

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2024

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

EASTER SUNDAY

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CHORAL INTROIT “An Easter Carol”

*Words and Music by Michael Bedford.
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CALL TO WORSHIP (from Psalm 118)

One: Rejoice! He is risen!
All: **He is risen indeed!**
One: We gather for worship in awe and wonder.
All: **The tomb is empty; death is not the last word.**
One: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”
All: **“This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”**
One: Open your hearts and minds to the risen Christ.
All: **Jesus Christ is alive and we, too, shall live.**
One: “This is the day that the Lord has made.”
All: **“Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”**
One: For Jesus Christ is risen!
All: **He is risen indeed!**

***OPENING HYMN** “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!” GtG 245

1. **"Christ the Lord is risen today!"**
Alleluia!
All creation, join to say:
Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high,
Alleluia!
Sing, O heavens, and earth reply,
Alleluia!

(continued...)

2. 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!
3. Lives again our glorious King,
Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now your sting?
Alleluia!
Jesus died, our souls to save,
Alleluia!
Where your victory, O grave?
Alleluia!
4. Hail, the Lord of earth and heaven!
Alleluia!
Praise to you by both be given,
Alleluia!
Every knee to you shall bow,
Alleluia!
Risen Christ, triumphant now.
Alleluia!

Words: Charles Wesley, 1739, alt. *Public Domain.*

Music: LLANFAIR, Robert Williams, 1817. *Public Domain.*

Music Harm. David Evans, 1927 © 1927 Oxford University Press; *used by permission through CCLI License #11178434 / #2457662.*

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Amazing God: we have heard the news before, yet still we can hardly believe it. We fail to trust the power of your grace and love. We know death too well, but life too little. Forgive our hardheartedness. Forgive our lack of faith in you. Forgive our resisting the life you offer. By the power of the resurrection, transform us. With the light of the Easter dawn, dispel the darkness of our despair and doubt. Through the gift of your Spirit, grant us the fullness of new life in Christ, our Resurrected Lord. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Acts 10)*

- One: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!
All: **The One who came to embody love among people “is ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.”**
One: “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”
All: **In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. For he is risen! He is risen indeed!**

THE PEACE

- One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**
(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 16:1-8

MARK 16 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ *When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Scared to Death! Scared to Life?” by Pastor Bill Vincent

You can't blame them for being frightened. In the early morning hours they are told news that we still find hard to believe. The one whom they had seen die an agonizing death is not where they last saw him. The one whom they knew to be dead and gone is not where he's supposed to be.

Later on they might just as well have concluded that they had seen a ghost. Nowadays, we might very easily come to that same conclusion. And why not? Going to a tomb in the misty, half-light of dawn? That's what you get for gallivanting in graveyards.

they went out and fled from the tomb; for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

It is easy enough to be scared to death by such an experience.

But this was not just any ole kind of fear – or not only any kind of fear. This was not a simple terror like that experienced at the latest horror movie/flick. This was a holy terror – literally, a holy terror. A fear, a fright in the face of the divine. The “fear of the Lord” in its most bare and basic form.

And it seems to me it portrays the situation of our response, even today, to this still ‘unbelievable’ news.

“*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*” the Old Testament tells us (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). The fear of the Lord as the sense of deep reverence, respect, awe that approaches sheer terror in the presence of the divine, the wholly and completely ‘other’ God. Truly an awe-filled, awful experience.

But as the Bible portrays it, this “fear of the Lord” is not meant to cause us to flee from God – though all too often we do, fleeing from ourselves as well. This fear of the Lord in the face of the awesomeness of the divine is meant to bring us to our knees in humble adoration and reverent respect, knowing our ultimate and sole dependence upon the power and grace of the divine.

And so the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But not always. Not if we flee from the presence of the divine. But only if somehow it is embraced; only if we let the divine, which we fear, overtake us, and transform us, and give us new life.

Yes it is easy enough to be scared to death, to be frightened into inaction or flight. What is more difficult is to make some positive response, even in the face of the unimaginable God, even in the face of awe-inspiring and fear-inducing divinity, and that which the divine offers.

And that is the issue before us.

Will we allow ourselves to be awe-filled enough to embrace – or be embraced by – the incredible newness of life offered here, even at the brink of the grave?

You see, there are certain predictable responses to the resurrection.

We can refuse to take it seriously by dismissing it as folly, laughing at it, considering it a silly tale of an over-zealous imagination.

Or we can refuse to take it seriously by rejoicing in it too easily, jumping at the good news without realizing what it is we jump at.

Or we can take this resurrection very seriously, and realize, with the coming of the Easter dawn, that this God means to change us, to change our lives. And that is frightening.

If ever there was a display of the raw power of God in our midst, it was in the simple emptiness of that tomb.

We can be scared of that emptiness, and flee.

Or we can be scared of that emptiness, and then embrace the fullness that it offers – the fullness of life anew in communion with this awe-inspiring God, the fullness of life anew with unimagined avenues of opportunity and hope. And still be scared.

“What about the joy?” you may ask. “Easter is supposed to be joyful.” And it is. But do we know what we are getting into? Or is ours a premature and frivolous ‘happiness’ without understanding? A Spring fever with little comprehension of the significance of the empty tomb?

True Easter joy begins with holy terror. Much like the women at the tomb. "But," you say, "they were scared and didn't understand." Maybe. But let me ask you: how fully do we really understand this resurrection business? "*He is not here,*" the young man said – that we understand. But how? How is he ‘not here’? How else but by the grace and power of God Almighty, and that is an awesome, fearful thing to experience. And therein lies the point. The women were afraid, for they sensed – however little or much – that here, before the gaping emptiness of a tomb that should have been full – that here they came face to face with the mystery and majesty of the very God of the universe.

The intention is not to traumatize people, but to make us all too aware that here in the resurrection of Christ we are dealing with the awesome power and grace of God. And that is more than just a little unnerving.

For if we choose to stand too long before this empty tomb, we will find ourselves overcome by the God who brought about this emptiness in the first place.

Look what can happen when this God lays hold of your life.

-Peter, who had denied even knowing this Jesus before a small group of people, ends up proclaiming his resurrection before a crowd of thousands.

-Lydia, who devoted her life, giving of herself to others.

-Paul, who ended up having his life turned completely around in the exact opposite direction.

The very transformation of our lives.

Described as being reborn. And remember with our first birth, we had no control over that.

Look what can happen – and watch out!

It is a dangerous thing to be taken hold of by the Resurrected Lord.

But it is also a wonder. A joy-full wonder.

For it means true joy, peace, hope, love, comfort, confidence.

A life so new and radical, life so unimaginable, so much so that it can only be described in terms of a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation and a new birth. Life that is beyond the power of death itself.

And as we stand before the empty tomb, we know now that all that this Jesus said and offered is true. "*Come to me all of you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28) ... and he will. "*I am the way and the truth and the life*" (John 14:6) ... and he is. "*God loved the world so much...*" (John 3:16) ... and God does.

The awesome display of the resurrection is God's confirmation of the message of Jesus Christ. God's stamp of approval on his life and ministry and way. God's ultimate vindication of Christ.

But there is also a warning here: for all that we might try to do to thwart God's way, all that we seek to do to keep God at bay in our lives and in the world is, in the end, futile; the empty tomb bears silent witness to that.

The fear of the women is very appropriate, in keeping with the experience of those who realize that they have come face to face with the awe-inspiring, awe-full power and presence of God.

But then at the end of our story we are left hanging: waiting for the other shoe to drop ... and it never does. Whether intentional on Mark's part or not, this openendedness is certainly appropriate for the story, for it signifies where we stand with this resurrection business. The end of the matter is 'not yet', "to be continued" written at the bottom. Only we can decide how it will end for ourselves; only we can decide the direction it will take for us.

As Halford E. Luccock said,

There is a real fitness...in the fact that [Mark's] is an "unfinished Gospel." "The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," is always unfinished. It is a continued story, to be carried on in individual lives. Paul added his page to it, [writing] "Last of all...he appeared also to me" (I Cor. 15:8). There is an unwritten page left for each of us to write.... (*The Interpreter's Bible*, vol.7, p.917)

In the women's fleeing in fear, the story is left open, unfinished. There is no neat and tidy conclusion. The door remains wide open, and that is a fearful thing.

But it is also in our own awe-filled encounter with the empty tomb that the choice is laid before us: to flee, scared to death; or to fall on our knees, in fear and trembling, to be caught up in the terrible, awe-some embrace of unimagined newness of life, the awesome embrace of a love that will not let us go, of a God that loves us even in spite of ourselves.

The empty tomb. It can scare the living daylights out of us. The question is: will we let it scare God's light and life *into* us?

***HYMN** "Crown Him with Many Crowns" GtG 268 (*Verses 1, 2, & 4*)

- 1. Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne;
hark, how the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own!
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless King
through all eternity.**

(continued...)

2. **Crown him the Lord of love;
behold his hands and side,
rich wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified:
no angel in the sky
can fully bear that sight,
but downward bends his burning eye
at mysteries so bright.**

4. **Crown him the Lord of years,
the potentate of time;
creator of the rolling spheres,
ineffably sublime.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
For thou hast died for me;
thy praise shall never, never fail
throughout eternity.**

Words: Matthew Bridges, 1851
Music: DIADEMATA, George Job Elvey, 1868
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from "*A Declaration of Faith*")

**Jesus was dead and buried,
but God raised him from the dead.
We are certain that Jesus lives.
We declare that Jesus is Lord.
His resurrection is a decisive victory
over the powers that deform and destroy human life.
His lordship is hidden.
The world appears to be dominated by people and systems
that do not acknowledge his rule.
But his lordship is real.
It demands our loyalty and sets us free
from the fear of all lesser lords who threaten us.
We maintain that ultimate sovereignty
now belongs to Jesus Christ
in every sphere of life.
Jesus is Lord!
He has been Lord from the beginning.
He will be Lord at the end.
Even now he is Lord.**

(next page...)

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Hear the prayers we lift up to you...
All: **...God of resurrection power and love.**

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection “In the Garden” Choir
Words and Music: C. Austin Miles, 1912
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**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

God of the empty tomb, your grace astounds us, your generosity fills us to overflowing. Accept our offerings as signs of our gratitude and bless our work on Christ’s behalf. May we love as Christ loved. May we serve as Christ served. Call us forth into your world, guided by Christ’s spirit. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord’s Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.
People: **And also with you.**
Leader: Lift up your hearts.
People: **We lift them to the Lord.**
Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
People: **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

(The prayer continues...)

The Lord’s Prayer (Traditional)

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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(As you are served, go ahead and partake of each of the elements, as a reminder – for each of us and all of us – of our individual participation in this sacrament and our personal commitment to our Lord.)

Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “The Day of Resurrection!” GtG 233

1. **The day of resurrection!
Earth, tell it out abroad,
the Passover of gladness,
the Passover of God.
From death to life eternal,
from sin’s dominion free,
our Christ has brought us over
with hymns of victory.**

2. **Let hearts be purged of evil
that we may see aright
the Lord in rays eternal
of resurrection light,
and listening to his accents,
may hear, so calm and plain,
his own "All hail!" and hearing,
may raise the victor strain.**

3. **Now let the heavens be joyful;
let earth its song begin;
the round world keep high triumph
and all that is therein.
Let all things seen and unseen
their notes of gladness blend,
for Christ the Lord has risen,
our joy that has no end.**

Words: John of Damascus, 8th cent.; trans. John Mason Neale, 1862, alt.
Music: LANCASHIRE, Henry Thomas Smart, ca. 1835
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.
One: For Jesus Christ is risen!
All: He is risen indeed!

***RESPONSE “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” GtG 232**

**Jesus Christ is risen today,
Alleluia!
our triumphant holy day.
Alleluia!
Sing we to our God above,
Alleluia!
praise eternal as God's love.
Alleluia!**

Words: Stanzas 1-3, *Lyra Davidica*, 1708; stanza 4, Charles Wesley, 1740
Music: EASTER HYMN, *Lyra Davidica*, 1708; adapt. from *The Compleat Psalmodist*, 1749
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POSTLUDE

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