



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 4th May 2025

Readings: *Acts 5.27-32; John 21.1-19*

Easter III

Rather like Christmas, Easter is so important that the Church takes far longer to think about it than the world does. Easter really, really matters, for as Cole Arthur Riley has it, '... spirituality which is always death, never resurrection, is a farce.'¹

Easter matters to us *personally*, reminding us God lives with a life that cannot be ended; God cares with a love stronger than death; God saves with a grace so sufficient that we cannot out-sin it. And ultimately, Easter seals the reassurance that, 'whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord'.² And at a time when the congregation is feeling the death of two members on the same day, this message of eternal life is a gift to us.

To the *world*, the Easter message matters, too. It witnesses that the worst people can do to each other is not the end. Now, of course, there is a sense in which some of the worst we can do *is* the end, and we only fool ourselves when naively we water down the impact of our inhumanity upon each other. Try doing that to a Jewish hostage in the Gaza strip or to a Palestinian refugee in Khan Yunis; or to their bereaved relatives: it would only add insult to their injury to say that it wasn't the end. But even when death has done its worst, Easter proclaims that Jesus is raised. And that is the point. Easter is not saying Jesus didn't actually die, and that crucifixions and resurrections are just poetic images. It is only *because* Jesus was crucified and dead and buried, that the resurrection can be a credible witness that death-dealing deeds are not finally victorious. And we need to proclaim that today just as much as ever.

And Easter matters to *the Church*, as well. We might even say it's our *raison d'être*. We heard from the book of Acts that in the earliest days of Christian preaching, Peter and the apostles pressed home the message of Easter, doing so at far greater risk to their wellbeing than most of us will ever know to ours. They said, 'The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.' They knew that 'spirituality which is always death, never resurrection, [would be] a farce'.

So, let's hold onto that point: the cruciality of Easter. I'll be back to it soon.

Like many other churches, the United Reformed Church declares that 'the Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church.'³ Indeed, we will hear that phrase shortly, when we come to induct Hannah for renewed service on the Elders' Meeting. As one writer puts it: 'The Church carries on the messianic ministry of our Lord.'⁴ In short, the Church's work is to point to Christ's presence and work in the world today.

That's not a presumptuous thing. We are not saying we literally are Christ. Hannah isn't; you aren't; I'm not. We can't be. Apart from anything else, we're imperfect: flawed, frail, and failing. How can we be anything but ambassadors or servants of his as his Spirit dwells within us? Moreover, his work was cosmic; it was 'once and for all'. No one can re-do Jesus' work on the cross, no do we need to. 'It is finished'.⁵ No, whatever we do to carry on his work is derivative; it comes from him, so that we can live out the implications here and now of what he did there and then.

And the crucial element of it all comes from Easter. What we do, just like Peter and the apostles, derives from Jesus Christ as the one who was raised and is alive. We are not serving the purposes of a dead God who is but a fascinating footnote of the world's gloomy history. Rather, by his grace we are

¹ Riley, Cole Arthur 2025 *Black Liturgies: prayers, poems and meditations for staying human* London: Hodder & Stoughton page 263

² Romans 14.8

³ United Reformed Church – from the introduction to *Ordination and Induction of Elders*

⁴ Paul, Robert S. 1965 *Ministry* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans page 69

⁵ John 19.30

partners with the risen Christ in today's world. It's what we are here for: to witness to Christ's living power and truth and love. It is his resurrection that authenticates the significance and power of all he said and did; it's his risen power and truth and love of which we are instruments. What on earth would be the point of witnessing to the love of a God that was defeated and disempowered by the life of the world two thousand years before us?

We might go so far as to say that any of our meetings as a church should head their agenda with the question: 'In what way does our business in this meeting serve the purposes of Easter's living, loving God? How does it embody 'the redemptive character and compassionate concern' ⁶ that epitomise what the risen Christ does and says?

I think we will find that today John's Gospel reading helps us witness to the risen Christ as the Lord. **First**, we were given the example of how, when unaware of the risen Christ's presence, Simon Peter's fishing was fruitless. He caught nothing. But when he adopted the counter-intuitive tactic that Jesus suggested – putting the net out on the other side of the boat – without delay his catch was almost enough to break the net. Naked, he was embarrassingly ineffective. Clothed with Christ, he was blessed with fruitfulness. And so it is that to be the church most successfully, we need deliberately to clothe ourselves with the mantle of the living Christ's wisdom and love – however counter intuitive, and counter cultural that is. Indeed, if what we propose to do is *not* 'counter intuitive, and counter cultural' we might need to question how authentically the Lord Jesus Christ is continuing his ministry in and through the Church.

Secondly, with Simon Peter, we are given real clues as to what it means to point to the risen Christ. Jesus asks Simon Peter if he loves him, and when he opines that he does, Jesus gives him two specific things to do: feed the sheep and care for them. The world is full of people who are spiritually undernourished; sometimes you and I feel spiritually undernourished ourselves. They may not know it's Jesus who could satisfy their hunger or slake their thirst. But if they are not told he could, how will they know? ⁷ Thanks be to God for every way in which Downing Place Church feeds sheep opens the window onto God. I think of the work of its House Groups, and those who lead them; of its Junior Church and those who week-by-week make it happen in *that space*, even as we are breaking open the Word in *this one*. It is all about offering people an encounter with the risen Christ, for the Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church.

Likewise, in a world that has a deficit of kindness, how precious and vital it is to live out Christ's love to one another; not just to feed them, but to care for them, too. I honour the pastoral work of this church – its elders and pastoral visitors, and those who administer telephone TLC; thanks be to each one of you. But, of course, Christ's call to be caring is not just for 'our own'. We are also called to care in the world, and we try to. In truth, even those of us inclined to care when an earthquake strikes, or a war is declared, or homeless people are cold on the streets, even *we* succumb to compassion fatigue long before the crisis is over. That's why we need persistently to hear Jesus' call, 'care for my sheep'. I so respect and value the work of this church's groups, and its staff, that steer our ministry out in the world – the World Church and Public Issues Group, the Evangelism and Service Group. Local faith communities will see love as a fundamental of their Easter life as the Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through them.

And finally, if we are witnesses to the risen Christ, the Church is called to live Christ's life in May 2025, all the time anticipating God's final consummation of all that is. 'The Gospel promises echo a dominant note of [looking forward to the future] ... and in this light we must always recognise the interim, provisional nature of the Church.' ⁸ Meanwhile, respecting the models of church life through history, part of what we learn is that has forever been trying something new and thereby being renewed. As B. H. Streeter put it a hundred years ago, '... the first Christians achieved what they did because the Spirit with which they were inspired was one favourable to experiment ... It may be that the line of advance of the church today is not', says Streeter, 'to *imitate the forms*, but to *recapture the spirit*

⁶ Paul, page 73

⁷ cf Romans 10.14f

⁸ Paul, p 57

of the primitive church.⁹ You see, even as Jesus can legitimately say, 'It is finished', God hasn't finished with us yet. We keep on experimenting in the power of the Spirit until God brings to completion all things. The reign of God that Christ began is at once both now and not yet. Fred Kaan sometimes has us sing: we 'put into practice God's future today,¹⁰ as the Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church.

As you wonder what the second chapter of Downing Place Church will be, when you can call a minister to be your partner and encourager in witnessing to the risen Christ, no hallmarks of your life and work, no characteristics of my successor, will be more essential than for you all to be Easter people, pointing a world so prone to darkness and shadows to the light that blazes from the empty tomb, as *in here* amongst you and *out there* through you 'the Lord Jesus Christ continues his [resurrected] ministry in and through the Church.

Aspiring to these things, may the force be with you, and to God alone be the glory. Amen

N. P. Uden

4th May 2025

⁹ Streeter B. H. 1929 *The Primitive Church: studied with special reference to the origins of the Christian ministry* London: MacMillan and Co page 262

¹⁰ From the hymn, *We pause to give thanks* by Fred Kaan 1929-2009, as in *Rejoice and Sing* (1991) 569.3.7f