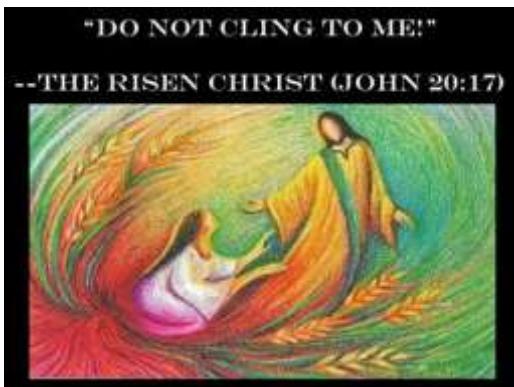


# Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 4th April 2021 – Easter Sunday**



## A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

In our mind's eye, we behold our feet in sandals, heads bowed in sorrow as we walk a dusty path in cool morning air.  
Ahead of us looms the tomb. We lift our eyes to face the cold stone at its mouth, the boundary between life and death.  
But it is not there – the boundary has been breached. He is risen!  
Alleluia!  
God of resurrection, ever renewing, ever reviving, we adore you for your life-giving presence. Son of Man, newly risen, sorrow made joy, we adore you for your sacrificial living and dying. Holy Spirit, breezing among us this Easter morn, we adore you for breathing new life into us.  
**Amen**

## Lectionary Readings:

**Acts 10 v34-43** (p1104) Peter at Cornelius' House

**Psalm 118 v1-2, 14-24** (p616) Shouts of joy & victory resound in the tents of the righteous

**1 Corinthians 15 v1-11** (p1155) The Resurrection of Christ

**John 20 v1-18** (p1089) The Empty Tomb/Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

## Touching Points

This week our focus explores the mystery of Easter.

The familiar passage from John's Gospel recounts the joy and mystery of the first Easter morning. It happens at a time of great uncertainty for the followers of Jesus, with their teacher dead the disciples must have felt adrift. In their grief, three visit Jesus' tomb and find him gone. Two leave, believing the body has been taken, but Mary remains, perhaps looking for something to hold onto in this time of upheaval, and Jesus is revealed to her. She runs to tell the other disciples that Jesus is alive. Easter is one of the times during the year when, through our church communities, we have an opportunity to reach out to many people. It is a touching point between the secular (social, commercial) and sacred worlds. It offers a chance to step into the Easter story, and to explore the truth of this wonderful mystery that is at the very heart of the Christian story.

The passage from Acts 10 recounts Peter's testimony to the family and friends of the Roman centurion Cornelius, stationed with the Roman occupying army in Caesarea.

The story of Peter's encounter with these Gentiles is a turning point in Acts, as non-Jews are welcomed into the Jesus movement on the same basis as Jews. It takes a mixture of heaven-sent vision, Gentile hospitality and visible signs of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to convince Peter and the Jerusalem-based believers that 'God shows no partiality'.

Peter shares the story of Jesus from its beginnings in Galilee to his brutal rejection and execution in Jerusalem. But ‘God raised him from the dead on the third day’ (v40) to vindicate all that he had lived and died for. In Peter’s preaching to these Gentiles, Jesus’ legacy is visibly crossing one of the most significant cultural boundaries in his world. The message associated with Jesus had always been more than words. It was visible, audible and tangible, publicly performed in his teaching, healing and hospitality. Now the witness of his Galilean companions brings Easter within touching distance for Cornelius and his friends.

By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, the gospel was well established in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth. Evidence from earlier in the letter suggests that some believers were in danger of abandoning the hope that God’s creation will one day be transformed. With such intense experiences of the ‘already’ of spiritual renewal, why believe in some intangible ‘resurrection of the dead’? Paul recalls the Corinthians to the heart of the Christian tradition, which had probably taken shape in the Jerusalem church. Its roots lie in the realities of Jesus’ death and resurrection, interpreted by Scriptures that underline their heavenly authority. Yet for all this, Jesus’ death and resurrection are located in the earthly, public world. Their impact has been seen, heard and sometimes touched by a host of real people, whose lives have been demonstrably turned around by the same grace that transformed the crucified Jesus into the victorious Lord of life.

In John’s Gospel, the centrality of a woman in this account is not something that anyone would invent in a world that undervalued the role of women as witnesses. John locates his narrative in real time, during the early hours of ‘the first day of the week’. Mary’s grief is strong enough to draw her to the place where she can be as close as possible to Jesus’ body. She is shocked by what she finds: an obviously disturbed tomb, the body missing, presumed stolen. Two of Jesus’ disciples – both men – believe her anxious report and confirm her story by visiting the tomb for themselves. As yet, its emptiness can only mean that the body has been ‘taken away’.

Mary’s double loss – the companionship of her beloved rabbi, and now his body – is made visible in her inconsolable weeping. Unlike Peter and the other disciple, she stays by the tomb long enough to experience something she hardly expects. She only recognises the figure behind her when he calls her by name, like the good shepherd calling one of his flock. Jesus is within touching distance, but he resists. ‘Do not hold on to me’ suggests a new kind of relationship. ‘Ascending to the Father’ through his passion is the counterpart of the descent of the heavenly ‘Word’ when the word becomes flesh (John 1 v1-18). This movement of grace will open up Jesus’ relationship with the God he calls ‘Father’. John’s readers know what this means: the coming of the Spirit to friends who live by the ‘new commandment’ that makes the love of Jesus visible. The foundation of this transforming vision is the astonishing witness of a woman.

Many things offer a ‘touching point’ with something mysterious that seems beyond the normal parameters of life: e.g. art, music, poetry, science and nature. However, we don’t all ‘get’ these things. Perhaps you have had the experience of trying to explain your enthusiasms to someone and being met with a blank look. Or being the one who gave the blank look! Sometimes you can get past this by helping someone else to experience what enthuses you. Experience can do what words can’t. It was the experience of the empty tomb, and then the risen Jesus that provided a touching place with mystery – the possibility that existence is far bigger than Mary had thought. What achieves that for us today? Go and tell!

### **A Sending Out Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank you for promising to be with us always.  
Help us to remember that promise when we don’t feel brave enough to be your disciples.  
Help us to remember that the first people to know that you rose from the tomb were ordinary people like us, women and men who didn’t feel very brave. Give us courage to believe and to tell others – as Mary did – this Easter and always. **Amen.**