



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR APRIL 2024

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 11:30am each Sunday, and can also be watched any time at <https://iview.abc.net.au>

Stay safe. God bless.

April 7, 2024

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

Christ is Risen! The Easter celebration continues with the familiar upper room appearances from John's Gospel. But, this year the supporting texts highlight a feature of the resurrection that can easily be missed – the way Christ's resurrection brings us into a unified, loving community in which we share joy and abundant life together.

May we find life in our connection with each other, with the world, and with God as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Acts 4:32-35: The early disciples of Christ bear witness to the resurrection through their generosity and care for one another, ensuring that no one among them had any need.

Psalms 133: A song of celebration for the blessing of living in unity.

1 John 1:1-2:2: John writes to testify to Jesus and to open the door to fellowship for the believers with one another and with God. However, if we claim to be in fellowship but live in "darkness" – denial and sin – we lie. But, if we confess our sin, and live in the light we do, indeed, have fellowship with God and others.

John 20:19-31: Jesus appears to the disciples in the closed upper room, giving them a gift of the Spirit, and sending them just as he was sent. Then, Thomas who wasn't at this appearance, is encountered by Jesus, and his doubts are removed.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The surprising message of this week's lectionary is one that is deeply needed in our world and our Church at this time. This second Sunday of Easter continues the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, but it adds a facet to the story that is not often spoken of – the way Christ's gift of life brings us into a unified, life-giving, faith community. In the Acts reading, the early church is described as a caring, loving and serving community in which all things were held in common and no one had need. The famous Psalms 133 celebrates the joy and life that is found in a united community. In John's letter the testimony about Jesus connects with the call to live "in the light", with honesty and integrity, and explains how living like this, in Jesus' resurrection life, brings us into fellowship with God and one another. Finally, in the Gospel, the first appearance of Jesus includes both the sending of the disciples as Jesus was sent to welcome, forgive and heal – proclaiming God's Reign – and the call to be people of forgiveness, which of course, is a key facet to reconciliation. In the Thomas story, the isolation that is felt by one who has not yet come to faith in Christ's resurrection life is poignantly described, and then the joy when he finds faith and a place in the worshipping, faith community is expressed. The simple and obvious message is that the resurrection is not a personal, individual gift, but is also about reconciliation and community. Because of Christ's life we find connection with one another and with God, and we are able to live out

of this sense of belonging, welcoming others, as John does in his letter, into the joy that we have found. The truth is that life is always found and enjoyed together.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

One of the biggest struggles we face in the world today is our inability to experience our connectedness with one another, with God, and with our planet. In the realm of religion, we have built an exclusivist culture that welcomes and accepts only those who think and act and believe as we do. This “us-and-them” worldview has led to religious violence, social fragmentation, political partisanship, and carelessness of creation. In the realm of economics we have underestimated both the impact that risky behaviour in one sector can have on the whole system, and how interconnected the global economy is. And in terms of power, resources, and technology, we have failed to grasp how significant our connections are as they bypass the false categorisations and lines of division that we have set up. One result of our failure to apprehend our connectedness is that we lose the joy and life that true community brings. The gap between rich and poor grows, the conflicts between countries, religions, and ideologies continue, and the destruction of our planet and its species is unchecked. If we could begin to believe in resurrection as a lived reality, though, we could turn so much of this around. Once we recognise that God’s life flows through everything and everyone, we can open ourselves to see the connections that God’s life creates, and then we can begin to experience and enjoy our connectedness, ultimately working toward unity and interdependence. But, the starting point is to receive God’s Spirit, to practice forgiveness and to go into the world as those who are sent, like Christ, to bring the grace, compassion, and justice of God into the world. Then, as we “walk in the light” with one another, we will begin to know the fellowship that John wrote about, and we find abundant, limitless life in our connectedness with God and one another.

Local Application:

Believing is often preached as a cognitive, intellectual thing, and resurrection as a doorway to personal, eternal bliss. Unfortunately, both of these views create division, conflict, and isolation of individuals and interest groups. The spread of individualism to the life of faith has left in its wake the remains of broken families, broken churches, and broken communities – the opposite of the resurrection life of connected community that this week’s readings celebrate. The resurrection, though, is a manifestation of God’s Reign that impacts every part of our lives – now and eternally. It is a life that is unrestrained, indiscriminate, and connecting. When we have truly believed, it changes how we live, and when what we believe is resurrection it moves us toward others in order to share life. Resurrection faith strengthens us when we grieve, because we are able to support and comfort one another. It inspires us when we celebrate because we are able to multiply our joy together. It makes our work more effective because we draw both on the resources of God’s Spirit and of our togetherness. In this way God’s resurrection life becomes more than just an idea that gives us hope. It becomes the lived reality of every day, and leads us inexorably into the glorious joy and sense of belonging that we find as citizens of God’s Reign.

April 14, 2024

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

It's a week of looking up. For the Israelites in the wilderness, it was looking up at a bronze snake that would open them to God's healing from the poisonous snakes in their camp. For Nicodemus it was looking up at the Christ who promised that when he was lifted up he would draw all people to himself. And now for us, we are called to look up, both as an act of repentance, turning away from what poisons us, and as an act of faith, trusting in God's grace and salvation.

May our worship lift our eyes to the Crucified One and give us the courage to do the tough but healing work of repentance.

READINGS:

Numbers 21:4-9: The people of Israel complain about being in the desert because there is no food or water and they don't like the food God has provided. Then a plague of The resurrection is more than just a past event or a ticket to life after death. It is a lived reality that has the potential to change us and our world, if we can only believe, open to the change it brings, and proclaim its life-giving power through our lives. This is the message of this week's Lectionary, and it is both joyful and challenging. The call to be witnesses to Christ is one of the most transforming messages we can receive, because it requires us to live, speak, think, and act like Christ.

May the message and mission of Christ fill us and send us out as agents of God's grace, justice, and love.

READINGS:

Acts 3:12-19: Immediately after the healing of the lame man, Peter addresses the crowds, explaining that the power to heal the man came from the same Jesus that they had crucified. Peter then calls the people to turn back to God.

Psalms 4: A plea for God to remember God's faithful servant, and an affirmation of how God cares for those who trust in God. Finally, a call for people to stop chasing lies and turn back to God.

1 John 3:1-7: Because of God's love, we are God's children, and we have hope that when we see Christ we will be like him. Therefore, we resist sin and seek to live in righteousness as Jesus is righteous.

Luke 24:36b-48: Jesus appears to the disciples, showing them his hands and feet, and eating a piece of bread to prove that he is not a ghost. Then he shows them how he has fulfilled the Scriptures, and he calls them to proclaim repentance and faith in Christ as his witnesses.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

If there was ever any doubt that God expects the resurrection to have an impact on how we live, this week's Lectionary readings should lay it to rest. All of the readings are very clear that, because of God's work in our lives, we should live differently, and we should be witnesses to God's grace and love. The Acts reading describes how Peter, after healing the lame man at the Temple, bears witness to Christ and calls his listeners to turn back to God. The Psalm speaks about God's goodness to God's faithful ones, and exhorts people to turn back to God. John's letter teaches, in a clear and direct way, that following Christ has to change how we live, with sin no longer being welcome in our lives, and Christ's righteousness being the pattern by which we now live. Finally, in the Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus challenges his disciples, who are now witnessing him as the Risen One, to believe and to be witnesses that call others to repent and believe and find life in Christ. The implication this week is that, as all of these biblical witnesses teach, we are also called to become witnesses to Christ, changing our own lives to live as true Christ-followers and calling others to repent, believe, and find life.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The task of witnessing to the resurrection, historically, has been one motive behind colonialism, Christian triumphalism, and even Christian violence against people of other faiths. This is tragic and horrifying, since nothing could be further from the Gospel of peace and grace that Jesus lived and taught. Even today, in a mistaken belief that we are somehow "witnessing" to Christ, Christians have engaged in crusades against evolution, climate change, Islam, abortion, homosexuality, and even social justice. Yet, the economic, political, and social implications of the resurrection have largely been ignored. However, when we place the resurrection, and the teaching that accompanies it in the New Testament, in the context of Jesus' message of God's Reign, we see that the resurrection is far more than just a promise of life after death. Rather, it is a challenge to everything that brings death into our world, and a call for all people to live differently – in ways that bring life to others. This means that we, who seek to follow Christ, need to begin by repenting ourselves, as John directs, seeking to remove sin – whatever would bring injustice and death into our world – from our lives, while embodying the same grace and love that Jesus showed. Then, through Christ-like lives and words, we are able to call others to a new, loving, gracious, and just way of being. The true power of the resurrection is felt not so much after death, but here and now when God's life is brought to all who are dying under oppression, poverty, persecution, and hatred.

Local Application:

The resurrection is usually seen as something we wait for. We may speak about receiving Christ's life now, but we tend to define that as simply a promise of everlasting life when we die. However, in every family, community, and individual life, there is a longing to be fully alive – creative, contributing, filled with meaning and purpose, and connected with other people and with the earth. It is exactly this longing that Jesus' resurrection life fills. The promise of life after death only has meaning if we can know and experience something of the resurrection now – and we can when we allow Christ's message and mission to change us, shifting us away from behaviours and attitudes that bring pain, darkness and division into our neighbourhoods and communities, and moving us toward generosity, peace-

making, inclusivity, service, and advocacy for justice. Our calls for repentance must first be manifest in our own lives, and then we can challenge others to work for justice. The call for repentance is not about imposing some puritanical moral code on others, so much as it is about living in such a way that we bring life and love to others. And the call to believe in and follow Jesus is less about assenting to some intellectual ideas than about embodying in our own lives the message and mission of Christ. In this sense the resurrection and the Reign of God are really synonymous, and together, they are the heart of the Christian message and life.

April 21, 2024

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

This week the challenge to live the resurrection continues. By combining the Good Shepherd metaphor with John's call for love and Peter's proclamation of God's grace in Christ, the Lectionary has some strong words for leaders, but also for all Christ-followers. God life is to be enjoyed as a priceless gift, but it is also to be received as a transforming influence, and shared as a grace-filled, love-bringing reality.

May the Good Shepherd fill us with life, and inspire us to be good shepherds to others as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Acts 4:5-12: Peter and the other disciples are put on trial by the religious leaders, who ask them by which name or power they have healed the lame man. Peter, in response, tells them that it is by the power of Jesus that the healing has happened. Though they rejected Jesus, he has become "the cornerstone" and is the name through which humanity is saved.

Psalms 23: David celebrates God as his shepherd who provides for him, cares for him, protects him, and in whose house he will live forever.

1 John 3:16-24: As Jesus laid down his life for us we should lay down our lives for each other. We are called to follow God's command to love one another – in action, not just in word.

John 10:11-18: Jesus proclaims himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and takes it up again.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

If the Easter season is about anything, it's about restoration, life, and God's compassionate care for God's people. These are the themes that come through the readings for this week. In Acts the disciples, who are put on trial for healing the lame man outside of the Temple, proudly proclaim Jesus as the name by which the healing has happened, and by which humanity is to be saved. In David's famous Psalm, God's care as shepherd is celebrated, and in John's letter the love of God that is revealed in Christ's sacrifice is to be passed on through those who are Christ's disciples as they choose to love one another and lay down their lives for one another. Finally, in [John 10](#) Jesus proclaims himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep with commitment and courage, and who lays down his life for the sheep. But, in this loving sacrifice lies the hope of resurrection – Jesus confidently asserts that he will take up his life again. The message is an important one as we reflect on the resurrection over the next few weeks. Resurrection can easily be seen as an individual experience of life beyond the grave, but the Gospel reveals that it is so much more than that. As much as it does offer personal renewal through God's life, and the promise of eternity, resurrection also calls us to be life-carriers – shepherds who, like Jesus, lay our lives down for others. It is the hope of resurrection that makes sacrifice possible, and that gives us the strength and courage to risk loving and serving others even when it hurts.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

There are two obvious implications in today's theme that present themselves. The first relates to the crucial issue of leadership. The realities of corruption, incivility, self-interest, and petty partisanship are present in pretty much every government in the world. In the corporate sector, greed, quick-fixes, and profit-above-all-else easily taint leaders. Even in the sphere of the church, the temptation to seek fame, wealth, and influence too often takes precedence over compassionate and strong leadership. Like the people of Israel in Jesus' time, we long for Good Shepherds who lead with grace, compassion, wisdom, and justice. The examples we have – Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Wangari Maathai, Gandhi – inspire and challenge us and give us hope that the leadership our world needs is possible. For those of us who exercise leadership in any capacity, the Easter vision calls us to use our influence to bring life to others, to serve others, and to work sacrificially for the good of our communities. It is this leadership alone that can make a positive difference to the great crises of our time at every level.

The second implication of today's theme flows from this leadership challenge. It's the call to recognise that resurrection life is not just a gift for personal blessing, but is a powerful energy that is intended to flow between people, bringing life, wholeness, and justice wherever it flows. As such, the call to love one another sacrificially applies not just to those in leadership, but to every Christ-follower. The resurrection life we celebrate is meant to connect us with others and motivate us to seek their best, contributing in whatever way we can to a world of grace, peace, justice and love. As we seek to live Christ's resurrected life together, our care and compassion has the potential to address every crisis from poverty to climate change. All it takes is the vision and hope, the courage and commitment and the faith to follow the movement of God's Spirit and the life that God's Spirit brings.

Local Application:

God's compassion for us and God's desire to restore and enliven us shine through every moment of the Easter season. The mystery and challenge of this divine quest lies in that it operates on personal, local, and global levels. As we begin to live as resurrected individuals, we cannot help but connect with resurrection communities, and that in turn brings the life of resurrection to the world. For most of us, though, the beginning point is personal and local. This means that, first of all, in our families and friendships, and in how we order our lives, God calls us to embody the compassion and sacrificial care of resurrection. Any time our words and actions bring life, joy and peace to others, we share resurrection. Any time we lay down our lives for one another, we manifest resurrection life. Then, as we connect with one another in resurrection communities, we are able to bring life to our neighbourhoods, impacting others with God's care and grace. This means that much of how we have "structured" and lived our faith as Christ followers may need to change. From exclusive communities, we will need to learn acceptance and welcome. From being people of judgment and criticism, we will need to become people of love and forgiveness. From being those who focus only on a few issues that directly affect us, we will need to contribute to causes that bring life to people we may never meet. The life that resurrection brings cannot be contained. It breaks out wherever it can, and those who seek to live resurrection can only follow where it leads. When we try to contain it or control it, we only end up falling out of step with Christ. This means that every action, word and thought can be either the reflection of resurrection, or an obstacle to making it visible. The choice is ours – we can be Good Shepherds who care for and lay our lives down for those around us, or not.

April 28, 2024

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

This connection between resurrection and living a life of love and service to others continues this week in the Lectionary. The primary challenge is to be those who bear fruit for the sake of Christ, and the fruit we are called to bear is Christ-like, sacrificial love that creates a world in which God's righteousness and justice last for generations.

May our worship challenge and change us into true lovers of God and of people.

READINGS:

Acts 8:26-40: Philip is instructed to go to a certain road where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on his way home after worshipping in Jerusalem. Philip finds him reading Isaiah's scroll, and explains what the Scriptures say about Jesus. Then he baptises the eunuch

Psalms 22:25-31: A psalm of praise and commitment in which God is celebrated for God's provision and authority, and all people are challenged to worship God, to fulfil promises to God, and to proclaim God's righteousness to unborn generations.

1 John 4:7-21: An exhortation to love one another, because God is love. If we cannot love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we do not see, but, as God has loved us, inspiring love for God in our hearts, so too, we should love one another. Such love drives out fear.

John 15:1-8: Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. God desires us to bear fruit, and to do so we must remain in Christ.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The heart of this week's Lectionary is Jesus' exhortation to "bear fruit". There are two emphases in this call. The first is to "remain in" Christ – dwelling in deep, life-giving connection with Christ. The experiences of Philip, who is guided by God's Spirit, and of the eunuch who comes to faith through Philip's work are examples of this dwelling in Christ. The second emphasis is to "bear fruit". What this fruit might be is explained by the other passages (but also by the context of this one). John's letter explains that the test of our discipleship, and the "proof" of our love for God is our love for others. This agrees with the context of John 15 which also speaks about love as the commandment Jesus gives his disciples. The Acts reading and the Psalm also reflect another kind of fruit that we are called to bear – which certainly flows out of our love – it's the fruit of our witness to Christ. This section of Psalm 22, which is the restoration part of the Psalm of lament that Jesus quoted on the cross, speaks of proclaiming God's righteousness (justice) to unborn generations. This is an exhortation to share the goodness and justice of God with others in such a way that it impacts the world for those who are yet to be born. Philip's obedience to the Spirit, and gentle witness to the Ethiopian eunuch is an example of this fruit bearing – sharing God's grace and love with others (who would usually not be welcomed – as a Gentile and a eunuch this man would not have been permitted into the temple) in such a way that it changes the world for time to come – I believe some scholars have speculated that this eunuch could have founded the Ethiopian church that continues to this day. That's quite some fruit! Essentially, the key of this week's theme is that our love for God must flow out into love for others – both Christian companions and others – in such a way that they too come to love God and others. This growing cycle of love for God and neighbour is what it means to bear fruit for God's Reign.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

On a global scale, this week's idea of a justice or righteousness that is proclaimed to unborn generations is compelling. So often even our quest to love as Christ did is so immediate and short-sighted that we fail to recognise the long term impact of what we are allowing in our world, and sometimes, our work for justice now results in long term consequences that undermine or even negate the good we have created in the short term. For example, a few years ago, using biofuels to address short term energy needs and climate change issues, resulted in great social challenges for third world countries as grain prices went up and food became increasingly scarce as crops were diverted to the more profitable biofuel industry. As we seek to respond to the call of this week's Lectionary to bear fruit, we need to acknowledge that true love does not seek the "quick fix" but is willing to commit to the long term, seeking true justice and attempting to bear fruit that lasts. This is a massive challenge in a world in which corporations are measured quarterly and Presidents have to prove

themselves in 100 days. The addiction to immediate solutions and benefits is bringing suffering in so many ways – from human trafficking of children as cheap labour in the chocolate industry, to sweat shops in the clothing and technology industries, to the impact of fossil fuels on the environment, to the corruption that prevents aid reaching those who need it in some countries. But, the mark of our love as Christ-followers today will be seen in generations to come by whether our world is more just, equitable and sustainable because of our efforts to love well.

Local Application:

On a local and personal level, Philip's example is a good one for us to follow as we seek to love God and others, and bear fruit for Christ. A number of factors stand out in this "fruit-bearing" moment of Philip's. He was willing to be driven out of his way by his love for and obedience to God. He was willing to engage someone who was very different from him, and who would usually have been marginalised by his people. The eunuch was a foreigner, a Gentile and a man who had been castrated and was therefore, in one sense, unclean. He was also willing to meet the man where he was, beginning the conversation from the questions and reading of the eunuch. He did not impose his own agenda on the man, but listened and responded graciously and gently. Finally, he welcomed the eunuch into the community of faith by baptising him without question. All of these loving acts are the ones Jesus calls all his followers to perform in order to bear fruit. Our love for God is truly revealed as we act in these loving ways toward one another, and to the "outsiders" we encounter. And, as we welcome, listen to, serve, and love others, the impact of that on their lives can have healing, transforming, and empowering effects that can flow out to touch others and make a real difference in the world. To change the world, and manifest God's Reign we don't need to do "great" or dramatic things. We simply need to love the people God sends across our path genuinely, humbly and sacrificially.