Worship Resources for March 31st—Easter Sunday

Be sure to check out my Lent-Easter Special Resources page for Easter Sunrise services and more!

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12 or John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43 or 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

During the Easter Season, the Revised Common Lectionary uses passages in Acts instead of from the Hebrew Scriptures as the first reading. However, on Easter Sunday, one can either use the Acts passage (I will reflect on it today with the New Testament readings) or this passage from Isaiah 65. Written after the exile, we read these words of promise for a new future, words that are echoed later in Christian scriptures in Revelation. God is doing something new, something that cannot be undone or taken away. God is doing something new for all the people, something they also can no longer reject. God is still at work, creating something new that began long ago, a new creation without violence, without pain and suffering, where life is affirmed in its fullness, where all are welcome. On Easter, as Christians we rejoice that the one who was rejected, the one who suffered, the one who was abused, neglected, betrayed and killed has risen. We rejoice that in his rising, death is conquered, love wins, suffering and violence and abuse do not have the final words. The new creation that God has promised and is at work creating right now is beyond what we can see or understand now, but it is coming into fruition, into the fullness of being, and we can participate in it now.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 was also part of one of the psalm choices for Palm Sunday. The psalmist rejoices in what God has done, and celebrates the work of God in each and every day, recalling that God delivers us, even from death.

Luke 24:1-12 tells of the resurrection of Jesus and lists more women than the other Gospels do. Similar to other accounts, the women come at “early dawn” and encounter angels (“two men”) and ask “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Once again, the women tell the disciples but the disciples do not understand. However, in Luke’s account, Peter seems to question and wonder what has happened, as opposed to Matthew and Mark.

In John 20:1-18, only Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds it empty (but notice that in John, it is still dark outside!). Again, Peter comes to the tomb after Mary has gone, but John’s Gospel also lists a “beloved disciple” who believes. Mary is the first to recognize Jesus when he appears to her in the garden, though not at first. Mary does believe, however, and goes and tells the rest of the disciples who still fail to believe.

Each Gospel account of the Resurrection is slightly different. Luke’s is fairly straightforward, mentioning more women, including the women who are listed in Luke 8 as some of the financial providers for Jesus and the disciples. They do not see Jesus risen, but they believe the words of the men they saw, and even Peter, who doesn’t fully believe, has to get up and at least look in the tomb.

But John’s only mentions Mary Magdalene, but has a much longer account of what happened that morning, beginning in the darkness and moving to the light. Even Mary in her faithfulness at first does not recognize the risen Jesus. What is it about his appearance that is so different? We know from reading further in John 20 that he still has his scars. Is Jesus disfigured? Is he glowing with heavenly light? What do you think? It is when Jesus calls Mary’s name that she finally recognizes him, and calls him “Teacher,” the name she has used for him. Because she calls him “Teacher,” we understand Mary to be a student—in other words, a disciple! And Mary is commissioned to go and tell the others.

Acts 10:34-43 (which can also be used as an alternative for the Isaiah reading) is Peter’s proclamation to the Gentiles, after Peter’s vision and encounter with Cornelius, a centurion who desired to follow Jesus. Peter’s proclamation reminds us that the Good News does not stop with the empty tomb, but continues into the world, and that we are called to proclaim that Christ is Risen, that forgiveness of sins abounds in Jesus, and that we are living witnesses of the resurrected life, of Christ in us.

1 Corinthians 15:9-26 reminds us that there is more to this life than what we see. If this is all that we have to hope for, then we are to be most pitied, according to Paul. But there is more that we hope for. We hope for the boundaries of this life to be broken down, that death no longer has the final word. This is what we believe, that in Christ, the ends of this life have been wiped away and the wall between life and death, between earth and heaven, is destroyed at last.

\*A brief tangent and side-note. 1 Cor. 15:26 is quoted in the final Harry Potter book, when Harry visits his parent’s graves. He is disturbed by these words “The last enemy to be destroyed is death,” but Hermione tells him that these are not words to be disturbed by but that they bring comfort. Harry finds that in order to stand up and defeat the evil in his world, Lord Voldemort, he has to defeat his fear of death. It is the fear of death that he has to conquer, and to conquer it, he has to be willing to die to save his friends. Don’t know if that’s a useful sermon illustration, but I leave it for you.

The question we must ask ourselves every year is “How can I share the Good News of Christ’s Resurrection in a new way?” We have to remember that Easter is probably the number one Sunday for new visitors who may not have ever heard the fullness of the Resurrection story before. It is also a time when every regular attendee will be there and they’ve heard many Easter sermons. So how do you make it different, and yet reach new ears? How do you share the message that Love is stronger than death, that we believe in the hope of resurrection in Christ, in which death is no more? How will you share it in a new way this year?

Call to Worship

The tomb is dark, but empty

 **The one you are looking for has overcome the darkness**

The stone has been rolled away

 **The one you are looking for has overcome death**

The burial clothes are put aside

 **The one you are looking for is alive!**

Christ is Risen!

 **Christ is Risen Indeed!**

 **Let us worship our Risen Savior!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, Creator of the heavens and earth, we confess that we do not always live into the message of hope and salvation, the promise of eternal life. We live in ways that make the here and now more important than the future. We live in ways that put ourselves and our own success first over the needs of others and the long-term needs of the world. Forgive us for our selfish ways and call us into the path of Christ, who humbled himself and gave himself up for us on the cross, so that death might be no more and that all can share in the joy of salvation and eternal life, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from Romans 8:38)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen and Amen!

Prayer

Author of Salvation, You have written into our hearts the plan of life. You have called us away from the dead-end roads of the world that put ourselves ahead of others, that lead us to wealth and fame and fortune at the cost of others. Instead, You have called us into the paths of life, in which we reach out to those in need, we are mindful of the poor and the dejected, we care for the sick and the injured, and we stand up for the marginalized and the oppressed. You called us to seek life for others and in that losing of our own selfishness, we find our lives in You. You gave Your Son, who fully gave up his life for us, gave up violent retaliation to die a criminal on a cross, and through that sacrifice of his own will, conquered death and allowed for Your will, Life Eternal, to reign. We give You thanks for Your son, Jesus the Christ, who gave us life, and in doing so, lives again. May we share the blessings of resurrection in our lives with the world, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.