference. We pray particularly that we would be sensitive to the needs of those who have found life during this pandemic particularly difficult – the lonely, the bereaved, and those for whom this period has brought the onset or worsening of health conditions, both physical and mental. Help us to bring them Your peace, Your healing and Your Love, to comfort them in their sadness, and to laugh with them in moments of joy.

And we pray for ourselves, that we would experience new encounters of Your presence with us, and be inspired to worship and to serve – for Your glory and the extension of your kingdom.

Amen.

Hymn: Brother, sister, let me serve you - Richard Gillard © Integrity Music

Brother, sister, let me serve you
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant, too.

I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through.

We are pilgrims on a journey
And companions on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk and mile and bear the load.

When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night-time of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear.

Brother, sister, let me serve you
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant, too.

Blessing

The Grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.

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