Hello and welcome to Manor Mission Easter Day Service. A special welcome if this is your first time joining with us.

Please bear with us as we get used to this new technology!

And although our circumstances prevent us meeting together, may I start by wishing you all a very Happy Easter!

But why do we still have good reason to say that this is a Happy Easter in the midst of global pandemic and lockdown?!

To get to the heart of this, we are going to have to solve a great mystery together this morning. But don’t worry; we will be enlisting the formidable talents of no lesser detective than the great Furlock Holmes!

But more of that later. Let’s begin with our first hymn: I cast my mind to Calvary. This song takes us back to the Friday before, when Jesus was crucified. Sing along at home if you know it and please take note of the words.

SONG: I cast my mind to Calvary

What an amazing song! Now let’s have a look at what is going on this week.

NOTICES:

Let’s have another song now. This is one of my favourite Easter songs! I need to warn anyone with a gentle disposition that this is a bit rocky!

SONG: He has risen

So time now to go over to Zoe to hear about Furlock Holmes and the Curious Case of the Missing Body!

VIDEO:

Our grateful thanks to Zoe, Furlock Holmes, and all the others from the Guiding groups and anyone else involved in making that great video! This has really helped us to bring the Easter mystery alive!

So let’s recap some of the key points from the video.

FACT: The tomb was empty – the body was missing!

Throughout the last 2000 years, the fact that the tomb was empty that first Easter Sunday morning has not really been in serious dispute. All of the action has been in trying to come up with an explanation as to why!

SUGGESTION 1: Jesus didn’t really die on the cross; he recovered in the cool of the tomb.

Sounds quite plausible. However, the Roman’s were experts at the most cruel method of death that we call crucifixion. The soldiers in charge would have known for sure that Jesus was already dead. Crucifixion was a slow death caused by suffocation when the victim no longer has the strength to push himself up on his legs to take a breath. Their legs would often be broken to hasten the end. The eye witnesses tell us that they didn’t need to break Jesus’ legs because he was already dead. [John 19:33]

John’s gospel [John 19:34] gives us clear additional evidence of Jesus’ death too. He records that a spear was thrust into Jesus’ side and blood and water flowed out. For John this was highly symbolic but for us it shows us that medically speaking there was clotting in the main arteries and is very strong evidence of death.

Even if Jesus had somehow survived the crucifixion, his body was wrapped tightly in burial cloths and the tomb had a large stone rolled over the entrance to seal it. In a highly weakened state from hours on the cross, even if Jesus’ had revived, it would have defied even the great Harry Houdini to be able to escape! Even more to appear to several of his disciples and convince them that he had been raised to life again! He even appeared to 500 of them at once!

Oh and by the way, the tomb was guarded too! [Matthew 27:62-66]

SUGGESTION 2: The disciples stole the body

All the evidence in the Gospels points to the fact that the disciples really didn’t understand that Jesus had to die! Luke’s Gospel records the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion. A stranger meets them on the road and asks what they are talking about and they explain that they had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah but that now he was dead! It turns out that the stranger was in fact Jesus, but they didn’t recognise him! But more of that later.

A few short weeks later when the disciples started to proclaim that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they put themselves in direct opposition to both Jewish and Roman authorities. Life became very difficult for them and many were killed for their faith. Does it seem reasonable that they would have been prepared to go through all this if they knew that they had stolen the body?!

SUGGESTION 3: The Roman or Jewish authorities took the body

Had they done so, they could simply have produced the body when the disciples began claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. End of story. But they couldn’t.

SUGGESTION 4: Mary, the ladies with her, and Peter and John later, went to the wrong tomb

We know that the Marys followed to see where Jesus was buried on the Friday. [Matthew 27:61] But even if they had gone to the wrong tomb, again the body could simply have been produced from the right tomb. We are told that the body was buried in the tomb that Joseph of Arimathea had bought for himself. I’m pretty sure that he knew where his own tomb was!

The author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who wrote the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, said this:

“When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

This morning we have eliminated everything that is impossible. The remaining explanation for the empty tomb is that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, however improbable that may sound. This must be the truth. Mystery solved – the body was missing because Jesus died but rose to life again.

This is why I can wish you a Happy Easter! It doesn’t depend on our present circumstances but on this key fact from 2000 years ago!

Our next song explains a little more about why the resurrection is so important.

SONG: What a beautiful name

PRAYER RECIPE

I’ve seen quite a few people have been doing some baking whilst they’ve had to stay at home. Baking requires a recipe to tell you what ingredients you need. Prayer is a little bit like that; we need a recipe to know what to include. I like the very simple TSP model, which as bakers will know is short for teaspoon. [Hold up teaspoon.]

T stands for “Thank you”. We need to thank God for the good things he has done for us.

S stands for “Sorry”. We need to say sorry to God for all the wrong things that we have done.

P stands for “Please”. We can ask God for the things we’d like him to do for us and for others.

So let’s use this simple model to pray for the world and pray for ourselves. I’m going to put this prayer on the screen so that you can join in.

Father God,

We thank you for what you have done for us at Easter, that you have made the way open for us to have our relationship with you restored.

We are sorry for all the ways that we have let you down, for the wrong things we’ve said or thought or done. And for the good things that we have neglected.

We pray for our world in the grips of Covid-19. For all those in authority and those that advise them; that you would help them to make the best decisions. We pray for your protection on all those who are on the front line in caring for those with the virus, those in care homes, those supporting the vulnerable, all other key workers like food shop assistants and the many thousands of volunteers. We pray for everyone involved in searching for a vaccine and for treatments. And we pray for those that grieve the loss of loved ones. Heal our world we pray.

Amen.

It seems increasingly popular these days to say it doesn’t really matter what you believe so long as you are sincere, or words to that effect. And it seems okay for you to believe one thing and for me to believe completely the opposite, but they can both be somehow true! Sherlock Holmes would not have been impressed!

In 1 Corinthians 15:19 Paul says that if as Christians we believe in the resurrection, but it didn’t actually happen, we are to be pitied more than anyone else! Christianity is a historical faith, by which I mean that it stands or falls on the facts of history. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead on that first Easter Sunday, we are wasting our time! Fortunately, the evidence is on our side as we’ve seen.

GOSPEL = GOOD NEWS

At our Bible Study on Tuesday, Tim asked us what we thought the biggest problem was facing the world today. Of course, Covid-19 was up there. But so too were things like global poverty linked to the horribly unfair distribution of resources, human trafficking and modern slavery, cancer and disease, refugees, the environmental crisis and many others.

But our conclusion, based on the Bible passage we were studying together in Ephesians 2:1-10 was that the biggest problem of all was “sin”. All the wrong things that we do that alienate us from God and from one another.

As Christians we believe that Easter is Good News because:

* On the cross Jesus took the punishment for all of our sins and died in our place
* The resurrection on Easter Sunday demonstrates that death is not the end
* And because Jesus is alive again, we can if we choose, have a relationship with him

Romans 5:6-8 Easy-to-Read Version (ERV)

6 Christ died for us when we were unable to help ourselves. We were living against God, but at just the right time Christ died for us. 7 Very few people will die to save the life of someone else, even if it is for a good person. .. 8 But Christ died for us while we were still sinners, and by this God showed how much he loves us.

Maybe for the first time today you understand something of that. I’d invite you to pray a prayer along with me using the TSP prayer recipe we used earlier. Again I’m going to put this on the screen.

Father God,

* I thank you for suffering death on the cross for me, taking the punishment for my sin.
* I’m sorry for all the wrong things that I have done, and the good things I have not done.
* I ask that you become part of my life and teach me how to live for you and for others.

Amen

If you’d like to find out more, please do get in touch with us. We would love to talk to you or send you some things for you to explore further.

Let us close with a great Easter Hymn of praise.

SONG: Jesus Christ is risen today

Thank you for joining us this morning; it was great to have you. We pray that God will bless you this Easter Day and always!