

**Readers’ Service**

A Service for the Easter Season

***The Flower Girl who became a Duchess***

by

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ORDER OF SERVICE

(A Service for the Easter Season)

[NB: This service contains both a Sermon and a Story. Either or both could be used as appropriate.]

**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*‘Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!
For as by a man came death,
by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.
For as in Adam all die,
so also in Christ shall all be made alive.’* **(1 Corinthians 15: 21 & 22)**

 **HYMN (H&P) 193: Christ the Lord is risen today**

**OR**

**HYMN (H&P) 208: The day of resurrection**

**PRAYERS:**

*‘Ye humble souls that seek the Lord,
chase all your fears away;
and bow in rapture down to see
the place where Jesus lay.’* *(Doddridge)*

 *So the impossible has happened! God has really done it this time! He has turned the way we look at life upside down. Christ has died. Christ has risen. In our darkest moments we fear that life may be ultimately without meaning; that there is a hole in the heart of the universe through which all love ultimately pours into nothing.*

 *But it is not so. For the faith of Jesus, the faith to which he clung by his fingertips on the cross, has been vindicated. His faith opens the door for our faith; his resurrection is our resurrection. Love reigns supreme. Love reigns triumphant. Today is the day to lay care aside, and rejoice without reserve.
Alleluia!*

**THE LORD’S PRAYER**

**HYMN (H&P) 202: Low in the grave he lay**

**READING: Isaiah Chapter 65:17-25**

 **HYMN (H&P) 204: Now the green blade rises from the buried grain**

**READING: John Chapter 20:1-18**

**SERMON (see attached sheets)**

**HYMN (H&P) 196: I know that my Redeemer lives**

**PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:**

*The risen Jesus stands among us. We place our concerns for the world into his hands.*

 *We pray for a world damaged and wasted by the pursuit of wealth and power.*

*Lord Jesus you challenged the rich and powerful.
Hear our prayer.* ***Hear our prayer.***

 *We pray for those whose lives are torn by war, poverty or oppression.*

*Lord Jesus you spoke up for the poor; and preached peace to those far off and near.
Hear our prayer.* ***Hear our prayer****.*

 *We pray for those who are lonely, sick, anxious, bereaved or burdened in any way.
Lord Jesus you healed the sick, and stilled the anxious.
Hear our prayer.* ***Hear our prayer.***

 *We pray for friends and family, old and young according to their needs.
Lord Jesus, you extended the meaning of family, and you laid down your life for your friends.
Hear our prayer.* ***Hear our prayer****.*

 *We pray for the dying, and those who grieve for lost ones.*

*Lord Jesus you said ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’
Hear our prayer.* ***Hear our prayer****.*

 *Lord Jesus, by your rising, you have sent death and his friends on their way. You have secured the promise of a new age. Receive these prayers from us. They are the prayers of those who want to learn what it means to be living in a new age in which life and death, past, present and future, all are ours, and we are yours, and you are God’s.* ***Amen.***

**OFFERING AND DEDICATION:**

*Lord, we do not know the value of what we give. We cannot know to what use you will put the money we offer. We do not know what you have in store for those who say ‘yes’ to your call. But we believe that nothing we offer sincerely will be wasted, and all that we give entrusted to you will be multiplied.*

 *‘Almighty God.,
of your own free goodness and mercy
you have created us,
and through the resurrection
of your only-begotten Son
you have given us hope;
guard us by your love
and, in your wisdom, keep us in eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.’* ***Amen****.*

(From the Methodist Worship Book p 161)

 **HYMN (H&P) 255: Crown him with many crowns**

 **THE GRACE**

**SERMON**

***THE FLOWER GIRL WHO BECAME A DUCHESS***

 *‘The difference between a flower girl and a duchess is not the way she behaves, but the way she’s treated.’* That’s one of the best known lines from Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion.

In the play Professor Higgins makes Eliza talk, walk and dress like a duchess. He passes her off in society as a duchess. He wins his bet. But he tramples on her feelings. He uses her to get what he wants. So, in the final scene of the play, Eliza, in her frustration, tells him: *‘The difference between a flower girl and a duchess is not the way she behaves, but the way she’s treated.’*

Mary Magdalene was, you might say, a ‘*flower girl.’* But Jesus was the reverse of Higgins. He didn’t use Mary as Higgins used Eliza. He didn’t use her as other men may have done, to satisfy their need for power or sex. Jesus respected Mary. Jesus cared about her. Jesus loved her. He changed her. By the way he treated her he made her feel like a duchess.

But now Jesus was dead. Mary felt herself falling to pieces. She would become a flower girl again. She went to the garden to grieve. She grieved the loss of the one who had given her life as she had never known it. As she wept over the loss of his life, she wept over the loss of her own.

Let’s try and imagine the scene. Mary found the tomb empty. Grief upon grief - there was not even the lovingly wrapped body of Jesus as a focus for her weeping.

Then she met this man. By the dawn’s early light it’s hard to recognize even expected and familiar things. She hardly saw his face, for her head was bowed, and her eyes were streaming with tears.

Then he spoke her name - ‘*Mary.’* Perhaps it was the distinctive way he said it, the tone of his voice. But at once, without doubt, she knew who it was. She flung her arms around him. He held her for a moment. Perhaps he smiled, laughed and shared her joy. Then he pushed her gently away. *‘Do not hold me. There’s no need now.’*

And she didn’t need to be told twice. She ran off, as fast as she could go, to tell the disciples: *‘I have seen the Lord!!’*

Now we celebrate again the resurrection of Jesus on that first Easter morning. But it was Mary’s resurrection day too. The young woman who rushed off to tell the disciples was a woman risen from despair, from hopelessness, from the dead; brought back to life again, made new. The resurrection of Jesus was the resurrection of Mary; then of the disciples, then of the early Christians. It’s our resurrection too.

Remember the story of Jesus and another woman, Martha. She is grieving over the dead body of her brother Lazarus. Jesus says to Martha *‘Your brother will rise again.’* Martha says *‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’* (John 11: 23 & 24)

Like most Jews at the time, Martha believed in the resurrection of the dead. But they did not think as we tend to do, primarily of individuals going to heaven as soon as they die. They believed that one day God would bring the life of his chosen people to a climax. He would fulfill his promise, end their troubles, set them free.

*‘I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people …’* (Isaiah 65: 19)
*‘ … For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.’* (Isaiah 65: 22)

And the liberation of Israel would mark a new beginning for the whole of creation.
*‘The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox …’*(Isaiah 65: 25)

*‘For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth …’*(Isaiah 65:17)

And one of the signs that these things were about to happen would be the resurrection of the dead. Those who had remained faithful to God through all the years of trouble would be brought to life again to enjoy God’s ultimate act of renewal and celebration. Their faith in God’s love for his people would be vindicated.

Jesus says to Martha *‘Your brother will rise again.’* Martha says *‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’* (John 11: 23 & 24) Jesus says *‘I* *am the resurrection and the life.’* (John 11: 25) The decisive time has come. This is the beginning of God’s end time. And the bringing to life of your brother Lazarus is a sign that this is so.

We diminish the Christian story of the resurrection of Jesus if we treat it simply and crudely as evidence that you and I will enter on another, better, life when we die. There’s much more to it than that.

A man once made a flower girl feel like a duchess again The same man lifts our drooping spirits at Easter time each year. He always will. For he is none less than the hero of the story of the renewal of all creation.

So just let yourself go. As it were, fling your arms around him for a moment. Then you will know by faith that the spirit of the risen Christ is at work in you, dissolving the darkness of death in his rising, wiping away tears; lifting you up as he goes about his business of recreating life as life is meant to be.

**EASTER STORY**

 **THE MUSICIAN WHO CAME TO LIVE IN THE HOUSE BY THE SEA**

There’s a little town by the sea. In this town there once lived a girl and a young man. Both played the violin. There was a retired man; and he played the double bass. And there was an older woman who played the clarinet. They were all quite good amateur musicians.

Quite often, they spent evenings playing together. They tried different pieces of music. Some they struggled with. Some they played quite well. But they always enjoyed themselves. Sometimes they even gave little concerts in the church hall.

One day they heard some important news. A professional musician, a cellist, was coming to retire in the town. He’d bought a house down on the sea front. He was quite well known. For years he’d been a member of a string quartet with an international reputation. You could buy their CDs in the music shop in town. There on the cover of the CDs was a picture of the man who was coming to live among them.

Well the great man arrived. The music group, meeting one evening, said to each other *‘Shall we go and see him?****’*** After much hesitation they called on him.

He was very pleased to see them. When they told him about their musical get-togethers, he said *‘Would you mind if I joined you one evening?’* They were taken aback. They couldn’t say *‘no.’* They didn’t want to say *‘no.’* After all his presence would do their reputation no end of good. But what worried them of course was the thought that he would show up their amateurish music making for what it was.

But one evening he joined them. They started to play together. He was of course so good. He showed up their technical weaknesses. But he helped them unobtrusively. The beautiful sound of his cello added a new quality to their music. Under his influence, by his very presence, their playing improved. It reached new heights. Under his leadership, they gave more little concerts.

Often the old cellist would play his cello alone at home. Sometimes, on quiet summer evenings, people would gather outside his house by the sea, just to listen. And a sound of great beauty floated down the garden and out to sea until it was lost in the lapping of the waves.

Then one day the great musician died, *‘suddenly, unexpectedly, after a short illness,’* as it said in the obituary in the Independent. The townspeople were sad. They’d lost a notable citizen. Those who loved music, especially the little group he’d played with, were distraught. A great many people attended his funeral - not just townspeople, but well known folk from the world of music too. It was in all the papers.

At the end of the funeral day, when all the crowd had gone, the little music group walked together down to the waterfront. They looked at the dead cellist’s cottage. They looked out to sea. Then they looked at each other. They knew that never again would they hear the sound of the cello floating on the still evening air. With tears in her eyes, the woman who played the clarinet said *‘I don’t think I want to play ever again.’* She spoke for them all.

Then, a few days later, they heard about the cellist’s will. He had left his house to the people of the town. It was his gift to them - a place to make music, to enjoy music for music’s sake. He left them his cello too.

The little group went to the house. They looked around inside. There was all the sheet music, all the tapes and CDs neatly shelved. And there was the cello standing in the corner of the room. The young man took it gently. He sat down. He drew the bow across the strings. It didn’t sound as it sounded when the cellist played it. In truth, it sounded pretty awful.

But it was enough. The group looked at each other. The same impulse came to all of them at once. *‘We will play again,’* they said. So they started to meet again to make music.

The group began to give concerts again. It seemed to people that they played better than ever. And whenever they played in the little church hall, there stood the cello on the platform beside them. It reminded them, and their audience, of the great musician who had died but who now lived on in the group and their music.

More people came to listen - townspeople in the winter, even visitors in the summer. The little seaside town began to gain a musical reputation.

Ten years later, with the help of a grant from the Millennium Fund, the council built a concert hall. They named it after the great cellist. It became the venue for musical festivals. It transformed the life of the seaside town.

One day you may visit the little place, perhaps for a holiday. If you do, people there will tell you, that if you go down to the waterfront on a still summer evening, and stand outside the house where the cellist once lived, you can sometimes hear the sweet sound of a cello floating down the garden and out to sea; until it mingles with the sound of the waves for ever lapping on the beach.