

Video: 'Carriers'

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To see a preview version: <http://www.skitguys.com/videos/carriers>

1. Welcome and introduction

Salamat datang; hwanyong hamnida; malo elelei; bulla; afyo MAI; velkominn; - *welcome* to worship this morning, especially if you are visiting Bathurst Uniting Church virtually for the first time.

I'm Rev. Claire Wright, and I have the privilege of ministering with this community of faith and calling.

This is the last Sunday in the Church's season of Easter. As we heard last week, it's a kind of 'in-between' Sunday, suspended between the great events of the Ascension of Jesus Christ (40 days after his resurrection) and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (10 days later – next Sunday).

In-between times are difficult, aren't they? When things aren't the way they *were* – but we can't yet see clearly what they *will* be. When we're hurting, perhaps, because of what we're losing, and what we miss – but also hopeful, because we are promised – we glimpse, perhaps – new life out the other side... It's a strange place to be, feeling those two things at the same time – whether you're followers of Jesus trying to come to terms with his going away; or a church trying to come to terms with the end of a ministry; or a community trying to come to terms with coronavirus... The 'new normal' isn't going to be the same as the old normal; and we're hurting and hopeful all at the same time – and the question is, perhaps, what holds us together, what holds us *up*, what *holds* us, at such times, as we wait for the 'new normal' which we can't yet see clearly...? We'll think about that a bit, today.

We begin by pausing to acknowledge the Wiradjuri nation, the first people to name and know this place as a dwelling-place of Spirit in the world. **We honour their heart-felt custodianship of the land on which many of us live, work and worship.**

And we pause to remember the presence of Christ in our midst – scattered-gathered though we are. As we ponder the final words from which it must have felt to Jesus' friends as if he was *leaving* them – as if this were an *ending* – we remember his promise that we *belong* to him, always. And we choose to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts (2 Peter 1: 19).

[The candle is lit.]

2. Call to worship

Come to us, God of hope:
Come to us with your promises.
Come in your mysterious presence.
Come, that we may marvel at your faithfulness in past generations;
That we may celebrate the new things that you are doing among us today;
That – hurting and hopeful – we may be your pilgrim people
on a journey, step by step, day by day, to your kingdom.
We come to you. For we are *yours*.
We come in worship.

3. Hymn: O Jesus, I have promised (*Together in Song* # 595, verses 1 and 4)

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 *Together in Song* for home use during the 'shut-down', please contact us and we'll arrange to drop off a copy.

4. Prayer of thanksgiving and adoration

We find our dwelling in you, gracious God.
To be thankful for our lives is not to deny our struggles or sufferings,
or even to imagine that they serve some higher purpose.

To be thankful for our lives is to affirm
that – hurting or hopeful – we are *held* in Christ;
and that whatever difficulties we endure,
we are never without the presence and loving care of God,
to whom we *belong*:
God promises to restore, support, strengthen and establish us,
In our hurting and in our hoping.

We cast our anxiety on God,
because God cares for us.

And we hold to this as a lamp shining in a dark place,
until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts,
And the whole earth is filled with the glory of God,
As the waters cover the sea.

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
World without end.
Amen.**

5. Reflection: 'Hurting'

Members of the congregation share what they most *miss* from life before coronavirus...

6. Reflective prayer

Let's pray...

Christ passes the baton on, to share the race,
to keep his story growing each day alive in us...

His endings – beginnings –
our beginnings and endings.
How do you tell which is which?

Encounters, departures,
sadness of loss, hopes for the new.

Lord, teach us to live loosely and gently...
to hold love not too tightly...
to see each day as a gift.

Help us to give blessing to others,
to call out the goodness in everything.

May the Spirit of the Christ who hands over the work to his friends,
rise in us as we become his hands...

May the encouragement of the Christ who steps back so that we may grow,
rise in us as we seek to do his will...
Amen.

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7. Affirmation of forgiveness

Friends, we take heart,
Affirming – one more time –
that in this Easter season we need not dwell on our wounds,
for Christ has died to heal us;
we need not dwell on our brokenness,
for Christ has risen to mend all things;
suspended between hurting and hopefulness, we are – above all – *held*,
for Christ has ascended to rule and reign in love for the world.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.

8. Hymn: Remember me

Remember me – the God who saves – for back in Egypt, you were slaves.
Then by my hand I set you free. Now keep my law. Remember me.

Remember me in bread and wine, where'er you share this meal of mine.
I gave my life to set you free. With thanks and praise, remember me.

Remember me in all you do – for I'm alive: I walk with you.
I was, I am, and I shall be. O church I love – remember me!

O God, we hear! We're called and freed! Your Spirit gives us memory.
Now send us out, that we may share your love's great story everywhere.

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9. Kids' focus

It's difficult, sometimes, isn't it, when things change, or someone we love goes away? We feel a bit sad, and a bit lonely, and a bit lost... Today's Bible reading finishes last week's story about the time when Jesus had to say goodbye to his friends, because he was going back to his Father in heaven... They felt a bit sad, and a bit lonely and a bit lost – and Jesus explained that they were only seeing *part* of the story...

Just then, they could only see that they were going to *miss* him, and things would never be quite the same again... And of course, they were right. But there's *more*, said Jesus. Look *ahead*: there's *glory* – because Jesus was going back to take up his place as king of the world. There was *adventure* – because from now on *they*, Jesus' friends, would have to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world – Jesus with 'skin on' ...

And all over again, Jesus' friends didn't know whether to feel happy or sad – hurting or hopeful – because if they looked back at the way things *had* been, when Jesus was with them, it was *terrible* that things would be different and couldn't go back to the way they were... But if they looked *forward* to the way things *could* be, to the way things Jesus *wanted* them to be – why, it was – it was *great* that things would be different and couldn't go back to the way they were, because Jesus was calling them forward to the best adventure *ever*... The adventure of being friends with the king of the world.... The adventure of being Jesus with skin on... The adventure of – why, they said to each other, looking around with new eyes at each other's uncertain, hurting, hopeful faces: the adventure of imagining – of *building* – a 'church'...

I wonder if we can imagine how much fun *that* might be...

[We share Emily and Alex Wray's lockdown adventure in building a fabulous (Lego) Church!]

And in case we think it's a *small* thing to have built a church, let's sing a famous hymn about how *big* it really is...

10. **Hymn:** The day you gave us, Lord, is ended
(*Together in Song #458, verses 1, 2, 3 and 5*)

11. **Reflection: 'Hopeful'**

Members of the congregation share what they are most *hopeful* about, when they think of what the 'new normal' might look like as a result of coronavirus.

12. **Bible readings**

John 17:1-11

Claire Wright

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And *this* is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify *me* in your own presence – with the glory that I *had* in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me, I have given to them – and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, *because they are yours*. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

In this is the Gospel of Christ.

1 Peter 4:12-13, 5:10

Sharynne McLeod

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you and testing you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings – so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself *restore, support, strengthen and establish you*.

Things change – I guess we know. That’s just the way life works. Has done, ever since God said ‘Let there be light’ – and there was light... Some change is small, quiet: a software update; another day older; a sunrise just that bit different from any sunrise that the world has ever seen before... Some change is big, disruptive – the kind of change that places a marker in our memory between the Time Before and the Time After... A global pandemic; the end of a ministry; the moment when the Jesus of long walks and deep talks and shared meals becomes in 43 world-shaking days the Christ of faith, eternal Son enthroned in glory – and now it’s just *them*, his followers, in a world still badly in need of his love and truth and healing...

Things change. And yes, some things get lost or left behind, or look painfully different. And goodbyes are hard – whether they are to a person, or a way of life, or a feeling of safety and confidence and certainty in the world... And so it’s a very human thing to talk about ‘getting *back* to normal’; to say that we can’t wait to ‘*return* to normal’ – to have things back the way they were... But friends, that’s not the way it works... This pandemic may ease, but we won’t shake hands with strangers, or ride crowded trains in the same way again... Bathurst Uniting Church will call a new minister, but he or she will be a *new* minister, shaping a new ministry... Jesus will continue to work in the world, alongside his followers, but in a wildly, radically, unforeseeably *new* way...

And so we’ve started to talk a lot about the ‘new normal’. The ‘new normal’ recognises that the world we will get used to and get on with living in, after *this* is over, *cannot* be the one we knew before... Things change – and we change with them. And because we are changed, the ‘normal’ will be ‘new’... There was a little piece in the Western Advocate yesterday about the world ‘getting *back* to normal’ after coronavirus. ‘Our new world might look a little different to the old world,’ it said, ‘but we will all emerge from this pandemic with a much greater appreciation for all that we have.’ But friends, that’s not ‘getting *back* to normal’ at all: firstly, because the new world will look different to the old world, but secondly, because we will be different. Can you imagine if we really did emerge with a ‘greater appreciation for all that we have’, as a result of this season? Our lives could be a radically different experience; the world could be a radically different place... There will be a ‘new normal’ after coronavirus, because we will have been changed by it, in all sorts of ways. There will be a ‘new normal’ in this community of faith, not just because there will be new challenges and opportunities for mission – not just because there will be a new minister – but because we have been changed by one another, and all we have learned and prayed and dreamed together... There will be a ‘new normal’ for Jesus’ disciples, after his ascension, because the Spirit comes ...

The normal *will* be new, friends. Things change – and the Spirit is at work in the world – and the normal will *always* be new, if we’re paying attention. Sometimes we will be *hurting* about that – because things will be lost or left behind, and goodbyes are hard. But we will also be *hopeful*, because God is working always for our good, and there is always the possibility – if we’re willing to keep trusting and loving and learning and growing – *always* the possibility that the ‘new normal’ will be *better* than the old...

But the question for today is: how do we sit with this difficult 'in between' time – this time when we grieve the old normal and cannot yet clearly see the new?

In our reading from John, Jesus gives us two things to go on: an assurance – and a prayer.

The *assurance* is that – hurting or hopeful – we are *held*. We *belong* to God. That's the bottom line of Jesus' words about 'mine' and 'yours' and 'in them' and 'in me': we are *God's*. We are *Christ's*. Whatever happens – whatever the 'new normal' may look like – we are held in love-scarred hands...

The *prayer* is that – hurting or hopeful – we would *hold one another*. 'Father,' says Jesus, 'protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one.' The longing of Christ is that we would know, as coronavirus has taught the world, that we are 'all in this together'; that we would hold one another close, hold one another up – *hold* one another in faith and hope and love, in life and prayer and mission.

Friends, the *assurance* may be enough that we can hold onto the hope amidst the hurting, like a lamp in a dark place, until the day dawns on the new normal, and the morning star rises in our hearts.

And the *prayer*? The prayer is surely *our* challenge – as day follows day, as things change – to hold together, to grow together, to work together, to make the new normal better than the old...

14. Hymn: When we face an unknown future

When we face an unknown future
That we can't imagine yet,
When the closeness we have treasured
Turns from blessing into threat –
As we miss our friends and loved ones,
As we crave community,
May we look, God, in this season,
For a whole new way to be.

Jesus faced the lonely desert
As a time to look within.
There he met such trial and conflict;
There he knew you were with him.
In this time of separation,
When we miss the life we've known,
May we hear your voice proclaiming:
'I am here! You're not alone.'

May we cherish those around us
As we never have before.
May we think much less of profit;
May we learn what matters more.
May we hear our neighbour's suffering;
May we see our neighbour's pain.
May we learn new ways of offering
Life and health and hope again.

God, when illness comes to threaten,
And when so much here goes wrong,
May we know this thing for certain –
That your love is sure and strong.
You're beside us in our suffering –
And when times are surely tough,
We may face an unknown future –
But it's filled, Lord, with your love.

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15. Reflection: 'Held'

Members of the congregation share how they have felt *held* by God – and by God's family – through this time of coronavirus.

16. Prayers of the people

Tuesday Night Bible/Film Study Group

Let us pray.

In the shelter of this community of love,
we pray to you, O God, for a world full of suffering and struggle,
that calls out for compassion and hope.

Go before us, *restoring* God:

Show us the way to be your love in the world...

Where people's lives have been shaken
by uncertainty and change,

feeling what we have lost – and not yet seeing what you have promised:

Go before us, *supporting* God:

Show us the way to be your love in the world.

Where there is no cause for singing;

where voices have been silenced by oppression or exclusion;

where voices and hearts grow faint in the face of overwhelming challenges:

Go before us, *strengthening* God:

Show us the way to be your love in the world.

In the loneliness of disconnection,

in the vulnerability of illness or fear or grief,

in the crumbling of old foundations for life and livelihoods,

Go before us, *establishing* God:

Show us the way to be your love in the world.

We pray for all who continue to battle with COVID-19 and its implications,

For nations and communities, churches and families.

For educators and healers and carers,

For transporters and suppliers and feeders,

For connectors and communicators and decision-makers.

Help us all to look – and work – forward to the day of restoration –

Not as a return to the way things were,

But as one step closer to how things were meant to be.

Through Christ, in whom we are yours, now and forever.

Amen.

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

Our Father...

17. Hymn: O God, we sing and celebrate

O God, we sing and celebrate!
Your grace to us is clear!
For we recall your faithful love
For all your people here.
We've worked together, yet we know
It's not the thing we've done,
But you who give us life and hope,
In sending us your Son.

Lord Jesus, in this broken world,
You teach us how to heal.
And in a world where pride abounds,
You call your church to kneel.
Amid the hate, we're called to love,
Amid the fear, to pray.
You call us to live differently:
Transform us every day.

You give us gifts to be your church:
We follow as you call.
Here some are teachers, others preach,
To speak your truth to all.
Some reach to help the sick and poor,
While some are called to lead.
Yet by your Spirit we are one,
In word, in prayer, in deed!

How easy to look back and see
Your graceful, constant care –
And yet, we're called to look ahead,
To grow, to serve, to dare!
What is your will in this new day?
God helps us pray and search,
For as we seek to walk with you,
We are your faithful church.

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18. Blessing and sending out

Go, then, into the world and the week,
knowing that – hurting or hopeful – you are *held*;
belonging, always, to God in Christ;
finding a place, always, in the family
of God's pilgrim people on the way.

May the loving arms of God hold you up and hold you close,
May the loving hand of God push you gently into the new day,
the new adventure of faith,
the new 'normal' which God has in store,
to bless us and to bless the world through us,
until the whole earth is filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, go with you – and
those you love – now and always. Amen.