

EASTER SUNDAY
31/3/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

Defeater of death!

Christ is risen!

Creator of community!

Christ is risen!

Way of hope!

Christ is risen!

Promise of wholeness!

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Opening Prayer

The stone has been removed from the tomb;

the power of death is at an end.

The grave clothes have been abandoned;

fear and hesitation are over.

The Risen Christ is encountered;

the community of faith will be restored.

Christ is once more with his friends;

hope is alive, new horizons beckon, oppression and injustice are shattered. Amen.

HYMN 390 Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzZYJSsW2YY>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Yours is the glory, O God, for raising Jesus from the darkness of death.

Yours is the glory, O Christ, for being prepared, to conquer death and give us the gift of eternal life.

And, as if that were not enough, you greet us by name, as you greeted Mary in the garden, and transform our lives forever with your Easter life.

Risen Lord, we worship and adore you;

and we pray that the Holy Spirit, your life in us, will so transform us to your image, that we radiate your glory here, through our rejoicing and praise, and in all the places where people's lives are still affected by the powers of death and sin.

Yours is the glory, O God, for showing us the human face of your love in Jesus, your Son, our risen Lord.

Yours is the glory, risen Lord Jesus, and we rejoice that 'endless is the victory that you over death have won'. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

O God, like the first witnesses of the resurrection, we too, come to the empty tomb with a variety of responses. We hear the good news that Jesus has risen, but so often the evidence for this is difficult to detect in our lives.

Forgive us when we fail to make the risen Christ evident through our words, our actions - our lives .

For so many people, the only good news of this weekend is that it provides the opportunity for a holiday in pleasant Autumn weather.

Forgive us if we feel that this time of worship is an interruption to our planned activities.

As we come to the empty tomb seeking forgiveness for all our faults and shortcomings, help us to re-order our priorities so that we put the risen Christ first in our lives at all times.

Forgive us when we forget that the tomb is forever empty because Jesus is here and is wherever Christians live and worship.

Help us always to remember the costly act of Jesus Christ which gives us the gift of a new beginning - guilt free and graced by love. The tomb is empty because Christ is risen.

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia. Amen!

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Jesus "is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10: 42b,43) Hear, believe, and live the good news. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **ROMANS 6:3-11**

3 Do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 4 Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into

death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8 But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

- **Mark 16:1–8**

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.

HYMN 380 Yours be the glory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tjz4yXUJrgU>

SERMON

How many of you like to watch soap operas on TV?

Or, how about the so called ‘reality shows’?

Do you like a good ‘who dunnit’ movie?,

or a love story?

How about going to a live show at the theatre?

We all like happy endings to stories no matter what sort of show it is. The problem for me with soap operas is that they never seem to get anywhere. One commentator said that in most 'soaps' you can pick up where you left off over a year later with little development of the story line in the meantime.

I am not a big fan of those mystery series on TV with a nebulous ending. We like answers and certainty. Watching a long TV series which leaves us hanging until the next series starts seems to me to be very unsatisfactory.

It is a very human characteristic to want a happy ending, like there was in the movie Grease!

In this respect the early church added to the Easter story with Jesus' resurrection and made a happy ending. However, if we look carefully at Mark's Gospel, the first Gospel written, this is not actually the case. Later editors added some more. Today we are just sticking with the earliest version.

Let's look again at the overview of the end of Mark's Gospel.

Jesus has suffered horrendous torture and an indescribable death on the cross. Almost immediately his body is whisked away by a person called Joseph of Arimathea. This is very unusual as it was normally the families' responsibility to prepare the body for burial in their own way.

So, this stranger comes along and manages to get permission to put the body in a fresh grave with a stone rolled across the entrance. His mother, Mary, and the family and the disciples seem to have been completely sidelined. In chapter 15, it says: "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph were watching and saw where the body of Jesus was placed."

What about all those faithful disciples?

Was it that they were terrified and had run away?

Did they experience any happy ending?

They had gone into hiding in an upper room locked away from everyone, they were shattered!

Jesus was dead. End of story!

..... Or was it???

After the Sabbath was over it was time to properly prepare the body after for burial. But the ladies, as they walked to the grave had some difficulty with this one large stone blocking the entrance. How would the women get past the large stone which had sealed the tomb?

The women arrive at the tomb to find that the stone has been moved and there is no sign of the crucified Christ. A young man is sitting there and once he had delivered his message they ran away like frightened animals. They were too afraid to speak to anyone else.

So here they are, depressed, frightened, full of anxiety running away from a situation that they could not fully comprehend. There is no joyous celebration about the resurrection, rather there is fear and confusion.

What had happened?

This is where Mark's Gospel ends. No celebrations. They don't understand what is happening. Mark simply says: "So they went out and ran away from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."

Surely any reasonable story teller can come up with a better ending than people running away in fear. It is a bit like the end of each week's episode of 'Days of our lives,' everything it left up in the air. After all Mark would have known about Jesus' resurrection and appearance to his followers when he wrote the Gospel. Why end with everything left hanging?

If there is a reason for this sort of ending, what is it?

The women start this passage moving gingerly towards the tomb. By the end they are in full flight. But the women are not the only people in this passage. They had come seeking the body of Jesus but instead encounter a young man with a message for them. In verse 6 he says: "Jesus has been raised. He is not here. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee."

Jesus is on the move! He's gone and they are told that He is on His way to Galilee. So, if the women wanted to see him again, they needed to get going too.

This is where the sudden ending becomes a beautiful twist. Jesus is already on His way to meet them in Galilee. And it is in these words that the whole story pivots back to the start of the Gospel. In Mark 1:9 we hear: “Not long afterwards, Jesus came from Nazareth in the province of Galilee...”

This is where we are pulled back into the whole story in Mark’s Gospel all over again. We have read the whole Gospel through to the unsatisfactory ending and then we are bounced back to the beginning. We have read about His teaching and Jesus’ healing ministry and His wealth of parables, along with the many spectacular events that He was part of and now in the resurrection we are taken back to the start of the Gospel all over again. It is not an ending but the transition back to the constant renewal of the Jesus story.

In the light of the cross and resurrection we are then drawn back to re-read the Gospel again in the light of all those events. It is a never-ending story taking us on a circular journey.

Just when we think we have caught up with Jesus and know everything, Jesus moves ahead of us back to the start in Galilee.

Jesus is always on the move and can’t be tied down. This is the wonder of following the lectionary as a congregation. We move through the seasons of the church year, Resurrection, Pentecost, Advent, Epiphany, Lent then Easter and we start it all over again with a slightly shifting focus over a three year cycle.

Every year we come back to Galilee and the story starts over yet again. We change with every cycle and the messages we draw are informed by our changing circumstances in life.

If we think we have understood the story, we haven’t really got it at all: we need to go back to the beginning again and see what fresh insights God wants to give us. Every time we get to the end of Mark, we are told to go back to square one, go back to Galilee, and experience the miracles of grace again and again and again.

And as we do that, as we keep moving on, chasing Jesus, trying to catch up with him, so we will experience that grace in our lives and deepen our knowledge of what resurrection is really about.

You see, the resurrection is not some static story that happened in history over 2000 years ago. The resurrection is a dynamic movement - an experience of grace that each one of us is called into again and again and again.

And none of us are left out of this. God wants to reveal His resurrection power to each one of us.

You may be sitting here today thinking “That’s alright for him to say: he’s got a dog-collar on! If he knew about my past, or what was in my mind, or the secret things of my life, he wouldn’t be so sure that God’s grace was for me.”

Well you’d be wrong! And here’s how I know...

Look again at the words of the young man to the women...“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee”.

“Tell his disciples *and Peter*...”

It is so significant that Peter gets singled out by name. No disciple had failed Jesus as much as Peter. No-one had fallen as short as Peter had. No-one felt as bad as he did. And yet Peter is singled out: “Go and tell the disciples and Peter...”

This is a clear sign that *even Peter was forgiven by God*. He had been singled out for God’s grace. And the message is clear. ... If even Peter can be forgiven, then no sin is too big for God to deal with.

There is nothing that you and I have ever done in the past that God cannot forgive. There is no shameful secret that cannot be brought before God or that needs to remain hidden from his glorious, grace-filled light. Whatever your past – whatever your present situation - God can forgive anything. Absolutely anything.

If He can forgive Peter: He can forgive even you: He can forgive even me.

So let’s think about this. OK!

I think we are getting closer now to answering the question we started with...Why does Mark end his Gospel like this?

Why does Mark end the Gospel so enigmatically, with the women running away - afraid to tell anyone about what has happened?

Actually, I think the answer is really simple...

It's because Mark's Gospel isn't finished.

The Good News of Jesus Christ can't end in silence. Mark is waiting for *you and me* to finish the story!! He is wanting *you and me* to go out and tell people the Good News.

The women in the story run away in silence - but *someone* has to proclaim the Gospel, *someone* has to continue the Gospel. It's up to you and me to complete the story...

I said earlier that the resurrection is a story about dynamic movement, the women are moving, Jesus is moving. Now the question is this: how are we moving in this story?

Are we going to run away and hide in silence, knowing that Jesus has been raised from the dead but too frightened to tell anyone about it? Or are we going to complete the story and go out to proclaim the Good News of the resurrected Christ to the people of our community and a wider world in need?

If we won't – who will?

The young man in the story presents each one of us with an incredible challenge as we sit here this morning: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here."

This is the truth of the resurrection. This is the truth of the Easter Story. The truth is that Jesus has moved on. He has gone ahead of us. Our task is to play catch up: to chase after him. He is going back to Galilee. And we need to follow him there.

We need to go back to the beginning. We need to soak ourselves in the Scriptures. We need to soak ourselves, again and again, in a profound personal experience of Jesus - his healing for you, his miracles for you, his life-changing teaching for you. And we need to proclaim our experience to a broken world.

The resurrection is not the end of the story. We need to finish it.

In the Celtic Christian tradition, the symbol for the Holy Spirit is a wild goose. And it's a beautiful symbol because no matter how carefully you might creep up behind a wild goose and try to catch it and tame it, it will always fly away from you.

Jesus is like that too. We cannot tame Jesus and turn him into a 'happy ever after' story. We must each spend our lives chasing him and following where he leads.

We are not on a wild goose chase.

We are chasing the wild goose!

And there is a huge difference between the two...

And so, this morning, we don't shout "Alleluia" because the story has ended. We shout "Alleluia" because the story continues - and you and I are partnering with God as the scriptwriters.

Where will you take the story from here? It's up to you...

HYMN 242 I danced in the morning

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fR2tkQJFEB8>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

New life is bursting forth, emerging, spilling over into all of creation! Let's allow our thankfulness to God spill out in the gifts of our tithes.

O God, your love never dies. Your joy sings through all of creation. Play a beautiful note through these tithes and offerings we pray, **amen**.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

He Has Risen!

He lives, We serve a risen Saviour, He's in the world today.

We know that He is living, whatever men may say.

We see His hand of mercy; We hear His voice of cheer;
And just the time we need Him, He is always near, because He lives!

We give thanks to the Lord, For he is good, His love endures for ever!
He is our strength and our defence. He is our refuge and salvation.
The Lord is God and he has made His light shine upon us! Praise the Lord!
Amen.

From the Hunter Presbytery Prayer Diary a prayer for the Bulahdelah Uniting Church congregation.

We are a congregation of approximately 35 regular attendees, including a few young families.

We have a small yet healthy Sunday school and a fortnightly Youth Group which includes a few youths from church families, plus up to 8 or 10 from the local community.

We pray for our local Christian youth so that they may continue to grow in grace as they face the challenges of life through their teenage years. We also pray for those young people who don't yet know, You, that through the love they experience around them amongst their Christian peers and leaders that their minds and hearts may be open to You.

May they all grow in courage and wisdom in this wonderful but difficult world we live in, We also pray for our Youth Group leaders, that you would equip them with wisdom, courage and integrity as they reflect Christ's love to those under their authority. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayers. Amen.

Lord God, our loving Heavenly Father, we thank and praise you for the glorious resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, our Passover Lamb, who has taken away the sin of the world. Lord, in the name of Your Son, Jesus, we are truly grateful.

Lord, help us to live in the gladness and grace of Easter Sunday, every day. Let us have hearts of thankfulness for your sacrifice. Let us have eyes that look upon your grace and rejoice in our salvation. Help us to walk in that mighty grace and tell your good news to the world. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayers.

Lord, we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been caught in the crossfire in both Israel and Gaza. O'Lord, please preserve life and shelter for those who own and proclaim your name in those lands. We pray that the peoples of Israel and the Middle East will find everlasting hope in you. And in the land of your Son's redeeming death and resurrection, turn hearts to look to the Saviour and live. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayers.

Loving God we acknowledge that we are blessed in this land as you have given us peace and freedom. In which we have a society of a rich variety of people that have come from many lands. We thank you for the church in Australia. Inspire us to promote the unity of your church as we pray for all congregations and it's clergy. We pray for the Federal and State Governments of this country and for all the positions of authority. We pray that they may govern wisely and justly so that all may live in peace and safety. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayers.

Lord, we pray for all who are suffering in all the war torn countries, domestic violence, persecution and injustice. All who are in fear of their lives. Lord, comfort them when they are in pain. Give them your peace when they are experiencing anxiety or fear. And give them your strength when they are weak. Lord, guide them to safer places. Lord, help them know you are with them always. That you never give up on us. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayers. In the precious name of your beloved son, our amazing Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Please join me in singing the Lords prayer.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 216 Rejoice the Lord is King

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4h8PelsYlc>

BENEDICTION

Today is a brand-new day, the first day of the week.
It is early, and in many ways it is still dark.
And yet the rumours of life on the other side of death grow loud now.
Places of devastation are being transformed into seedbeds for new life.
Experiences of desolation are becoming places
for honouring the sacredness of life.
This story, this new resurrection life,
lives in our tissues, stirs in our bones, rouses our hearts, and explodes in our
spirit.
We have come from darkness and despair to hope and joy.
We have been transformed by new life.
Go forward now
with the Gardener's love
and the hope that a new day has come.
Carry your peace with you,
This resurrection life,
this joy and outrageous love
into a world yearning for aliveness
Alleluia! Christ is risen.
Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74