

## Call to Worship

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

**his steadfast love endures for ever!**

Let Israel say;

**his steadfast love endures for ever!**

Let all the Church now share;

**his steadfast love endures for ever!**

For Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

## Prayer of Approach and Confession

Jesus, we come like the women  
who made their way in the dawn to mourn you;  
we gather in worship and still we are fragile,  
worried about the world and weary of weakness and wrongdoing,  
and we discover that death could not stop you,  
the tomb could not contain you, despair could not undo you.  
Easter dawns for the women and the world with rejoicing beyond words!  
Jesus, we come with the company of heaven  
and the family of the Church to rejoice;  
we gather in worship and still we are amazed,  
renewed in faith and hope and love,  
blessed in ways that give freedom to our souls,  
named as the cherished children of God,  
invited into creation made new and life made more beautiful.

Whatever we carry as we come to worship,  
however our journey and history bring us  
to this time upon this Easter day,  
let us dwell deeply upon your story.  
We remember that Easter's joy grows from the sadness of the Cross.  
You have taken upon yourself the burdens of our sin;  
the failures of our living, the foolishness and the selfishness,  
the spoken and the unspoken, the done and the undone,  
the public and the secret evils that drag at us with so much power.  
You have lifted these burdens from us,

and welcomed us once more into the heart of the God  
whose longing is that all be saved.  
Hear us, as in silence together,  
we offer our own Easter 'thank you' and 'sorry...'

*silence*

## Declaration of Forgiveness

God of all mercy, we pray as the Psalmist prayed long before us:  
we thank you that you have answered us and become our salvation.  
The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.  
This, truly, is the day that the Lord has made;  
we rejoice and are glad in it.  
In the name of our risen Saviour,  
and in the power of the Spirit of God, we pray. Amen.

## Prayer for Illumination

God who has the power to raise the dead,  
let the powerful presence of your Spirit break open  
these old words of your Bible,  
that they might bless with joy and hope us this Easter. Amen.

## Readings

*Colossians 3: 1-4 | St Matthew 28: 1-10*

## An All-Age Activity

You will need:

- A. As wide a range of recognisable EMPTY containers as possible – things like: a shoe box; a match box; a jar of Marmite (other things in jars are available); a briefcase; a suitcase; a shopping trolley; a lunch box; a picnic hamper; a supermarket bag for life; etc.
- B. In advance of the service, place into each of your empty containers something entirely unexpected for that container – things like: a banana in the shoe box; a battery in the match box; a hard-boiled egg in the jar; a dinner plate in the briefcase; a frying pan in the suitcase; a family photo album in the shopping trolley; a TV remote in the lunch box; a stuffed toy in the picnic hamper; a Bible in the bag for life; etc.

- C. Before the service, have all your containers with their unexpected contents clearly visible for the congregation at the front of the worship space – possibly set out on tables.

What to do:

1. When the time comes for this activity, explain that Easter is partly about the way in which things get looked after and stored away. That's why we've heard the stories of the body of Jesus being carefully placed in the tomb after he died on the cross.
2. But, with God at work, not everything is as we might expect.
3. Please can I have enough volunteers to help me explore the things I have here at the front? (let a suitable group gather – one for each of your containers).
4. Ask each person what their container is and what it is for – let them all answer.
5. Then invite them, one at a time, to open their container and take out what is inside it. Gradually build up the picture of all these unexpected things.
6. Draw the link – that on the first Easter the women went to the tomb knowing what tombs were for. They expected that the dead body of Jesus would be there. Instead, as we read in today's story in Matthew, they find the tomb is empty, an angel says hello and then they meet Jesus risen from the dead. God undoes everything the world expects on Easter morning. And we live in that story today.

## Sermon Notes

### *Colossians 3: 1-4*

This letter is sent to the first Christians gathering in a community in the city of Colossae which was a strategic trading centre in the Lycus River Valley (in what is modern Turkey). The letter appears to be written by Paul and Timothy (although some scholars suggest it is maybe more likely to be by the circle of Paul's associates rather than the apostle himself). It begins by celebrating the way in which the gospel is spreading and being shared; different messengers are bearing witness to the good news and churches are being planted as a result. Thus we are told that Epaphras, "our beloved fellow-servant," has been the faithful "minister of Christ" who has helped this community come to believe (1: 1, 7-8). Colossians is very much a letter about holding on to Christian faith and hope even if the journey is hard and faith sometimes stumbles. It seems that the Colossians are facing challenges, perhaps from a culture hostile to their new-found faith. It may be that all sorts of alternative teachings and perspectives risk confusing and undermining them and their fledgling community of Jesus-followers (see 2: 1-23). Our text this Easter could well reflect an early Christian baptismal liturgy or creed (notice the similarities with Romans 6: 1-11). Christians share in the resurrection because, in baptism, we die to our former selves and rise to new life; our status changes from being people weighed down by sin into people set free to live and serve as God's beloved children. The assurance is that nothing can undo this new life that we enter into as we come to faith. Perhaps this part of the letter speaks to believers who worry that our faith isn't good or strong enough. Maybe we wonder if we truly are held within God's love. The letter's assurance is deep

and clear: we have already been raised with Christ. From this reality important things follow, signalled by the “if” of verse 1. The life of faith we enter into calls us to a changed perspective on being human. Read on in chapter 3 and we see what some of the newness means: putting to death things like evil desires and greed, letting go of anger, slander, malice and abusive language; undoing divisions in society such as those (in Paul’s day) that divided Jew from Greek. Instead, chapter 3 continues, put on new ways of living like a clean set of clothes: kindness; humility; patience and, above all, love. We also get a picture of the risen Christ seated at the right hand of God (3: 1). This is a very biblical picture of glory for God’s chosen one. We encounter it as a song in praise of the king as Psalm 110: 1 proclaims: “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Colossians takes this image and now sees it fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

### *St Matthew 28: 1-10*

This text is the sequel to 27: 61 where the women watch as the body of Jesus is laid in a borrowed tomb. Now, having waited out the sabbath, women return. We aren’t told here why they return (other gospels speak of them coming to properly anoint the body for burial after the haste of the earlier burial). Here, we simply are told that they come “to look at the tomb.” Perhaps they simply wish to get as close as they can to the body of the man they had followed. They do as so many of us do when death comes and we wish to pay our respects and let grief settle deeply into our lives. Think of the significance of our funerals and memorials and acts of remembrance. Think of the flowers laid where tragedy or evil has taken lives. It matters that Easter begins with grief and with grief acknowledged. Suddenly, everything is transformed. Matthew’s Easter is a story of overwhelming change, of even the solid ground being split by the power of God and the surge of resurrection. There isn’t just an earthquake; it is a violent one that forms a background to an angel’s arrival and the rolling away of the stone that blocked the tomb. We might notice this but, maybe, not get too distracted by it. Why does the angel roll the stone away if Jesus has already left the tomb? Did the stone get rolled away for him and then rolled back? Is this Matthew’s over excitement? Is it the confused story told and retold by witnesses overwhelmed by what they’ve experienced? In 27: 62-66, we’re told that Pilate agrees to have the tomb guarded to prevent the body of Jesus being stolen and lies spread about his resurrection. Now, in our text, the guards are dealt with by their shocked response to earthquake and angel (28: 4). Matthew then ignores the guards and all of the focus is upon the angel and the women; Easter is God’s offer of new life to those willing to receive it. Matthew’s gospel is one that really homes in on practical (and challenging) ways in which following Jesus needs to be expressed in daily life. It isn’t that, by good works, we somehow earn salvation or God’s approval. Matthew would never want us to go that route. Instead, it is that Jesus begins to change the world, drawing all things and people closer to the will and ways of God. A life of faith flows into goodness expressed. Think of the significance Matthew gives to all of this in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) and their warning about the pointlessness of salt that no longer seasons what is around it. Matthew is also writing for a church that is just beginning, possibly only 40 or so years after the events the gospel describes. The followers of Jesus

are having to find their way, discovering what faithfulness means. They are also, we can imagine, facing hostility and suspicion from the surrounding culture. Matthew is keen to let them hear good news in ways that cement and encourage their unity and faith. All of this could be a good thread to draw in a sermon on this Easter passage. Notice the ways in which the angel encourages the women and commissions them with a message of hope to carry to the other disciples. They are to return to their roots in Galilee and be assured that the risen Jesus will meet them there (as he does in 28: 16-20). The women run off, their fear mingling with “great joy” (28: 8). Easter doesn’t take all fear away for us, but does weave in the golden threads of joy. Just as suddenly as the earthquake and the angel, Jesus appears. Whilst in John’s gospel there is confusion and the mystery of Mary not being allowed to touch him (John 20: 14-18), here in Matthew recognition and touch seem spontaneous (28: 9). We might also draw a congregation’s attention to the beautiful reality in Matthew that the immediate response to encountering the resurrection becomes worship of the risen Christ; as we worship this Easter Sunday, we are in direct line with these women on that very first Easter. The centuries slip away! Jesus repeats the angel’s message. We might also notice that both Jesus and the angel begin with words we often need to hear and dwell upon as people of faith: “Do not be afraid.” Following Jesus amidst the realities of the world is not simple or easy. Much will undermine and challenge us. The news doesn’t suddenly become happy across the world just because we tune in on Easter Sunday morning. Our lives do not miraculously become perfect. Any congregation gathering for worship is likely to include folk with all sorts of greater and lesser fears. Perhaps the test of an Easter sermon is simply this: does it allow us to dwell upon joy and hear the risen Lord encourage us to not let fear overwhelm us?

## Offertory

As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, let us make our offering for God’s work in and beyond this place. Let us pray:

Risen Lord Jesus,  
as you have begun the new creation  
through your living, dying and rising,  
receive these gifts of money and the offering of our lives,  
that our gifts might belong to you,  
and our living and witness be blessed and fruitful  
to your praise and glory. Amen.

## Holy Communion

### *The Narrative of Institution*

Upon this Easter day of resurrection, we come to the table that Jesus shared with his friends on the night before he died upon the cross. We come to remember. We come to be fed again. We come to be formed anew into the body of Christ. Let us remember why all of this is possible and good, as we hear again the words of the apostle Paul:

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

### *Thanksgiving*

The Lord is God,  
**and he has given us light.**  
The Lord is our strength and our might,  
**he has become our salvation.**

Salvation is the gift that you offer to us all, merciful God.  
Even when we were far off, you chose to come close to us.  
Even in our doubts and despair, you kindled a light that will not die.  
As you gather us at this table, setting before us the bread and wine  
that speak of so many things, we thank you.  
Thank you for seeking us out in the life that Jesus lived;  
in the love that he revealed, in the healing that he gave,  
in the teaching that he left for us.  
Thank you for seeking us out in the death that Jesus died;  
in the punishment that he took, in the suffering that he embraced,  
in the brokenness that he took upon himself.  
Thank you for seeking us out in the new life that Jesus revealed;  
in the joy that he offers, in the hope that he promises,  
in the future that he welcomes us into.  
Easter has dawned, a day for the healing of all creation  
and the renewal of all things;  
thank you for the hallelujahs we can share across the world today.

Send your Holy Spirit upon us gathered here  
and upon these gifts of bread and wine.  
Let them become for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ.  
Let them feed us with the good news of resurrection.  
Let them be food for pilgrims as we journey on together  
with one another and with you.  
We offer our prayers, and share this meal,  
in the name of Christ our risen Lord,  
to whom be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

## Prayer after Communion

Living God, lover and companion,  
you create and sustain, bless and renew.  
Thank you for all we have shared together  
as we worship upon this Easter day.  
Thank you for weaving our stories  
into your great and glorious story of love.  
You feed and bless us  
so that we can be the friends and followers of Jesus.  
Help us to hear your call and say 'Yes' to all you command.  
Hear us, as we journey on this Easter, in our prayers for your world.

On this day of life made new,  
we pray for all whose lives cry out for newness:  
for survivors and abusers, for fighters and victims,  
for those seeking sanctuary and those forced to flee,  
for those who welcome the stranger and those who wish the stranger ill,  
for everyone whose body or mind is broken  
by sickness, sadness or hopelessness,  
for healers and helpers who persist in doing good  
even if all seems impossible,  
for the lonely, for the angry, for the unmoved,  
for the powerful, for the powerless.  
Hear the prayers of our hearts as we name those people and places and situations  
we want to bring to you this Easter...

*Silence*

God, in your goodness, receive all of these prayers,  
the ones we speak and the ones we cannot even turn into words,  
and may your Easter blessings enfold and renew all creation. Amen.

## Blessing

Risen Lord Jesus, not even death could undo you.  
Let the wonder of your resurrection and the promises you keep,  
be the blessings for your people.  
Renew in us and across all creation the life, hope and joy of Easter.  
Travel on with us, as we go on our way, in the power of your Spirit,  
and the name of God. Amen.

For hymns please see separate Eastertide document on  
<https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/worship-notes/>