

**HOLY EASTER SERVICE – SHEPPARTON UNITING CHURCH & SHEPPARTON RURAL
CONGREGATIONS 12TH April, 2020.**

The Lord is risen
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Music: 280 (AHB)

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| 1. Jesus Christ is risen today,
Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day,
Alleluia!
Who so lately on the cross
Alleluia!
Suffered to redeem our loss,
Alleluia! | 2. Hymns of praise then let us sing
Unto Christ our heavenly king,
who endured the cross and grave
Sinners to redeem and save. |
| 3. But the path that he endured.
Our salvation has procured;
Now exalted he is king,
And the angels ever sing: | 4. Sing we to our God above
praise eternal as his love;
praise him, all ye heavenly host,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost. |

I pay my respect to the traditional custodians of this land in which we live, work, play and worship. To their Elders and members past, present and emerging.

Welcome to you all. Those who are able to join this broadcast and those who are joining us via the hard copies being distributed through emails, postage and social media.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession:

We praise you O risen Lord, for the triumph of love emerging from the coldness of the tomb. We thank you for the gladness and grace that transform our broken hearts, and that the gravestone is being rolled away, so that love and hope are restored. We rejoice in our salvation with thankfulness!

We confess our need of you and our longing for you. We confess our reluctance to believe, the coldness of our hearts that refuses to love, and our dependence on ourselves for salvation.

Come to us O risen Lord, meet us wherever we are. Turn us back from the darkness of our own doing into the light of your presence and the renewal that is freely given. Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Doxology: (771 TiS)

*Now to him who loved us, gave us
Every pledge that love could give,
Freely shed his blood to save us,
Gave his life that we might live,
Be the kingdom
And dominion
And the glory evermore.* (Samuel Miller Waring 1792-1827 *alt*)

Reading: John 20: 1-18 (NRSV)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. [2] 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." [3] Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. [4] The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, [7] and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. [8] Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. [10] Then the disciples returned to their homes.

[11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; [12] and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. [13] 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." [14] When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15] Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." [16] Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew "Rabbouni!" (which means teacher). [17] Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because 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.'" [18] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Prayer: O Jesus Christ Risen Lord! Help us through the written word and the spoken word that we may perceive the Living Word. Amen!

Sermon: 'Christ is Risen! It is unbelievable!'

Every year, Easter comes to us, engages us and confronts us differently. This year, it is no different. The threat of Covid-19 and the global pandemic have forced most countries in the world into lockdown, and the church once again is transformed into something that the church has not experienced before. Here we are on resurrection morning 2020 and things are not the same as before.

For such is the very nature of the resurrection. The risen Lord will come to wherever we are, it will transform the world from whatever it was, and the dead shall live!

It is simply unbelievable!!! And if you are like me, in responding to the proclamation the 'Christ is risen' with 'It is unbelievable', take heart for it is not a statement of unbelief, rather it is an expression of faith.

The Collins dictionary puts it this way..." To say that something is unbelievable, you are emphasizing that it is very good, impressive, intense, extreme and extraordinary". And we can add our own adjectives, but it does not diminish the truthfulness of the event. Therefore, the statement 'It is unbelievable', is a statement of faith rather than a statement of unbelief.

It is that AHA moment when we are taken out of the realm of human comprehension and reason to a new realm, the realm of faith. But it is not blind faith. It is faith that is rational, reasonable and practical, for it always seek to address the human condition. Our all too human questions can only find its explanation in that new realm. The realm of faith!

I believe that, that was Charles Wesley's experience when he wrote that famous Easter hymn: *And can it be that I should gain, an interest in the saviour's blood? Died he for me who caused his pain – for me who him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that thou my God, shouldst die for me!*

That love is so amazing, so infinite and so free, it is unbelievable!

Then Charles Wesley says this in verse four (my favourite verse which tells of my life story also). *Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night: thine eye diffused a quickening ray – I woke; the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth, and followed thee.*

There are many, even on this resurrection morning who are still stuck in that all too human realm of reasoning that they missed the opportunity and the grace of being liberated from it and taken into the realm of faith, they are still in that dungeon of nature's night.

In our day and age, our victimhood mentality tells us that if it is too good to be true, chances are, it is not true. The resurrection for them is too good to be true. But, for us as Christians – it is unbelievable because it is true!

Of course, it is not new. There were critics and objectors to the truth of the Easter story. Two people come to mind from the second century of the common era, Celsus and Porphyry who ridiculed the Christian proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus on the basis that it

rested upon little more than a confused and contradictory testimony of frightened women. That line of argument lends more support to the truthfulness of the Easter witness.

Their objections were not about the truthfulness of the Easter story but rather the character and nature of the witnesses. Remember that it was a machocinist and polygamist society where the status of women was low, and their testimonies ought not to be taken seriously.

But we learn from the gospel accounts of Good Friday that the first congregation of the crucified Jesus were two thieves, one on each side. The very nature of many congregations today. A crucifix in the middle and thieves all round. Some praying and confessing 'Jesus, when you come into your kingdom remember me', and others well... They will go on questioning and seeking reasonable explanations. How can Jesus save himself and us from the cross?

We also learn that the first convert was a Roman centurion by the name of Longinus, who served in Judea under the command of the Governor, Pontius Pilate and he was the commander of the detachment that stood watch on Golgotha. He was an eyewitness to the final moments of Jesus' earthly life and the first to utter the words "Truly this was the Son of God" (Mathew 27: 54).

He decided to leave the military service, left Judea to preach about Jesu Christ the Son of God in his native land of Cappadocia.

In our Gospel reading this morning from the Gospel of John chapter 20: 1-18, we learn that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb by herself when it was still dark. A solitary, lonely grieving woman, searching for her lord who died. She saw that the stone had been removed and she ran.

It seems that she knew exactly where Peter and the other disciple were, she ran there. She told them the bad news and those two disciples ran back to the tomb. Mary must have followed them back to the tomb. They entered the tomb, Peter first than the other disciple, and according to John's account, the other disciple believed. What he believed; we do not know.

Then they returned to their homes. One can feel Mary Magdalene's disappointment when she was left alone again, first by her lord who died, then his body is now taken out of the tomb and she doesn't know where they have taken him, and this time by the two disciples.

She stood there weeping outside the tomb and with teary eyes she bent down to look into the tomb. Remember she only saw the stone removed and ran to tell Peter and the other disciple. She assumed that the body had been taken, this time she wants to be sure that the body isn't there.

For many of us, this is our story. We are always in a hurry to tell our friends that Jesus is not there. The one who fed the multitude, heal the sick and mix with sinners. Our lord is now a dead lord, and we cannot find his body. There are those who want proof of our experience by running to the place of the dead and what we see sends us back to where we have come

from. For, as John puts it in verse 9, the disciples did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Fortunately for Mary, and for us it is not the end of the story. While she was standing weeping and looking into the place where the dead should be, Jesus calls out her name and she turned to find the lord she believed was dead is now the Lord who lives.

This time Mary Magdalene said in Hebrew, “Rabboni” – teacher. She may have remembered all the things that Jesus had taught but wait a minute, at the end of chapter 20: 18, Mary went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”.

Mary had no need to understand the scriptures, she had seen the risen Christ. It is unbelievable! Her transformation and renewal are now complete, she can preach of the Risen Crucified Lord. In her own words “I have seen the Lord”. The Lord she once thought was dead is now the Lord of both the living and the dead.

Some might say, all very well for Mary, but for me I am still standing there peeping into the darkness of death. Or like the disappointed disciples, we would like to go home now please.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is on the mark here, (Hebrew 13: 8) “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”. That is the good news for us. The risen Christ is coming to where we are whether outside the tomb or in locked doors, he will call out our names and we will be transformed and transported to a new realm with those words in our lips “I have seen the Lord”.

We may not recognise him at first like Mary, but we will not miss that voice. It is unbelievable. I have seen the Risen Lord in the church, in this church, in the community and in aged care homes. I have seen the Lord in Intensive care units and in the parks where homeless people make their homes. I have seen the Lord in Christ’s mission in the world, calling out names, turning lives around from disappointments and grief, to the Easter proclamation of the realm of faith “Christ is Risen – it is unbelievable!”

Amen!

Prayer of Intercession:

Please pray with me a prayer by of St. Francis of Assisi

Most High, glorious God enlighten the shadows of my heart, and grant unto me a right faith, a certain hope and perfect charity, sense and understanding Lord, so that I may accomplish Thy holy and true command. Amen!

Blessing: 779 (TIS)

May the feet of God walk with you, and his hand hold you tight. May the eye of God rest on you, and his ear hear your cry. May the smile of God be for you, and his breath give you life. May the child of God grow in you, and his love bring you home