

1. Welcome and introduction

Video: We are still the Church

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To watch a preview version: skitguys.com/videos/we-are-still-the-church

A very special welcome to everyone watching on-line – or reading this in print – particularly if we've never met. We usually say 'make yourselves at home' here at Bathurst Uniting, so today – well, 'make yourselves at home' *at home!* We hope you draw strength and inspiration from the thought that you are sharing worship 'together' with a community of faith, even though we cannot physically gather together.

Today, even – or perhaps especially – in these difficult times, we continue our journey of Lent, walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem and death – and life. We also continue our journey through John's Gospel, as we tell the great stories by which we define who Jesus Christ was and is for us – through his encounters with people.

Two weeks ago, we joined a Samaritan woman at a well to say: 'Lord, give *us* this living water' (John 4). Last week, in the shoes of a former blind man, we heard Jesus say: 'I am the light of the world' (John 9). Today, we join Mary and Martha at the grave of their brother Lazarus, waiting for their friend Jesus to come: with them, we will face the depths of grief and hurt and fear and not understanding, and yet dare to confess our faith in the one who says: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe?' And we will see a stone rolled away – and an empty tomb flooded with light.

2. Acknowledgement

As we gather to confront our own stories of grief and loss and uncertainty, our own stories of new life and hope,

We acknowledge the
Wiradjuri people, the first
inhabitants of this place.

**We honour them for their custodianship of the land
on which many of us live, work and worship.**

We affirm this day that though we are many, we are one body in Christ – belonging to one another – even when we cannot gather in person!

We greet and honour Christ in each other.

3. Lighting of Christ Candle

Kids, we light the Christ Candle especially today, because we'll be thinking about how we feel when we're in a dark place, and how sometimes we bury our hopes away in dark places – and how Jesus wants to come into those dark places and let the light in... [*Light a candle*]

4. Call to worship

Here we are – gathered in the family of God despite our separateness:
Wearied from the week,
Longing for God to revive and refresh us.
Lord of life, **call us forth into life!**

Here we are –
Shadowed by worry, weighed down by burdens,
Longing for God to hold us and heal us.
Lord of life, **call us forth into life!**

Here we are –
Fumbling for faith, held together by hope,
Longing for God to breathe new heart into us.
Lord of life, **call us forth into life!**

People of the Living God,
We are called into life.
We are called into worship.

5. Hymn: God is my strong salvation (*Together in Song* #15)

<p>We can't generally post the words to hymns for copyright reasons. They can easily be found on-line – or in any hymn-book you have at home. If you would like to borrow one of the church's copies of <i>Together in Song</i> for home use during the 'shut-down', please contact us and we'll arrange to drop off a copy.</p>
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6. Prayer of thanksgiving

In the midst of the gathering gloom, Lord of life,
In the midst of the world's brokenness and fear,
We choose to come before you with praise and gratefulness:
Awed by the wonder of the new life you gave us in creation;
Awed by the gift of new life in the children born and growing among us;
Awed by the potential of new life in your kingdom –
Futures changed, second chances, hope always.
For when we are discouraged and empty,
When all seems lost,
When we have given up our dreams for dead, and buried them deep,
You come to us, rolling the stone away, shining your light,
and crying 'Come forth! Come forth and have life!'
And we are grateful and amazed.
God of life, we thank you for your steadfast love and your gift of hope. **Amen.**

7. Prayers of confession

Lord of life,
You have given us life, and so many good gifts -
Yet you know that we are easily discouraged, easily distracted,
easily dis-graced...

Forgive us for the times when we have given in...
Forgive us for the times when we have given up...

Forgive us that we have not always uttered words of mercy and welcome,
life and hope and encouragement – to others, or even to ourselves...

8. Assurance of forgiveness

Friends, no matter how many times we are tempted to give in or give up,
God remains steadfast in love for us; God speaks life to us.

This is the Good News of the Gospel, the foundation that cannot be shaken: that
God knows our humanness; that God is with us and for us and will never forsake
us; and that through the life and death and life of Jesus Christ, we are loved and
accepted, healed and held. We say together:

Thanks be to God. Amen.

9. Hymn: Our God, our help in ages past (*Together in Song #47*)

10. Kids' focus

In today's Bible reading, we hear about a family that is going through a really,
really tough time, and they are very worried about what's going to happen. I
guess we all have times like that sometimes. And then the very *worst* thing that
could happen, happens. And I guess we all have times like that sometimes, too.

But just when things seem very dark and very sad, Jesus comes to be with them,
and shows them that God knows *exactly* how bad things are, and that God loves
them and is on their side. And he shows them that with God on their side, they
don't need to be afraid of anything, as God is bigger than *anything* that can
happen to them.

*Be strong and courageous, the Lord of the ages
Holds all his little ones safe by his side...*

<p>'Be strong and courageous' © 2004 Colin Buchanan from the album 'Jesus Rocks the World'</p>
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11. Song: Psalm 91

Rev. Claire

You who have dwelt within the shelter
Of the shadow of God Most High,
Rest now here in the refuge, in the shadow of Shaddai.
You have found your sanctuary,
Safe haven for your souls,
Just trust in Me, I will never let you go.

*I will settle My feathers around you,
I will gather you under My wings,
And My faithfulness will be your shield forever:
Fear nothing.*

Though pain and peril stalk the night,
A thousand arrows darken the sun,
The lion roars, the serpent waits,
And every path is strewn with stones,
Angel hands are there to steady
And keep you safe from harm:
If you fall, you fall into Everlasting Arms.

I will settle My feathers around you...

I know you love Me; don't let go of Me –
I can carry the weight that you bear.
Cry to Me: I will answer – just a whisper, I'll be there.
And I will always honour the friend who's honoured Me.
Abundant life I promised you –
And one day you will see My salvation!

I have settled My feathers around you...

You who have dwelt within the shelter
Of the shadow of God Most High,
Rest now here in the refuge, in the shadow of Shaddai.
You have found your sanctuary,
Safe haven for your souls,
Abide in Me, I will never let you go.

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12. Reading: John 11: 1, 3–6, 17, 32–45

At home, if you can, please try to read the entire passage: John 11:1-45.

If you don't have a Bible at home, on-line versions are freely available.

For example, see: www.biblegateway.com

Or if you're in Bathurst, contact us to borrow a 'book' copy!

The Gospel reading is from John, Chapter 11.

Now a certain man was ill: Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and her sister Martha... So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'

But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' So, even though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was... And when he arrived in Bethany, he found that Lazarus had died, and had been in the tomb, for four days...

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep.

So the Jews said, 'See how he loved his friend!' But some of them said, 'Could *he*, who opened the eyes of the *blind* man, not have *kept* this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'But Lord, there will be a stench: he has been dead for *four days*!'

Jesus said to her, 'Did I not *tell* you that if you *believed*, you would see the glory of God?'

So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you *always* hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'...

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

In this we hear the Word of Life.

13. Message

Rev. Claire Wright

'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!' It is the first thing Martha of Bethany says to Jesus as he arrives. It is the first thing her sister Mary says when she meets him. The very same words: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!' In Martha's mouth it sounds like a statement of faith: Jesus, if you'd been here I know you could have *healed* him! In Mary's, it sounds more like a question, a cry of hurt and confusion: Jesus, where *were* you? If you had been here, my brother would not have died - but you weren't here. Where *were* you?

If you had been here, Jesus... If only you had been here... You can imagine how Mary had prayed that Jesus would come. They'd sent him word; they knew he loved them; *surely* he would come... Surely... And Lazarus getting worse, and worse – but *surely* he would come, he was only a day's journey away from Bethany, why would he delay, why would he be deaf to their need at such a time?... Surely... Jesus would come – and it would be alright... But he didn't come...

Where *were* you, Jesus? Where were you when we needed you?... If you had been here, my brother would not have died. If you had been here, my friend would not have got cancer. If you really answered prayers, I would not have lost my job. If you were really in control, if you really loved us, if God was really *with* us and *for* us, like the minister says, coronavirus wouldn't have happened...

Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when illness strikes us or those we love; when a bushfire or cyclone devastates homes and hopes? Where is God when a mis-guided missile turns a hospital to rubble, when a Syrian child washes up on a European shore? Where is God when lives and livelihoods are turned upside down by a microbe... 'If you had *been* here, God. If you had been *here*...'

Martha tries to console herself with her faith. God has a plan. All things work for the good. The faithful dead will get their reward. We believe in the resurrection of the dead on the final day... But that's not *Mary's* question: Mary's question is – 'Where *were* you? Where *were* you when we were in pain, when we were in fear, when we were in grief?' We can talk about God's glory, and God's sovereignty, and God's love – we can affirm that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life – and all those things are true. But they are not always the truth of the *heart*.

Martha is sensible and brave and faithful. But Mary... weeps. 'Where *were* you?' Her friends, who love her, weep: 'Where were you?'... And *that's* what deeply moves Jesus, perhaps: not *faith*, in this instance, but *frailty*. Because Jesus knows the truth of the heart. God *knows* uncertainty and grief. God *knows* loss. God *knows* death and its awfulness...

In the Auschwitz concentration camp, in the late spring of 1944, Elie Wiesel witnesses the hanging of another Jewish boy, no more than twelve years old. He and two men are led in chains to the gallows for execution in front of thousands of other prisoners. In the ominous silence, someone in the crowd suddenly cries out! "Where is God? Where is He?" Three chairs are simultaneously kicked out from under flailing feet. But the child, too light, is still alive – and remains so for more than half an hour. 'Behind me,' writes Wiesel, 'I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?"... 'And from within me,' he says, 'I heard a voice answer: "Where is he? This is where – hanging here from this gallows..."' (Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 1982 re-issue edition: New York, Bantam Books, p 62)

Where is God? Hanging right there on the gallows... Where is God? Hanging right there - on a cross... As we come towards Easter, this is the first sign that Jesus is claiming the power and triumph of life over death – not *without* death, but *beyond* it; not *without* suffering – but *in* it and *through* it, because God is with us – to death and beyond, loving us to death – and beyond. And this is the mysterious ‘*glory of God*’ that Jesus promised to show through Lazarus’ death: the revelation of a God who weeps with us so that we need never be alone in our turmoil; a God who enters into fear with us so that we need not be afraid; a God who enters into death with us, so that we may hold onto faith, and hope, and love – to death and beyond...

Friends, there are all sorts of things we give up for dead; all sorts of things we lose the fight for, and mourn, and bury, and wrap up and put in a cave and roll a big, heavy stone in front of – particularly in hard, uncertain, life-on-hold times such as these. Situations. Relationships. Dreams and visions for ourselves and our lives and our children, and our churches... We lose the fight for them, and we mourn them, and we bury them, and we put them in a cave and roll a big, heavy stone in front... And sometimes, just sometimes, when we least expect it, resurrection happens. Sometimes, just sometimes, long after we’ve given up hope, Christ comes and says: ‘Take away the stone.’ And we protest – ‘But Lord, there will be a stench. This thing has been dead for *ages!* It’s too late. It’s too painful...’

And God rolls away the stone – and suddenly there’s light shining in that dark place, and fresh air stirring the grave cloths, and the cobwebs start to part – and Christ says ‘Lazarus! Come out!’... And whatever it is we’ve given up for dead, whatever we’ve buried away, is called back into the light, and set free to live again – a second chance, a new beginning, an unquenchable hope...

As we come towards Easter, we are reminded that hope is never foolish. There is no such thing as a hopeless case – a lost cause, a ‘too hard basket’ – with God. We can always choose to hope, now that the power of resurrection is loose in the world. Christ lives! Suffering and pain are real – yet God in Jesus Christ is here, in the middle of death, working for Life...

Friends, we can always choose to show God the things we’ve given up for dead and buried, when God asks us to; when Christ says ‘Take away the stone’...

We can always choose to be a people who allow ourselves to be called forth from our darkest places into *life* – into forgiveness and joy and freedom and new beginnings.

We can always choose to be a people who call *others* forth into life, in Jesus’ name.

Because sometimes, just sometimes, when we least expect it, resurrection happens.

14. Video: Last Words of Christ: Martha

‘Last Words of Christ: Martha’ © The Skit Guys, purchased with streaming rights included by gracious permission of The Skit Guys Studio. For great video resources, viewable as free previews, see: www.skitguys.com

15. Hymn: O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us
(*Together in Song #409, verses 1-3*)

16. Prayer

There are many doorways to cynicism, Jesus,
many reasons for despair, many causes for fear;
but there is no excuse for giving them ultimate power;
not if we really believe what we claim to believe.

Resurrection is real, Jesus;
we have touched it, and seen it;
our own lives bear witness to it,
and it constantly reveals itself in our world.

And so, in spite of the fear that nags at us,
in the face of the despair and cynicism that taunts us,
in denial of all that would seek to steal life away,
we offer you our love, our devotion, our lives,
as an offering of resurrection faith
and defiant praise.
Amen.

'Defiant praise' © John van de Laar, www.sacredise.com

17. Prayers of intercession

Lynne Collett

Heavenly Father, Almighty God,

Throughout this world, your creation is in panic, suffering and grief.
May your healing Spirit pass over each home, each workplace,
health centre and hospital and bring healing in body, mind and spirit.

Bring comfort and peace to each person as they experience
the restrictions placed upon them;
help them to be obedient and co-operate as they are placed in isolation,
in health clinics and hospital beds as the virus spreads.

Lord, may your Spirit uphold and comfort all who mourn,
all who are diagnosed with this illness
and those who wait for news of loved ones.

Each of us has our own fears and concerns and react in various ways.
Still the panic as the virus spreads,
ease the anger and despair as wedding and funeral plans are
reduced to the basics
and as our freedoms to move from state to state or country to country
are no longer available.

The task ahead for our society is large and complex.
Guide and sustain those in government as they seek your guidance
and actions to be put in place.
May they do their utmost to be compassionate and wise
in the giving of funds and resources at a time
when many find themselves unemployed,
and many are concerned about paying rent and food on the table.
Lord, move landlords to be compassionate in their dealings with rental clients.

We pray for your power to treat others with consideration and kindness,
especially those in the service industry, as they supply our needs.

Our thoughts and prayers reach out, in Bathurst and beyond:
to those medical staff and health care workers
who are giving of themselves and facing risks each day to help
the many people seriously ill in hospitals;
to the police and armed forces as they deal with public unrest,
maintain isolation and at times deal with death;
to our teachers, as they try to educate children at this difficult time of restriction
and parent panic.

Lord, as our community and communities of faith
respond to this new situation,
may we unite to face the challenges.
Each day is also filled with new possibilities
for your people to reach out to each other – and to others – in love and grace.
In these times of isolation, help us to develop new ways of connecting,
through the phone or by internet,
with our neighbours – known to us and unknown.
May families build stronger bonds with each other, and reach out to others.

As Christians, may we embody your calm, grace and generosity
as we serve those in need and continue to build community.

All things are possible with you.
May these times be an opportunity to discover
who we are,
how much you are needed in our lives and
how we can be your hands and feet in the world.
Let us be a people of Hope.
In the name of Christ.

Amen

And let's join together in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, in whatever version or language is closest to our hearts.

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our sins,
As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.

18. Hymn: All my hope on God is founded
(*Together in Song #560*, verses 1, 2, 3 and 5)

19. Blessing and sending out

Go now from this place with the One who always goes with you, in the footsteps of the One who always goes ahead of you.

Go into the world and the week, called forth into life; called forth into faith and hope and love – because resurrection happens.

And the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, be upon you, and those whom you love, now and evermore.

Amen.