

Service for July 11th 2021: reliable witnesses to the truth

Prepared by Jon Skeet

Welcome and introduction

Welcome to worship. Wherever you are, however you're worshipping, our combined worship is enriched by your presence, as we actively celebrate and share God's unconditional love.

This service is (presumably) the last in an increasingly inaccurately named "Bible month" as we examine Mark's Gospel. Last week David Shaw invited us to reflect on many aspects of Jesus in the final chapters of Mark; this week we will be considering what happens next, and our own part in God's story as witnesses to the truth of the resurrection.

Our first hymn is bittersweet for those of us in a situation where we can't sing it to the rafters as we might like to. But we *will* sing again, and God knows the song in our hearts today. Whether we're singing or humming, we do indeed worship together, praising God, telling the world, and spreading the word.

Hymn: Born in song (STF 21, H&P 486)

Words and music by Brian Hoare. CCLI 4191371

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VLLghU0_5I

1. Born in song!
God's people have always been singing.
Born in song!
Hearts and voices raised.
So today we worship together;
God alone is worthy to be praised.
2. Praise to God!
For he is the one who has made us.
Praise to God!
We his image bear.
Heaven and earth are full of his glory;
let creation praise him everywhere.
3. Christ is King!
He left all the glory of heaven.
Christ is King!
Born to share in our pain;
crucified, for sinners atoning,
risen, exalted, soon to come again.
4. Sing the song!
God's Spirit is poured out among us.
Sing the song!
He has made us anew.
Ev'ry member part of the Body;
given his power, his will to seek and do.
5. Tell the world!
All power to Jesus is given.
Tell the world!
He is with us always.
Spread the word, that all may receive him;
every tongue confess and sing his praise.
6. Then the end!
Christ Jesus shall reign in his glory.
Then the end
of all earthly days.
Yet above the song will continue;
all his people still shall sing his praise.

Prayers of adoration and confession

Lord God, creator, saviour, sustainer – we come before you in humble adoration. Our humility is not because you desire make us feel small and inadequate, but because of your majesty and glory. As we consider everything you do and everything you are, we fall on our knees in worship and service.

You alone are worthy of all praise. You alone are perfect in truth, boundless in love, and bountiful in life. All good things are seen in you and flow from you. Lord, we catch only glimpses of your greatness, but it takes our breath away.

Enlarge our hearts, open our eyes, and purify our worship, that we may know more of you and follow you more closely. Amen.

We remember together the times we have not been the people God has called us to be.

Lord, as we come before you in praise, we feel inadequate. We know we have not always lived lives that reflect the love you show to us. We come with regret and remorse, for opportunities wasted and for times we have contributed to brokenness in the world. We are sorry – as individuals, as local churches, and as the broader body of Christ - for all the times we have not followed your will for us.

We are sorry, and we come back to you. As we ask for your forgiveness, Lord, we ask for your help in turning our lives back to your path. We ask for the Spirit's strength, using us to change discrimination into inclusion, conflict into collaboration, and material inequality into shared abundance.

Brief silence as we each reflect before God.

God of salvation through Christ, we rejoice in the grace you have shown us from before our birth. We thank you that you eagerly welcome us back into your loving arms, again and again.

Amen.

Reading

3 John 1:1-4

Two truths and a lie

One of the themes of our service this morning is recognising and telling the truth.

In the company I work for, lots of teams have a game called “two truths and a lie.” When someone new joins the team, they have to make three statements about themselves – two truthful ones, and one which is a lie. Then everyone has to guess which ones are true and which one is the lie. It’s been a very long time since I changed team, but I might say something like this...

First statement: my wife Holly and I met at a talk about different ways of thinking about time. When someone asks when our first date was, we always answer: “that depends – which calendar are you using?” Some people find that funny – although admittedly not many.

Second statement: when I was a teenager, I once went to a party in a bright green bin-liner. It was a bit hot to dance in, but remarkably popular!

Third statement: when Holly and I were at university together, we were both members of a club. On Sunday evenings, we would all sit together in our dressing gowns, reading children’s stories in silly voices, and drinking mugs of piping hot cocoa.

So which of those do you think was the lie? It was actually the first one. While *I’m* interested in calendar systems and time zones, Holly isn’t really. But I expect *some* people who know me might think that was true. Now, here are “two truths and a lie” about Christianity.

First statement: God loves you, whoever you are, and whatever you’ve done. God wants you to know that love, and to love other people in the same way.

Second statement: When you’re a grown-up, you can only go to Church on a Sunday if you know the Bible well *and* you’ve been good for the whole of the week before. If you’ve been bad and anyone finds out, you won’t be allowed into Church.

Third statement: Jesus is the Son of God – he’s God as a human being. After he’d travelled around with his disciples, teaching and healing, he was killed on the cross. Then God raised him back to life.

Which of these was the lie? I *hope* it’s obvious that it was the second one. But sometimes I wonder whether it’s a bit like the lie I told about myself. Maybe sometimes we make it *seem* like we only want people to come to Church if they’re already perfect. Let’s try to make it obvious that we welcome *everyone*... and that we’re ready to share the *real* truth about God with anyone who is interested.

Our next hymn is about knowing Jesus better and better. Sometimes it's difficult to understand the truth about God's love and how it was shown to us in Jesus, but it's the best thing we could ever learn about – more important than anything else in our lives.

Hymn: All I once held dear (STF 489)

Words and music by Graham Kendrick. CCLI 1045238

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zk6E040pNKO>

1. All I once held dear,
built my life upon,
all this world reveres,
and wars to own,
all I once thought gain
I have counted loss;
spent and worthless now,
compared to this.
2. Now my heart's desire
is to know you more,
to be found in you
and known as yours.
To possess by faith
what I could not earn,
all-surpassing gift
of righteousness.
3. Oh, to know the power
of your risen life,
and to know you in
your sufferings.
To become like you
in your death, my Lord,
so with you to live
and never die.

Refrain

*Knowing you, Jesus,
knowing you,
there is no greater thing.
You're my all, you're the best,
you're my joy, my righteousness,
and I love you, Lord.*

Alternative: May the mind of Christ my Saviour (H&P 739, STF 504)

Words by Katie Barclay Wilkinson. CCLI 1039031

Reading

Mark 16:1-20 (the whole of Mark chapter 16)

Reliable witnesses

The end of the story?

In 2002, Tilehurst Methodist Church put on a production of “Jesus Christ, Superstar” for Good Friday and the following Friday and Saturday. Different productions have different ways of ending, but in ours, the body of Jesus was simply carried out of the hall to an instrumental piece of music. The cast didn’t return for a curtain call. I suspect – and hope – that the audience felt slightly discombobulated. The response I was most pleased with was from a non-churchgoer who said that despite the odd ending to the *performance*, this clearly wasn’t the end of the *story*. Exactly right!

And yet Mark’s gospel ends with a similar sort of damp squib. Here’s Mark chapter 16, verse 8: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” What sort of ending is that?

Of course, there are also verses 9 to 20, which form a brief but more palatable ending... but scholars think those were added later, as a combination of resurrection stories from elsewhere. We don’t know whether there were some original verses after verse 8, or whether Mark just expected anyone reading or listening to his Gospel to know what came next anyway. But without anything else, it feels like a real anti-climax.

Unreliable witnesses

One phrase that I often think about when it comes to the resurrection appearances is “unreliable witnesses”. In *every* Gospel, the risen Jesus first appeared to women – either just Mary Magdelene, or a group of women who had gone to the tomb to attend to the body they expected to find. In Luke’s Gospel, the women *did* go back to the apostles – who didn’t believe them. The same thing happened to Mary Magdelene in verse 10 of Mark chapter 16. Women were regarded as “unreliable witnesses” so when they came back from the tomb with such remarkable news, it’s only natural that the apostles regarded this as nonsense. Natural, and completely abhorrent.

Fortunately of course we’re beyond all that now. The phenomenon of “fake news” back in the first century AD has been completely eradicated. We’d never *dream* of judging the truth of what someone says based on their gender, race, wealth, appearance or political leanings now. *Sigh*. If only. We have more information readily to hand than ever before in human experience – but there’s more fighting than ever about what is actually *true*.

The women weren’t the only witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection who weren’t believed, however. After a single-sentence summary of the Road to Emmaus encounter with the risen Christ, when the two disciples returned to the others, again the rest didn’t believe them. In fact, looking through the Gospels, I can’t find any examples of people believing in the resurrection because of someone else’s account: it’s only ever through their own encounter with Christ.

Turning back to the original ending to Mark's Gospel, there's a second kind of "unreliable witness". The "young man" – who we normally understand to be an angel – says to the women: "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

How do they react to this instruction to not be alarmed, but to witness to Christ's resurrection? They *are* afraid, and they don't tell anyone. They are unreliable in that they can't be relied upon to be witnesses at all!

Witness in 2021

So much for the very first Christians. What about us? I believe we are called to be *reliable witnesses* for Christ, and that this has two parts. Firstly, we need to be people that God can rely on to witness. We need to be ready to talk about *our* experiences of Christ, and why we believe in the resurrection – and I know that can be a scary thought. We also need to be reliable in the sense of being believable. In our society, there's a natural tendency to look for a hidden motivation when someone says something unexpected. How do *they* benefit if we believe them? Is what they're saying in line with other things they've done? If we proclaim a risen Jesus providing life in all its fullness, but live as if we believe something else entirely, why would anyone pay any attention?

If it feels like I'm asking for something impossible, I have two pieces of good news – along with the Good News that Christ *is* risen, of course. Firstly, we're not asked to do this alone. Look at the very last verse in Mark 16: "Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, *and the Lord worked with them* and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it." We don't *just* believe in Christ crucified and resurrected: we believe in God the creator and God the Spirit as well, and we can rely on the Spirit for help and strength.

Secondly – and I know this sounds odd – I don't actually expect anyone to believe us. Think back to the apostles. They had been with Jesus, and had been told to expect him to be raised. They were then told about the resurrection by people who'd seen him physically, with their very own eyes, and *still* the apostles didn't believe. What chance have we got?

Two thousand years later, I think people can still only believe in the resurrection as they encounter God in their lives. I don't think we're called to *persuade* people into being Christians – only God can do that. Like John the Baptist, we're called to prepare the way. Our witness is still important, but it's not as simple as telling people about our faith and expecting that to be enough on its own. Through our words and actions, we can help others to be in the right place to accept a personal connection with God; to open the door when God knocks.

Conclusion

In Bible month, we have looked at Jesus through the eyes of Mark. We've heard about the Kingdom of God, present and in the future; of the power of faith in the storms of life. We've seen Jesus frustrated by the way the Disciples have missed the point, and thought about what following Jesus means. We've reflected on Christ in control, Christ angry, Christ as a King – and what kingship and majesty even mean. We've seen the truth underpinning all of this: Christ resurrected, with God's all-powerful love conquering death.

Are you ready to be a reliable witness to that truth, in your words and in your life?

May the end of *our* stories not be "they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid".

Amen.

Our next hymn contains a mixture of challenge and comfort. The call to witness is clear – but so is the Spirit's presence, guiding and strengthening us as we proclaim the Good News.

Hymn: [God's spirit is in my heart](#) (STF 404, H&P 315)

Words by Alan Dale, music by Hubert Richards and Betty Pulkingham.

CCLI 4692612

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VTQvYG-bl4>

1. God's spirit is in my heart;
he has called me and set me apart.
This is what I have to do,
what I have to do:

Refrain:

*He sent me to give the good news to the poor,
tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,
tell blind people that they can see,
and set the down-trodden free,
and go tell everyone
the news that the kingdom of God has come;
and go tell everyone
the news that God's kingdom has come.*

2. Just as the Father sent me,
so I'm sending you out to be
my witness throughout the world -
the whole of the world:
(Refrain)

3. Don't carry a load in your pack;
you don't need two shirts on your back;
God's workers can earn their own keep -
can earn their own keep:
(Refrain)

4. Don't worry what you have to say;
don't worry, because on that day
God's spirit will speak in your heart -
will speak in your heart:
(Refrain)

Prayers for others

God of Good News, we pray for your Church.

We remember the work of all the prophets through history, boldly speaking the truth of your glory. We ask for discernment, that we may understand your love better, and for courage to witness to others. We remember those who face persecution for that witness, and ask for your strength in their hearts.

God of truth, **speak to us and through us.**

God of all creation, we pray for your world.

We think of difficult situations around the globe, and lift them to you. As the pandemic continues to rage, we ask for your wisdom at a global scale, that countries may act in the best interests of *all* people.

We see the effects of climate change devastate communities through extreme weather events and creeping but persistent changes. May our reactions be guided by you, moving beyond shock into action.

We think about areas where injustice, poverty, inequality and violence are common, and your presence can seem hard to find. May we work to make that presence felt, as force for real change.

God of strength, **act in us and through us.**

God of our lives and communities, we pray for those close to us.

We think of all the ways our families, friends and local communities are affected by the pandemic, whether through physical health, mental health, financial concerns or lack of social contact. As rules change, help us remember those who want to go faster, and those who are nervous we may be going too fast. Help to remind us that each individual is valued and different.

We remember health issues beyond Covid, and pray for those who are ill. We give thanks for all who work in health care, and pray for your healing to be shown through their work.

We remember those who have died, and those who mourn them. We pray for your comfort and strength.

God of compassion, **show your love to us and through us.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our final hymn is a reminder of our much we have witness to. Not just the nativity; not just the miracles of Jesus; not just the preaching and teaching; not just the Crucifixion; not even just the resurrection... but the whole Good News, for all people, in all times and in all places.

Hymn: [We have a gospel to proclaim](#) (STF 418, H&P 465)

Words by Edward Burns, melody from Gardiner's Sacred Melodies. CCLI 2649935

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcZdqa3PNDE>

1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
good news for all throughout the earth;
the gospel of a Saviour's name:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.
2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem -
not in a royal house or hall,
but in a stable dark and dim,
the Word made flesh, a light for all.
3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
hated by those he came to save,
in lonely suffering on the cross,
for all he loved his life he gave.
4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
that we might share his victory.
5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
by all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his Church
to live for him, the Lamb who died.
6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.

Blessing

God of creation, may we see the truth of your majesty all around us.

God of salvation, may we feel the truth of your grace in our hearts.

God of revelation, may we witness to your truth through the work of the Spirit.

May God bless every one of us, and may we feel that blessing upon us, now and forever.

Amen.