



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

### HOME PRAYER PACK FOR APRIL 2023

As we continue to worship from home, please find enclosed materials to assist.

If you are unsure where to start, perhaps the following is a useful guide (with thanks to *A Sermon For Every Sunday*):

- If you are with your spouse, partner, and/or family, gather around a table. If you are on your own, find a place that is quiet and comfortable.
- Light a candle to symbolise the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that you are entering sacred time.
- Start with a simple opening prayer, acknowledging that Jesus promised to come to wherever people gathered in His name.
- Read through the weekly readings, as outlined in our newsletter. If in a group, take turns on reading out loud to the group.
- Follow up with a discussion based on the readings.
- Enter into a time of prayer. This can be as simple as “What am I thankful for?” and “What am I concerned about?”

If you need a bible at home, please call the church on 4832 1026, and one can be provided. If you are interested, *Songs of Praise* airs on ABC TV at 2:30pm each Sunday, and can also be watched any time at <https://iview.abc.net.au/collection/2016>

Stay safe. God bless.

**April 2, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

"Faith" is a word that is used all the time in religious circles, in Christian worship, and even in political discourse. And so Holy Week begins! The big challenge of this period in the Church Calendar is that the focus is so very clearly on events that happened to "Someone else" so very long ago. It can all tend to become a nice "show" or a good academic exercise, but with little impact on us as we seek to follow this Jesus. Yet, with the unique calling and nature of Jesus, and the unique character of these events, it can be a stretch to find ways to apply the truths of this week to the lives of worshipers today. But, if this isn't what the work of liturgy is all about what is?

So, today – and throughout this week – may we journey with Christ, but may we also be challenged by Christ as we worship.

**READINGS:**

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29:** A celebration of God's goodness and faithful love, answering prayer, turning the rejected stone into the capstone, and inviting people into God's presence.

**Matthew 21:1-11:** Jesus instructs the disciples to bring him a donkey and its colt, then he mounts the colt and rides into Jerusalem, where a procession gathered to celebrate him, while others wondered who he was.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

Palm Sunday is another one of those moments when it is easy to fall back on the same old ideas. But, if it is thoughtfully and carefully prepared, this celebration can be a powerful beginning to a very moving journey through Holy Week. In the light of this, it is good not to miss the connection with the rest of what is to come this week, and how this moment of entry into Jerusalem was a very definite and intentional decision by Jesus to face the suffering which lay ahead. Rather than avoid the confrontation and its consequences, Jesus faces them square on, and refuses to shy away from the suffering, or change his message or methods in order to stay safe. In a world in which pain-avoidance has become almost a religion in itself, this example is deeply challenging – as is the cause of Jesus' pain: his insistence on living according to God's alternative way and his refusal to bend to the demands or threats of empire and its systems.

**CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** Stories of political and economic upheaval seem to fill our news reports these days, and we are faced with the cruelty and ruthlessness of Empire, the dynamics of which are played out every day in the world of business, politics, science, education and even in the realm of faith. As we watch Jesus ride into Jerusalem on the donkey's colt again, we cannot avoid the call to live out the alternative Kingdom that God calls us to, even when it leads us to sacrifice and confrontation with the "powers-that-be". This calls for us to search our hearts, to acknowledge that no person or group that operates

within “the system” will ever lead us to God’s reign, and to count the cost for ourselves of following Christ, and living in subversive ways to undermine the oppressive control of Empire. What is good news is that there are so many ways to do this today, thanks to the internet, social media and our greater awareness of what is going on in the world and our connectedness to it. All that is required is the same strength and determination of will that we see in Jesus.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** We each face, every day, the temptation to just be part of the system. We must choose every day whether we will turn from the sacrifices of challenging the status quo, or “get on the donkey” and face the confrontations. And each day we do this in some surprising ways. When we refuse to play God in the lives of our children, friends or companions, we reject the ways of Empire. When we reject the call to accumulate as much as we can, and embrace a life of simplicity and generosity, we undermine the influence of Empire in our word. When we commit to peace and justice, even at the cost of our own safety or lives, we have turned our back on Empire. When we take the time to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of those on the fringes of the system, we have undermined the exclusionary rules of Empire. Living like this will seldom win us any awards or lead us into positions of power and wealth, but it will win us the inner joy and peace that comes from living in God’s reign, and it will lead us to integrity, wholeness, and the wealth of love and being loved that Jesus demonstrated so well. So, today is a good time to evaluate where we still collude with the system and where God may be calling us to opt out.

**April 9, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, “Sacredise”

And so we finally come to what may be thought of – in some senses at least – as the most important Sunday of the year. If resurrection is just about a miraculous event that happened to Jesus long ago, or if it’s only about something that happens to some people at the end of time, then it has little real value, no matter how fascinating it may be. But, of course, resurrection is about far more than this. It’s the promise of God’s life available to us both now and forever. And it the call for us to follow Christ by becoming life-givers and agents of resurrection in our families, communities and our world. What a glorious and miraculous challenge!

May the empty tomb be more than an event for us as we worship this year, and may our worship lead us into a real and transforming encounter with God’s irrepressible life!

**READINGS:**

**Acts 10:34-43:** Peter preaches to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house & reminds them of Jesus’ life, death & resurrection.

**OR Jeremiah 31:1-6:** A prophecy of hope and restoration in which God promises that God’s people will once again be happy, and will enjoy God’s blessings.

**Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24:** A song celebrating God's mercy and strength, and celebrating the restoration of God after struggle – foreshadowing “the stone that the builders rejected” who “became the cornerstone”.

**Colossians 3:1-4:** Paul encourages believers to remember that they have been raised with Christ, that their life is with Christ in God, and that they should therefore concentrate on the things of heaven.

OR **Acts 10:34-43** (*see above*)

**John 20:1-18:** Mary finds the empty tomb and reports it to the disciples. Peter and John investigate and witness the empty tomb, but Mary remains and becomes the first to meet the Risen Christ.

OR **Matthew 28:1-10:** The two Mary's go to Jesus' tomb, and find it open with an angel sitting on the stone who instructs them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is risen. As they head off, they are met by the risen Jesus.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

It goes without saying that the theme for Easter Sunday is the resurrection of Christ. But, more than just a historical event that happened to Jesus years ago, the readings make it clear that the resurrection is also something that happens for us today. All of the Old Testament readings speak of restoration and new life that can be experienced by those who have been broken. In Acts Peter reminds the gathering in Cornelius' house of Christ's resurrection as part of his call for them to believe. Paul in his letter to the Colossians reminds them that they too are raised with Christ, and that they have life that lasts beyond the grave. So, even as we walk with the women and the disciples through the resurrection story, we are called to remember that, as we receive Christ, it becomes our story too.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** It's easy to make the resurrection an intellectual exercise that focuses on details, doubts and questions of evidence. Equally it is easy to make the resurrection little more than a touch stone of belief – of intellectual agreement – that qualifies us to call ourselves Christians. But, as the readings today show, the resurrection is far less about what goes on in our minds than it is about what goes on in our lives. The two big challenges for us as believers is to open our lives to this resurrection life of Christ, to allow God's life to break in and free us from all the little deaths that seek to control our lives. Then, as those who have experienced life, we are called to be those who bring life in all the places in our world where death is at work. Also, we need to face the ongoing question of how resurrection can be experienced for our diseased planet, how resurrection can come to those who live in dire poverty, or who have been trafficked as sex slaves or child workers on farms, or who live with the burden of dread diseases. One thing is certain, God's resurrection life will only come to those people as we – the people of the resurrection – carry it into the world.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** It is crucial that Easter Sunday is not allowed to become just an interesting academic exercise. In every community, and in every life, we struggle with both life and death. The beauty of resurrection is that death is not so much opposed or destroyed as transformed and absorbed into life. And so, as we celebrate resurrection this Sunday, we are also called to live resurrection in our own lives. This means that God is challenging us to face the death within us – the self-centredness, apathy, destructiveness and cynicism that keep us and others from life – and allow it be transformed into life. It also means that we be prepared to bring life to others wherever we can through our compassion, hospitality, listening, giving, friendship, involvement and advocacy. When we become aware of how our actions bring life or death to others, we find ourselves making different choices. If our use of energy robs the planet of life, we will gratefully seek to be more responsible and careful. If our choice of products or our tendency to consume more than we need leaves others in poverty, or leads to people not receiving fair pay for their work or products, we will shop more compassionately. And if simple acts like voting, signing petitions (like those from Avaaz.com) or engaging our local government officials can help to make our communities more just and peaceful, we have brought life to others. Then, flowing from these works, we can speak – with actions having backed up our words – of the eternal life that can be experienced through Christ.

**April 16, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life, "Sacredise"*

Easter is not over! While we celebrated Easter Sunday last week, the fifty day Easter Season continues until Pentecost Sunday. During this time the Lectionary invites us to dig deep into the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. This season flows out of Holy Week as a kind of mirror of Lent which led us into it – Lent being a preparation for the powerful and challenging journey of Holy Week, and Easter being an outworking of the Holy Week experience. This week the gift of the Lectionary is the gift of assurance – a confidence that our faith is not just a fantasy, or a distant dream, but is something real and transforming that we can experience and live each day.

May the power of resurrection life fill our souls as we worship this week, and throughout the Easter Season.

**READINGS:**

**Acts 2:14a, 22-32:** Peter, preaching on the Day of Pentecost, proclaims that Jesus is risen and quotes from David's Psalm (16) as a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ.

**Psalm 16:** A psalm of David, expressing trust in God, commitment to faithful worship, and assurance of God's promise of resurrection – which in the New Testament is taken as a promise of Jesus' resurrection.

**1 Peter 1:3-9:** Peter encourages the believers as they endure trials, reminding them of the life they have in the Risen Christ and of the joy that they will experience when their faith, having been strengthened by their suffering, leads them into fulness of life.

**John 20:19-31:** The resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and breathes the Holy Spirit on them, then he appears to Thomas who had doubted the witness of the other disciples, and shows Thomas his wounds, leading Thomas to faith and worship. After telling this story, John explains the purpose of his Gospel, to show who Jesus is and to lead his readers to faith.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

The resurrection may be an interesting historical fact, but if that's all it is, it has little value for us today. This week's Lectionary readings make it clear, however, that the resurrection of Jesus is way more than just an event of the past. Every reading offers the assurance that God's life is available to us now in Christ. In both Peter's preaching and his letter he affirms that Christ's resurrection is real and is a promise that God's life is available to all. The Psalm, which Peter quotes in his Pentecost sermon, expresses the Psalmist's assurance of God's care and life, and is taken by Peter as a prophecy of Christ's resurrection. Finally, in the Gospel reading, John demonstrates how Christ's resurrection inspires and empowers his disciples, and how Thomas is dramatically drawn into faith. Put together, these readings give us a basis for confidence as we face the challenges – the 'little deaths' – of each day, and they invite us to experience Christ's resurrection life now, not just after we have died. So, resurrection is not just an amazing thing that happened long ago. It can be our lived experience every moment.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** In a world where nothing is certain, where agreements and treaties and commitments are so often broken, the word 'assurance' can seem like a ridiculous ideal. Expediency would seem to be a far higher value, and those who want to keep up had better get comfortable with it fast. Yet, assurance is an important word in the realm of faith. Without assurance faith becomes either a fantasy or a white-knuckle clinging to vain hope. It's not that we need proof of what we believe – as if faith was about verifiable fact. Rather, it's that faith needs to be something we live, that drives us and moves us and defines us. Lived faith requires a confidence which is an experience of the thing in which we believe. Like the small wins that an athlete uses to boost their confidence on the way to Olympic gold, assurance confirms for us that what we have given our lives for has substance and reality to it. To speak of the resurrection with no experience of 'little resurrections' to give us this assurance, this confidence, leaves us in a limbo state of always waiting for something better – "pie in the sky". But, as we work for justice, peace, simplicity and community in this world, we draw strength from our daily experiences of God's resurrection life – in the laughter of a poor child who still remembers how to play; in the commitment to peace among those who suffer abuse from dictatorial leaders; in the mindfulness of those who choose what they eat and buy according to principles of justice and conservation of the

planet; in the resilience of those who continue to hope and dream and work for a bright future, even after losing everything in natural disasters. It is when we open our hearts and minds to these signs of resurrection that we find the assurance to keep faith, and to hold on to our integrity, compassion and commitment to ethical living. It is this daily experience of resurrection that empowers us to believe in Christ and the way of God's reign, and, like Thomas, to turn our lives into an act of worship and service.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** In every life there are daily 'little deaths' – job losses, sickness, broken relationships, bereavements. At times faith in Christ and in the resurrection has been portrayed as an escape from these realities of the human condition, and Christians have tried to pretend that we are immune from life's pain and failures. However, when we do this, we do not help ourselves or our communities, and we do not honour Jesus' death or resurrection. Also, when we make the resurrection simply a historical fact to assent to intellectually, we lose the power it offers for daily living and service. Thomas refused to believe as an intellectual exercise just because "everyone else" did. He insisted on discovering the resurrection for himself, even though it meant admitting his doubts and allowing himself to be proved wrong. He needed an assurance of life, but once he had received it, he was a changed and healed person. What life and healing we could offer our neighbourhoods and our people if, in the Church, we welcomed doubt and recognised that failure and brokenness are universal. What transformation could be experienced if we accepted people as they are – whatever that might mean – and invited them to seek in earnest after an assurance – an experience of 'little resurrections' – in the midst of their pain and struggle. How different our impact on our communities might be if, instead of giving our energy to judgement and criticism and defensiveness, we embraced all people with the confidence of God's life, God's love and God's compassion. How differently we might be perceived as Christians if our faith in resurrection was less an idea which we held in our heads, and more a quality that we lived with every part of our lives. And when we've experienced the assurance that comes from God's life in this way, we discover that we cannot help but be agents of resurrection in every moment, every place and every relationship we may find ourselves.

**April 23, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

The Emmaus Road is a compelling story. It is a curious way for Jesus to reveal himself to these two disciples, but it is also a moment that called them to a response. It is all too easy for faith to become an academic exercise or a "thing we do" on Sundays which has little connection with life. But if the resurrection is to be known and lived, we cannot just have ideas about it. We must respond to it – not just once, as to a once-off event, but in every moment, as to something that is a constant reality in the universe. It is this challenge that makes this week of the Easter Season both meaningful and pregnant with possibility.

May our worship this week lead us to encounter life such that we cannot avoid offering ourselves to life in response!

**READINGS:**

**Acts 2:14a, 36-41:** Peter continues his sermon on the Day of Pentecost and encourages his hearers to believe in Jesus as Messiah, to repent and to receive God's Spirit, and 3000 people respond.

**Psalms 116:1-4, 12-19:** A psalm of praise, thanksgiving and commitment in response to God's gracious rescue.

**1 Peter 1:17-23:** Because God, through raising Christ from death, has led God's people to eternal life, we should love one another.

**Luke 24:13-35:** Jesus appears to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who invite him to stay the night with them. They share a meal and, as Jesus breaks the bread, they recognise him.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

God's life and grace, and the gift of resurrection, are wonderful things to know about, but they mean very little in real terms without a response from us. While God's grace and love are always available, it is as we respond that we are able to appropriate and benefit from them. The power of Peter's sermon was only realised by his hearers when they responded to what he had said. The psalmist recognises that God's gracious rescue is made real when he responds with gratitude, praise and commitment. Peter invites the believers who have come to faith in Christ and received God's life to respond by living lives of love toward one another, which of course, is how God's life is experienced. Finally, the two disciples on the Emmaus Road have heard about Jesus' resurrection, but it is only when they recognise him at the meal as he breaks bread that the reality of the resurrection hits home to them and they experience it for themselves. It is not that God needs our response in order to love us, forgive us, or save us, but that for us to know, experience and live out of the life and grace of God, we need to appropriate what God has given us and respond to the realities that we



encounter. This call for response is a powerful and hopeful part of the Gospel we preach, and is the gift we are invited to share in worship this week.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** When we begin to talk and think about applying the Gospel to the realities of our world, ideas like resurrection and response don't often come up, and yet they are key. As we have already explored, resurrection is what God is doing in the world in all sorts of ways, and we are called to co-operate and co-create with God as this life-giving work is happening. This is where the response comes in. When tsunamis and earthquakes hit, we are called to respond to the Christ at work in the midst of grief, death and suffering. When the planet is threatened by greedy consumerism, we are called to respond to the Christ who gave life to the universe. When war and conflict harms innocent people, and when dictators bomb their own, we are called to respond to the Christ who brings peace. Wherever life is at work to rescue, heal and restore there is a response that we are called to make. We can ignore it and go about our lives as if it doesn't matter, or we can seek to be a part of the life-giving work of God. We can walk with Jesus on the road to Emmaus and then let him walk on, or we can invite him in for a meal. We can stay alone and amazed at the Christ we've encountered, or we can run back into community and share what we've experienced, drawing others into God's life. Whether by prayer, contribution, volunteering or voting, our task is to remain always open to God's life and where it may break out next, and then to be ready with a response that brings grace and life to others. In what ways can your community be part of the work of resurrection in the most broken and hurting parts of our world this week?

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** In every Church community we speak easily about God's life and God's resurrection and how it is available for us. It's easy, though, for this to become either academic or individualistic. What we sometimes fail to recognise is that whenever we see God's life at work in another, or in our communities, there is a response that we can make. One of the great privileges of the faith is that we get to participate with Jesus in what God is doing in the world. This is far more than just praying a personal prayer to receive God's life or preaching 'evangelistic' sermons to 'get people saved'. It's when we watch to see what God is already doing, where God's life is already breaking out, and then we respond to this by co-creating, co-caring and co-welcoming people, that we, and those God touches, really connect with and experience God's life. The big question this week, then, is to discover where in your church resurrection is beginning to break out (or is continuing to break out), and where in your community or neighbourhood is resurrection at work? Then this must be followed up with the question of what our response should be – how does God want us to participate, to notice, communicate and spread the life of God? So often we feel that we have to make things happen, and that the initiative begins with us. The resurrection helps us to recognise that the initiative is always God's. God's life is always breaking out whether we see it or not. Our task is not to make anything happen, but to respond – to get on board with – what God is already doing. This is a liberating and empowering thought, but also a challenging one. We can choose to do our own thing, or nothing, but if we really want to encounter God and be involved in Gospel work, we better recognise and respond to God's thing! How can you do this more or better in your community this week?

**April 30, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

If we have become accustomed to think of resurrection life as something that we receive and enjoy primarily as individuals, this week's Lectionary readings will come as something of a shock. Through the interesting collage of metaphors – sheep and Shepherd, suffering and care, life and togetherness in the community of faith – we are drawn into recognising that the life Christ offers us is always shared. If we are to know the reality of the resurrection, we will discover it as we care for one another and share life in mutual compassion and protection.

May we be drawn into unity and communion with God and each other as we seek for life in our worship.

**READINGS:**

**Acts 2:42-47:** A description of the life of the early disciples as they shared in worship, hospitality and caring for one another.

**Psalms 23:** David's famous psalm of confidence and hope in God's care, guidance and provision.

**1 Peter 2:19-25:** Peter encourages the believers who are going through trials because of their faith, and reminds them that Christ, who suffered though he was innocent, is the example we follow.

**John 10:1-10:** Jesus warns about those who are thieves and robbers, who do not care for 'the sheep', and he speaks of himself as the gate for the sheep, through which the sheep move to find pasture – and the abundant life that Jesus offers.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

This week the Lectionary offers a wonderful and rich connection of ideas. In this season of the resurrection, the life of Christ is still uppermost in our minds, and Jesus' promise that he has come to give life is at the heart of our reflections. The rest of the Gospel, though, and the other readings, all reflect on how life is lived when the care and compassion of God direct us. In the Acts reading we are given a glimpse at the true community of the first disciples and their care for one another. In Psalms 23 we are reminded of God's care and attention toward God's people. In Peter's letter, written to those who are being persecuted

for Christ's sake, there is the assurance that their suffering is not meaningless, and that it is a sharing in Christ's sacrifice, even as God – the Shepherd and Guardian of the believers' souls – watches over them. Finally, Jesus, in speaking about his life, warns about those who pretend to care for 'the sheep' but don't. In a confusing contrast he is both the Shepherd who does care, and the gate through which the true Shepherd enters to call the sheep, and through which the sheep pass in order to find pasture and life. While it is not the purpose of this short reflection to unravel all of these metaphors, the essential message is clear – the life of Jesus is given and received by mutual care, compassion and protection. The resurrection does not offer some individualised, blissful life. Rather, it calls us into a life that is shared with others who follow Christ, to whom we belong and for whom we are responsible, even as they as are called to care for us. It is only together – in community – that Christ's life can be known and enjoyed.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** If there is one gift that modern science has given us it is the realisation of the connectedness of all things in the universe. While we have divided up our world into ever smaller groupings – nationalities, political affiliations, languages, ethnicities, regions, genders, generations, religions, cultures, economic strata, educational levels, all of these divisions are ultimately false. It is impossible to do anything to another person or group that does not have some impact on ourselves. And so, we are called, as followers of Christ, to embrace these connections, and to find in them the resurrection life that Christ promises. Like the psalmist, we can know God's care and provision for us, but also know that this means that we are drawn into God's house, where we are not the only inhabitants. Like the early believers we are called to share all things, to 'do life' together, and to endure whatever persecution or hardship we may face with the same grace and forgiveness that Christ demonstrated. And unlike the false shepherds, who care nothing for the sheep, we are both the sheep who enjoy God's care, and the 'shepherds' or 'gatekeepers' who care for the sheep and help them to find life-giving pasture. What this interconnected experience of life means, is that we can no longer ignore what happens on the other side of the world. We are connected with the poor, the sick, the refugee and the oppressed. And, in our own way, as followers of Christ, we can use our love and compassion to change the world so that the most vulnerable people are no longer abused by "thieves and robbers" but are cared for and provided for by people who truly seek their best, and who seek a better world in which all are secure, all are provided for and all are included in the community of humanity.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** Where are the lines drawn in your community? In every church we inevitably fall into lines and divisions, splitting ourselves along lines of gender, generation, sexuality, theology, denomination and function. We tend to separate ourselves when we worship – children, adults and youth in different venues with different 'styles' – and when we work and live together as church – with clergy and laity kept in their distinct compartments. But, what if all of these lines rob us of life? What if our tendency to use marketing strategies to identify 'target markets' and 'felt needs' only leads us into a lifeless uniformity? What if it is the very interconnectedness and diversity that opens us to the reality of the resurrection? In what ways can your community begin to identify and honour the connections, rather than the differences? In what ways can you begin intentionally to include those who are seen as different or 'outside'? What would happen if the neighbourhood in which your church operates knew you as the church that connects

people, and that connects needs and solutions, and that celebrates humanity in all of its God-given variation? In what ways could your church offer a ministry of connectedness, welcome and involvement with those who most need to be cared for and offered life in your town? Do you think that, maybe, as we seek to follow Christ's example, we could ignore the slights and criticisms that we so easily retaliate to, and notice the ones who need to be loved and led to life? And then, do you think that maybe the people of your community would find, individually and together, a richer, more full life, as they honour and embrace the connectedness of the world?