



EASTER WORSHIP

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Call to Worship

One: Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

All: He is risen indeed! This is the good news:

One: The tomb is empty; Christ is risen!

All: He is risen indeed! This is the good news:

One: Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it. Christ is risen!

All: He is risen indeed! This is the good news:

One: Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people.

Christ is risen!

All: He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Hymn #243 *Jesus Christ is risen today*

Opening Prayer

God of mystery and power,

we have heard the good news of Easter

and we are glad to be caught up in its joy today.

Your love fills us with expectation:

darkness will never overcome the light you shine in Christ Jesus.

Just as Jesus spoke to Mary in the garden that first Easter day,

You call each of us by name because You love us.

We are so grateful for the hope we have in Your resurrecting power,

embracing us this day.

Because Christ lives, we look for eternal life,

knowing that nothing past, present, or yet to come

can separate us from Your great love,

made known in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Almighty God, in raising Jesus from the grave,

You shattered the power of sin and death.

But we confess that we remain captive to fear and doubt.

In thought, word and deed,

in what we have done or said,

in what we have failed to do or left unsaid,

we have allowed our fear, selfishness, and arrogance to guide us,
instead of your love and hope.

We have allowed doubt and uncertainty to fill our hearts, instead of Your peace.

We have not loved You with our whole heart, mind, and strength;
we have not loved others as Jesus taught us.

In Your mercy, forgive what we have been,
transform what we are, and shape what we shall be,
so that we may know Your presence and peace and walk in Your ways.

O living Lord,

On the first Easter day, You stood in the midst of Your disciples
and spoke to them of Your peace.

Come to us, we pray, in Your risen power
and make us glad with Your presence.

Breathe Your Holy Spirit into our hearts
so we may be strong to serve You

and share with everyone Your good news.

We pray all this in Your name, Jesus; amen.

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ²So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

One: This is the Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Message: *“Seeing in the Dark”*

In the Gospel of John, Mary starts out her day, walking alone in the dark.

It’s a sorrowful image.

As one of Jesus’ closest friends and followers, Mary had been right in the thick of every good and bad thing that happened during the past week. The bittersweet, yet strangely-fitting celebratory procession of Palm Sunday; Jesus’ aggressive words and actions in clearing the Temple; that long last night together of a shared supper, conversation, prayer, and Jesus humbly washing their feet. Then betrayal and arrest; Jesus’ farce of a trial; the excruciating day of his death.

Mary, we know, stood side-by-side with Jesus’ mother, with another Mary, and with John, the beloved disciple. The four of them stood witness to Jesus’ last words, his forgiveness and mercy, his love, and his suffering.

And then that special, extra-important Sabbath day; we can imagine Mary and her companions – Jesus’ mother and the other women, the disciples, and followers – all together and in deep, disappointed, frightened mourning. In contrast to the rest of Jerusalem, for them, that Passover Sabbath must have been especially grim.

And yet, when Mary set out to go to Jesus’ tomb very early that morning, escaping, perhaps, the oppressive grief and heart-broken confusion of her companions, though it was still dark, it was already Easter.

How can it be Easter when it is still dark?

Darkness is not just a time of day or a stretch of hours best suited for sleeping. Darkness can be something we experience, periods in our lives when the oppressive darkness of suffering, of grief, helplessness, anxiety, of physical, emotional, or spiritual pain eclipses all our light. Mary is walking in many shades of darkness, both literal and of the heart. Yet, Scripture and our own faith journeys teach us that the darkness is not dark to God; that God works in the dark, preparing the way for the light to come.

The Gospel of John began – do you remember how? We usually read it on Christmas Eve – John began his telling of Jesus’ life by re-telling the creation story centered on Jesus: the light shines in the darkness, John proclaimed, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Right now, though, for Mary and for us, as we accompany her on that dark walk to the tomb, the darkness seems to have won. During that time between, that murky, hazy, just-before-sunrise time, it's hard to see and understand what's right in front of us. God may well be working in the dark, but Mary cannot see it. She finds the stone rolled back and assumes that the tomb has been emptied of its contents, and that yet another dark thing has happened: tomb robbers, or Romans, or the Jewish authorities have taken Jesus' body.

And Mary runs, through the murky greyness, back to the others, to get help from Peter and John. All three come flying back, John outstripping the others and arriving first, but stopped outside by the sight of the linen body wrappings on the ground.

Bull-headed Peter, a little slower off the mark, marches straight in, and John eventually follows. It's John who describes the scene for us, carefully recounting the details, reporting the evidence without any of the artistic, literary touches we find elsewhere in his gospel. He believes that the body has been stolen, the author or his editor parenthetically acknowledging that they did not yet understand that Jesus had risen from the dead.

The men go home; Mary, alone once more in the dim, pre-dawn light of the garden, weeps.

How can it be Easter when it is still dark?

That's the question Christians at some point always ask themselves or get asked. How can we proclaim the good news of Christ risen for the world, when there is still so much darkness? It's a fair question.

There are the heartbreaking, always-present darkneses of poverty and injustice, violence, and abuse. These darkneses are made visible in our communities in many ways, like growing homeless populations, and overwhelmed food banks, and in the world in still more ways, like war, or wildfires, or oppressive politics. There are the shadows cast over the lives of our families and friends by physical illness and mental unwellness. There are our own long nights of grief over broken relationships and loved ones lost to us, through aging or dementia, or to death, or simply to changing circumstances. The things – the people, the constants, the ways of living, the great truths of the past – things we thought of as the foundation of our lives can change or fall away. And we are left grieving and worried and trying to cope in the present, with the future impossible to predict.

Mary's foundation has been badly damaged, too, by the experiences she'd had over the past week. She is grief-stricken, probably afraid of arrest or abuse, like the rest of Jesus' followers. Other early Christian writings from that time period reveal Mary to be as important a follower of Jesus as any of the twelve. But, unlike the twelve disciples, Mary's relationship with Jesus was different, running perhaps a little deeper than teacher and friend. Setting aside the wild fictionalization of Mary Magdalene's life, we know one thing with certainty: Mary had been horribly, devastatingly ill for a long time, and Jesus made her whole. Knowing so personally what Jesus was capable of, the kind of divine, healing power that Jesus had...for him to die and then this further indignity of his body being stolen – *her* foundation has crumbled and fallen away from beneath her feet.

But it turns out that death had only briefly stifled hope; the light indeed shines in the darkness, and it is not overcome. There is a lovely moment of mistaken identity, where Mary assumes that Jesus is the gardener, followed by a still more beautiful moment when Jesus calls Mary by name, out of her darkness and grief and into the light of this new world, full of hope and abundant life.

Jesus calls Mary, and then he sends her out, the first Easter morning preacher of the resurrection, to proclaim the good news. And Mary runs, no longer grieving, no longer full of fear and confusion; this time, it's awe and wonder and joy that send Mary tearing out of the garden and back into the world once more.

The old order of death and suffering, of conquering empires and oppressive power, the old foundation of reality has indeed fallen away, but a new foundation of freedom and hope, built on the resurrection, has taken its place. Death is destroyed; hope restored. All of the history of God's people, from Genesis to Good Friday, no longer can be understood the same way; God in Christ has stepped into human history, broken into our reality, and upended it completely.

The foundation of reality is no longer inevitably death, but new, abundant life. Human lives are not meaningless cycles of days, some dark and some light; the suffering and abuse we see in the world is not the way the world should be and not the way God created it to be, and we have hope, now, because the first of the "how it should-be's" has become our reality. In Christ, death does not have the last word; nothing is so broken that God cannot make it whole. It's impossible to over-state how monumental Easter is for those who believe.

Mary is tasked with being the first person to preach this amazing, world-changing good news to Jesus' followers. A huge responsibility, and a task that has since

consumed uncountable reams of scrolls and books and sermons in the attempt to do it justice.

But Mary doesn't say anything like that. Nothing about death or life, nothing about sin and suffering, nothing about hope or the reshaping of reality. Mary says, "I have seen the Lord."

The traditional Easter greeting between Christians is what you shared at the beginning of this service: Christ is risen – He is risen indeed. And that's a wonderful tradition...but it's kind of impersonal. Mary makes a different claim: *I* have seen the Lord.

I'm sure she said more after that – picture Peter and John's reaction! – they must've thought that she was talking about finding Jesus' stolen body, so she must've had to explain more. But that's how she starts; this is how the good news of Jesus alive is first proclaimed in the world: "I have seen the Lord."

It's Mary's own experience of Christ risen, her personal testimony. Her moment when Christ's Easter light drove out her darkness, when hope came back into her life because of Jesus. When anxiety and grief and fear all fell away, for her, because of Jesus.

Do we proclaim Easter like that?

Do we say, I have seen the Lord and this is how my life has changed?

I have seen the Lord, and that's why I have hope, even in a terribly hard year?

I have seen the Lord, and that's the reason I walk *through* the darkness, rather than getting lost in it?

Or do we say, Jesus rose from the dead, and expect that to make any kind of sense or impact at all?

Mary, understandably, grabbed hold of Jesus as soon as she worked out who he was; I suspect a bear-hug and more weeping might have followed, but Jesus told her – just as he tells us – that staying in the garden, clinging to him, is not what we're supposed to do. Instead, we are called to join Mary – heart and voice and feet – and go, making our own personal proclamation of the good news, living as Easter people, who find our hope and strength and life in the resurrection. The light of Easter morning drives out the darkness in every place, in every moment and in every person it touches. Christ is indeed risen; but you and me? We have seen the Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Hymn #248 *At the dawning of salvation*

Offering

At Easter, we celebrate God's most precious gift to us in Christ's dying and his rising. As we present our gifts to God, may our generosity proclaim God's goodness to us, and the hope we have in Christ Jesus, our Risen Lord. Let us pray:

One: God of Resurrecting Hope, we thank You with grateful hearts.

All: We recognize how much You have given us in Christ, and what his gift has cost.

One: Bless the gifts we bring so they may help spread the hope and joy we feel today in the world You love so dearly.

All: In the name of Your greatest gift, Jesus Christ, we pray; amen.

Prayers of the People

Lord Jesus Christ,

Come, be among us,

that we might see You by our side,

that we might hear You call our names,

that we might, on this joyful, glorious day,

be still, right now, and know that You are God.

We give You heartfelt thanks from our full hearts, gracious and loving God,

for the life, death and resurrection of your Son.

We have seen the Lord, and in him, we see our own salvation.

We bring to You our prayers this day, confident that You are listening,

anticipating Your grace outpoured anew in a world needing Easter.

One: Gracious God, hear our prayer

All: And in your love, answer

Sovereign God, this is the world that You love

and it is the world for which Christ gave His life;

guide its leaders and all who strive for peace and justice.

Teach all international leaders to look with Your mercy

upon the powerless, the homeless, the hungry, the vulnerable and the oppressed.

We pray also for our nation.

Direct those who govern our life in Canada,

and shape the minds and actions of the people of Canada.

Wherever there is need, help us to be Your servants there –

working in partnership with one another and with You

to love and to care in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

One: Gracious God, hear our prayer

All: And in your love, answer

Loving and faithful God,

We pray for Your Church in all its breadth and variety,

gathered out of every nation, people, and language to be a holy and royal
priesthood for You.

We pray for the Presbyterian Church in Canada,

and we pray for our own congregation.

Whatever challenges we may face, whatever the future may hold,

we ask for ourselves and for all Your churches:
revive us, O God, and make us strong
so that we can fearlessly share Your truth and good news
with a lost and hurting world.

One: Gracious God, hear our prayer

All: And in your love, answer

Compassionate and healing God,
Your Son came to heal hearts, bodies, and minds;
to restore and renew all creation.
We pray that healing may come to those places and lives most in need:
those who are ill or recovering from illness;
those who are struggling with financial, emotional, or spiritual burdens;
those who live surrounded by violence, for whom home is not a safe place;
those who mourn.

In this moment of silence, Lord, we name in our hearts the people and situations
we worry about today:

Show us, we pray, how to be Your hands and feet and compassionate heart
for those who are in need.

One: Gracious God, hear our prayer

All: And in your love, answer

Gathering our prayers and praises into one, we pray together now as Jesus taught
us:

All: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass
against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and
ever,
Amen.

Hymn #258 *Thine be the glory*

Sending

All: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the
fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, this day and always.
Amen.