

Morialta Uniting Church April 19th 2020

Welcome Welcome to you, whoever you are, and wherever you are. We are all joined together by the Spirit of God, and through the wonders of technology. It is good to be connected in this way.

Opening reflection:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We would like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that is made by passing through some stages of instability – and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually – let them grow. Let them shape themselves without undue haste. Don't try to force them on as though you could be today what time, grace and circumstances will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give yourself the benefit of believing that God's hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Teilhard de Chardin (adapted)

The Symbols of our faith are before us:

The cross stands empty – Christ is alive – love will never die.

The candle is lit – Christ's light shines in the world. The darkness cannot overcome it.

The book is open – bringing the stories and traditions of our faith for new interpretation in every age.

The water is poured – life is nurtured by the Spirit of God.

Song: Alleluia Aotearoa 146 We are an Easter people

We are an Easter people,
ours is an Easter faith,
the yeast is rising in the bread,
our wine has vintage taste.
Christ is risen, Christ is risen, risen in our lives.

We are an Easter people,
ours is an Easter faith,
our tears are freed to flow and heal
our shattered hopes and hearts.
Christ is risen, Christ is risen, risen in our lives.

We are an Easter people,
ours is an Easter faith,
our fears have died, we rise to dream,
to love, to dance, to live,
Christ is risen, Christ is risen, Risen in our lives.

Acknowledgement of Land We acknowledge that from before recorded time, the First Peoples cared for this land. We praise the Creator and we honour the Elders and Communities of the Kurna people of this place. May we all work for the healing and restoration of this Land and its Communities.

Prayer:

God of all, who calls us to belonging, we give thanks for resurrection life. We give thanks for signs of your care and creativity. We give thanks that within kernels of doubt, there may be trees of life and hope.

Praise be for minds that bend and flex despite restriction,
for bodies that signal love by staying apart.

Praise be for neighbours, calling from balconies, waving through windows,
for greetings that cross the space between us.

Praise be for strangers, careful on footpaths, for children asking their questions,
for truth tellers who earn our trust and speak to our fear.

Praise be for friends who warn and chide and encourage,
for human warmth in time of distance.

God of all, who calls us into belonging, we give thanks for the richness and diversity of life, for the privilege and responsibility of caring for creation, and opportunities for spreading goodness and generosity. We pray with millions this week in World Earth Day that people may learn to respect creation and care for it as a gift of God.

We lament the global tragedy of coronavirus. In the gaping chasms of this time, we are reminded that for many in our world the deep struggle of daily existence has always been there. We lament that we have often turned our eyes away. Forgive us when we have remained in denial or dismissal and lead us into new days and new ways.

In these times may we be wise in holding back from bringing danger to ourselves and others.

We rejoice in hope and peace offered in this Easter season.

Hear our prayer of praise and thanks for ordinary kindnesses in this unusual Easter season.

Hear our prayer of praise and thanks for new life in the Spirit of Jesus in this Easter season where belief leads us into thoughtful action and into the life of the risen Christ. *Amen.*

Inspired by Julie Perrin and others

Scripture John 20: 19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jewish authority. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin^[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah,^[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon *by Rev Christine Garner*

Last week we celebrated the Risen Christ. We sang joyful Easter songs. The scripture reading focussed on the early morning with Mary Magdalene discovering that Jesus’ tomb was empty, Jesus’ body gone, and then Mary running to tell the disciples. Peter and another disciple ran back to the tomb with Mary. They looked and were bewildered and they went back home, leaving Mary alone in the garden. Mary has an encounter with the risen Jesus and together they have a conversation. Then Mary returns to tell the disciples what she had experienced.

On this second Sunday of Easter, the gospel reading takes us back to that same day. This time, on the Sunday evening. We take up the story with the disciples huddled behind closed doors. I want you to imagine the scene. They had started the previous week with a triumphant celebration as Jesus had entered Jerusalem, the crowds waving palms and cheering him on. Then the terrible turn of events; Jesus betrayal, his arrest, his trial, and finally his death by crucifixion.

Like most people do at a time of tragedy, they gathered together to console each other and try to come to grips with the reality of the new situation. No wonder they are flat. They wouldn’t be wanting to talk to people. They were in a time of grief. The worst had happened. Jesus was dead, of that they are sure.

But they have already heard the rumours that are circulating; that Mary Magdalene and some of the disciples have been to the tomb and that the body of Jesus is missing. Nobody knows where it is or what has happened to it. The tomb is empty. Mary claims she has heard her own name spoken by her beloved teacher and friend, and that she has seen him. But to the disciples it seems too impossible to believe.

So here they are then, on the Sunday evening, ten disciples hidden in an upper room. Judas has taken his life; Thomas is somewhere else. They have locked themselves in. They are afraid of the same zealous religious leaders who had a hand in Jesus’ death. Will they too be persecuted for following Jesus? Will they be banned by the Sanhedrin for spreading a heresy? By locking their enemies out, they locked themselves in. They were prisoners of their own fear and despair. The worry and confusion of the events of the last seventy-two hours have taken a toll. Their fear is justified. No wonder they are timid and trembling, cowering behind closed doors.

But what the disciples experience next is surprising. They have an experience of Jesus coming and standing among them. "Peace be with you," he says. And he breathes on them a new Spirit of Life. In reality their room had open doors because the risen Christ entered. No locked doors can ever keep Christ out. Christ's presence cannot be stopped nor contained by the walls we build. All doors are open. The tragedy is that we lock ourselves in, but Christ can open doors to life and liberty if we will open our hearts.

When I think of those disciples, clustered together, shaken by the events of the week, I am amazed how this story can speak to us at this time. Who would have imagined when we celebrated Christmas how different our world would be by Easter? I spent Christmas at Robe with my whole family. How glad I am that between us we made that gathering happen. Now at Easter, the family is spread out and isolated, in Queensland, in Victoria and here in South Australia.

And the same applies to everyone. I know that some of you are even more isolated from family and friends who are overseas somewhere. Others who live alone find themselves particularly isolated.

Whatever we were all doing at the end of last year, things are different now. The world as we knew it then has changed. There is a new threat abroad, a danger, and it is defining what we are doing now and how we are living, and it's called COVID19. This virus first appeared in the news on 31 December last year.

Of course, we are not locked together in a closed room as the disciples of Jesus were. Rather we are restricted in a way that is unnerving. We are self-isolating, not just for our own protection, but also for the protection of each other. It is quite confronting to be so separated and restricted. We are finding we have time on our hands, an enforced relaxation of our endless round of activities. And in the midst of all this we are finding new ways of connecting. And we know that when the restrictions are relaxed, we will in all likelihood not be going back to the same old, same old... the world that emerges will, I suspect, be very different.

So, for me the big questions are these. How are we spending this time of isolation? What changes are happening to us? How are we making use of the time? What is forming in our hearts and spirits?

I have an image of it being a time of enforced hibernation. And I am thinking how bulbs lie dormant in the ground, waiting for the right time to emerge. My winter gladiolas will be flowering shortly. But last week when I was gardening, I discovered one corm that had been dislodged and so it hadn't been able to grow. It was isolated. I have planted it to see what happens. Will it grow? I hope so, but it may be too late for it to flower this season. Now this is a clivea. A friend planted it from seed in October last year, 6 months ago. You can see the remainder of the seed, but now the green shoots are spouting. In this I can see the slow work of nature that goes on, hidden underneath the soil, and when the time is right the new growth emerges. Just how it will turn out we do not know, but it needs to be nurtured. It will be interesting to see how long it takes to flower.

When I was in full time ministry, at least once a year, I tried to get away to the Jesuit Retreat Centre at Sevenhill in the Clare Valley. It would be a 'Silent' retreat from after dinner on Monday night until after breakfast on Friday morning. We would be nurtured by rest, good food, fresh air, daily communion, and morning and evening reflections led by the retreat leader, an Anglican

priest. I would keep my journal, reflect on what was happening in my life and my congregation. But often it was not until I drove home that I could really say what had changed, what had emerged, what had been happening to my soul, my mind and some new insights for life. I needed this time of hibernation, of distance to become aware of the spirit of God working and speaking to me. What an opportunity we have in this time of self-isolation, to be quiet, to be still in our isolation, and to trust in the slow work of God.

So back to the apprehensive and spooked disciples in their locked room. What is the future going to hold for them? Jesus calmly appears. "Peace be with you." He says it twice, just to be certain that they get the message. And he shows them his hands. Jesus understood the human need for presence. The same one who washed feet, broke bread, ate with strangers, comes into the disciples' midst, urging them to be at peace. He breathes on them and commissions them with the power of the Holy Spirit. Into their fear he comes, despite their locked doors, their disbelief and their hiding.

For the disciples, it was just the beginning of a new way of being. In the biblical story the full expression of the new life within them does not come until Pentecost, which is when they go out into the world and take Jesus' message of inclusive love with them.

What is it in our lives that we still lock-in? What are the fears that prevent our growth and a deepening of our faith? Are we going to recognise when the presence of the risen Christ comes and stands among us? Are we ready to feel the breath of the Spirit blowing through us? How **are** we going to spend this Easter season? And where will we be when we come to celebrate Pentecost on the last day of May? And where will our world be? Will we have used this privileged time well? Will we be ready for whatever emerges in the future when this time of self-isolation ceases?

On 29 March this year, Nicholas Wright, an Anglican Bishop and Theologian at Oxford University wrote an article about "Lent, Lament and COVID19". In this Easter season his closing words speak to us still and I quote:

"We become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope. New wisdom for our leaders? Now there's a thought."

And I finish with a poem by Kitty O'Meara on published on 19 March 2020.

And people stayed home
and read books and listened
and rested and exercised
and made art and played
and learned new ways of being
and stopped
and listened deeper

someone meditated
someone prayed
someone danced
someone met their shadow

and people began to think differently
and people healed
and in the absence of people who lived in ignorant ways,
dangerous, meaningless and heartless,
even the earth began to heal

and when the danger ended
and people found each other
grieved for the dead people

and they made new choices
and dreamed of new visions
and created new ways of life
and healed the earth completely
just as they were healed themselves. Amen.

Song: ATN 9 Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am God *(sing 3 times)*

I am the Lord that healeth thee *(sing 3 times)*

Commit thy way unto the Lord *(sing 3 times)*

News and notices. How are you going?

Remember to contact each other, find ways to stay in connection, support those who are finding things tough.

Here we acknowledge the offerings that have been made to support the work of God's church here and beyond.

Prayer

God of all, fierce Lover of Life, give strength to our arms and our resolve, critical in this time for cleaning and scrubbing and washing our hands even again. Let us join ourselves to the task, because we too love life, our neighbour's and our own.

God of the frail in body and mind, be a companion in loneliness, a consolation in absence, a balm in mystified sorrow. When doors through which dire necessity must stay shut, let Love arise in memory of gesture and embrace.

Give wisdom and strength to all those in our community and around the world who are responding to the coronavirus — especially health professionals, as well as teachers and helpers, chaplains, police, government officials and policy makers, research scientists, food providers and all. May they know a strong circling of real gratitude and support around them.

May those who mourn the loss of loved ones, be comforted.

May those in our community who are feeling anxious, find peace and reassurance.

May we be communities of empathy, love and care, in all we face.

We pray for and remember those people in places like Yemen who are under attack or who are more persecuted than ever because of the perception that no one will notice while the eyes of the world are otherwise engaged.

May increased help come to refugees, those with no safe space to obey lockdowns, migrant workers and those stuck at borders. Those who have lost their jobs and livelihoods, those we know and those we don't know.

We are called to speak into and live into those struggles, to speak of a world where each person's dignity and value is upheld and treasured, to grasp onto prophetic restoration, the reality of Easter.

Risen Jesus set us free to join you in the life of the world. Amen *Inspired by Julie Perrin and others*

Song: NJS 89 Let there be peace

Let there be peace on earth /And let it begin with me /Let there be peace on earth /The peace that was meant to be.

With God our Creator/We're one family/Let us walk with each other/In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me/Let this be the moment now/with every step I take/Let this be my solemn vow.

To take this moment and live/each moment in peace eternally/Let there be peace on earth/And let it begin with me.

Parting words:

Be still...

And let God's peace wash over you
like waves lapping over stones
smoothing rough edges of insurmountable worries
to tiny insignificant grains of sand,
leaving smooth shining love.

May God our Creator renew in us the creative Spirit
that brings healing and life to our world.
May Jesus the Christ, uphold us in grace and love.
May the Holy Spirit fill us with courage
to be bearers of God's song of hope in the world. Amen.

Blessing Song TIS 779 May the feet of God walk with you

May the feet of God walk with you, /and your hand be held tight. /May the eye of God rest on you, /and God's ear hear your cry.

May the smile of God be for you,/ holy breath give you life/May the child of God grow in you/and God's love bring you home.

May the waking sun delight you/and its evening call to prayer./May the moon and stars surprise you,/spin your heart to world's unseen.

May the storms with all their wildness,/ bring you courage, call to strength/May the darkness be your comfort/soft preparing for today.

Peace be with you

