

# Belong

EASTER  
BLESSINGS

HOLY WEEK

WHY LET  
IT HAPPEN?

BECAUSE  
JESUS LIVES



## RESURRECTION BLESSINGS



BY RICK SHALLENBERGER  
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*“Tis impossible to be sure of anything but Death and Taxes,” said English actor and dramatist, Christopher Bullock in 1716. We can be even more sure of the resurrection.*

In 1789, Ben Franklin changed Bullock’s statement a bit and said, “In this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.” Theologically, Ben Franklin’s quote is more accurate because he limited his observation to things “in this world.” As Christ followers, we know we are citizens of another world – the kingdom of God, and there are many things we can be sure of. Easter points us to the reason we can be sure – the resurrection.

Let’s look at two passages that share observations and blessings from the resurrection.

Let’s first look at Paul’s first letter to believers in Corinth.

*Now I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand,*

**“EASTER IS  
A SEASON OF  
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DEATH.”**

*through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Corinthians 15:1-5 NRSV)*

There are some important things to note in this passage:

- **The resurrection is good news.** I believe we wholeheartedly agree with this because it is our hope.
- **The resurrection is the truth we are to stand on.** If Jesus wasn’t resurrected, we have nothing; our faith is vain and futile (see 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 NRSV). We stand on the resurrection because it is the certainty of our salvation. Earlier in Corinthians, Paul declares that all he resolves to know and preach is Christ and him crucified. He is reiterating that all humanity was effectively saved when Jesus spilled his blood and died. Paul is now bringing in the resurrection, speaking to the expanse and fullness of Jesus’ vicarious saving of humanity.
- **It is through the resurrection that we are being saved.** This good news is a constant reminder of our salvation. “Being saved” speaks to sanctification and our continued formation into the image and likeness of Jesus. Paul hints about this when he refers to us being transformed “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18).
- **Paul refers to the resurrection as “of first importance.”** Can you think of something more important than the truth that Jesus rose from the grave? It’s what we base our faith on. It’s what we base our hope on. It’s what inspires, compels, and motivates us. Death didn’t defeat him. The grave couldn’t hold him.
- **The resurrection was “in accordance with the scriptures.”** The resurrection was prophesied in the Old Testament and in Jesus’ own words. (See Psalm 16:10, Psalm 22:16-24, Isaiah 53, John 2:19-22, John 10:17-18, Matthew 16:21, Mark



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8:31, Mark 9:9-10.) Do a study on how Jesus fulfilled prophecy. You will come to see how God’s plan has always been Jesus, and how the Old Testament continually pointed to him. He is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17).

Questions for reflection:

- What does the phrase, “of first importance,” mean to you?
- What does it mean to you to stand on the truth of the resurrection?
- What are some other prophecies you think of that pertain to the resurrection?

Let’s also look at a few gems from the apostle Peter.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable,*

*undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9 NRSV)*

Notice the blessings Jesus' resurrection gives us:

- A new birth into a living hope
- An imperishable inheritance
- Protection by the power of God
- Salvation to be revealed in the last time
- A reason to rejoice
- The outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls

## SCOTTISH RETREAT

We are delighted to confirm the dates for the 2024 Scottish Retreat – Friday 10 to Sunday 12 May. Once again we have been able to secure exclusive use of Carronvale House in Stirlingshire ([www.carronvale.co.uk](http://www.carronvale.co.uk)).

Come and join us for a weekend of uplifting worship, inspiring presentations and stimulating workshops. The cost for 2024 will be the same as last year, £140.00 per person for a shared room or £164 for single occupancy, both with ensuite bathroom. Prices include two night's accommodation and all meals from dinner on Friday evening through to lunch on Sunday. As usual, we will make sure there are plenty of opportunities for fun, relaxation and fellowship.

The Scottish Retreat is open to all but places are limited, so please apply in good time to avoid disappointment. For an application form, email

There are many other passages that help us see the significance of Easter. You may want to read John 11:25-26, Romans 6:5-6, Romans 8, Romans 14:8-9, 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Hebrews 13:20-21.

Questions for reflection:

- Which blessing listed above jumps out at you? Why?
- Which blessing do you feel the least? Take that blessing to God and ask him to reveal it to you more personally.

Easter is a season of rejoicing. We rejoice because we know Jesus defeated the greatest enemy – death. This is why we joyfully proclaim, “He is Risen,” to which others might proclaim, “He is Risen indeed!” This proclamation is our testimony that we believe Jesus died for us, was raised for us, and took us with him as he ascended to the Father.

Let us joyfully celebrate the blessings of the resurrection. He is Risen!



[peter.mill@gracecom.church](mailto:peter.mill@gracecom.church) or call 07990 572211 for further information. Completed forms should be returned with a £10 per room deposit; the balance is payable on arrival.



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## WHY LET IT HAPPEN?



BY HILARY BUCK  
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Bad things happen in life. But Paul wrote to the Roman church, saying that ‘We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28) As the traumatized disciples watched Jesus’ crucifixion, they would have surely queried a statement like that.

The chief priests and scribes and Pharisees wouldn’t have given the concept a passing thought. They were just happy to get rid of Jesus. Many in the crowd were convinced that his death showed that he must be a sinner, otherwise God would get him down. After all, God would not have allowed that to happen to him if he was a man of God. The thieves on the cross reviled him until, as we know, one of them changed his mind.

Soon we will celebrate the fact that God did not leave Jesus in the grave, powerfully proclaiming that bad things happening to us are nothing to do with our right standing with God. But the idea that God is not on our side or has got something against us when life seems to turn on us is one that runs through human thought even today.

When something goes awry in our lives or a tragedy happens or someone we love dies, we may think: God, why didn’t you stop this happening? Why did you allow it? You could have stopped it. And we can get cross with God or feel let down by him. After all, he has all the power in the universe so it would have been no problem for him to, for example, stop an accident, stop us losing our job, stop us getting sick or whatever it is that is troubling us.

It’s a question that is asked more often that we think by Christians. It is one that can stick with us a bit and can trouble us. And it’s a question that seems to question Paul’s confident statement to the Romans.

So let’s return to the crucifixion and trace the journey of the women at the cross. We know they were present, though they were standing at a discreet distance.

When Jesus died, the women must have waited around to see what was going to happen to his body and when Joseph of Arimathea, with Pilates' permission, arrived to take the body to his tomb, they followed him and saw where his body had been laid.

Putting the records together the women then bought spices and ointments, prepared them and rested on the Sabbath, though it is not clear which order they did this. But their intention was clear – they would go with them the next day and anoint Jesus' body.



Photo: Alireza Esmaceli, Unsplash.com

But they didn't need to do this. The money they were spending was a complete waste. How much did they have to spend? The spices would have been an expensive, mixture of myrrh and aloes and other spices, much of it imported from abroad. Myrrh came from North African and parts of Saudi Arabia, and suitable to have been included as a present for a king, as we know that the Magi gave it to the Christ child when they arrived at Bethlehem. Aloes too were native to Africa, Madagascar and the Arabian Peninsula.

Then the spices had to be prepared, ointments had to be made. The time they spent preparing them was

also a waste of time and effort. What time did they get to bed?

Why didn't God stop the women? They went to a lot of effort and spent a lot of money for nothing. He could have stopped it. Maybe he could have put an angel by the door of the shop telling them just to go and rest – there's was no need to anoint Jesus.

But if they had been prevented from accomplishing their mission, what would have occurred? They wouldn't have got up early, gone to the tomb as the day broke, meet the angels and above all: – they wouldn't have met Jesus. And they wouldn't have had the honour of being the first witnesses to his resurrection.

Because God did not intervene and let the women continue with their expensive purchases, their hard work as night came on preparing the spices, and after a short night, getting up before dawn to go to the tomb - because he let it all go on, they met the resurrected Jesus as the sun rose. The apostles weren't the first to meet him. The women had that honour.

We can probably think of events that happen to us that impact our lives far more than a large expense and a late night. But the experience of the women highlights Paul's principle so well, and is a startling example of all things working together for good.

Maybe we could take a look back at the difficult things that have happened to us, and see how that it led us, like the women, to Jesus. Take a look to find how God is using those times for good, how that they may lead us so that we too will meet Jesus and draw close to him.

Through the times that trouble us and the storms of life that leave us shredded and shattered, may it cause us to come closer to our Saviour who appeared to the women as a humble gardener and One who would never leave and forsake us and works only for our good.

*Hilary Buck is a Minister of GCI Lewes*

## SPIRITUAL RESPONSES FOR HOLY WEEK

**Palm/Passion Sunday** – This is a week to follow Jesus and vicariously enter in his suffering. Imagine laying your coat in the road before him as a sign of honor and respect. Wave your palm branch over him as you worship and shout Hosanna, which is from Psalm 118:25: “Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success.” Then join him as he stops and weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-44). Joyfully welcome Jesus' presence in your life and join him as he laments over the pain and suffering those in the city will face.

**Maundy Thursday** – Whether you meet as a group or not, this is a day to reflect on Jesus' example of servant-leadership. Am I leading and serving as he did? It's also a day to reflect on the new covenant by which we have been made clean. Finally, it's the time to recommit to the new commandment he gave: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). This is the true sign of discipleship (vs. 35).

**Good Friday** – Today we follow the words of the hymn as we “survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died.” It's a time to reflect on Jesus' words in John 15:13-14: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”

**Holy Saturday** – This is a day of reflection, of a quiet awareness of Christ's death, of the sacrifice he made so that all could be forgiven and adopted. This is a good day to reflect on your baptism and your desire to follow Jesus. Take time to prayerfully recommit yourself to Father, Son, and Spirit.

**Easter Sunday** – He is Risen! This is a day of wonder and worship as we join the cry heard around the world: Our Savior lives! We are saved by his death, and our sins are carried away. By rising he justifies us and frees us to live in the kingdom. Focus on the resurrection. Shout your praises. In him you have life, power, love, triumph, transformation, hope, and joy.



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**Easter Season** – Focus on all the blessings and the spiritual inheritance you receive through Jesus' death and resurrection. Live in the new life he has called you to. Rejoice in the communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit, a communion you've been invited to. Live in the forgiveness he offers. Leave your burdens at the cross. Live a resurrected life. You are the beloved – be loved.

*Adapted and paraphrased from Living the Christian Year, by Bobby Gross.*

## SOUTHERN RETREAT

The Southern Retreat will be held from Friday 26 April (arriving at 5.00 pm) to Sunday 28 April 2024 (leaving at 2.00 pm) at the High Leigh Conference Centre, Lord St, Hoddesdon EN11 8SG.

The theme for the retreat will be 'Experiencing the presence of God' based on Psalm 145:18 (NIVUK) – 'The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.' It will be a time of worship, Communion, prayer, and discussion, with quiet times for meditation and reflection, in a relaxed atmosphere, as we contemplate God's love for us and how we can share his love with one another.

The price for the retreat is £208 per person, which includes two nights' accommodation, dinner on Friday and Saturday, and breakfast and lunch on Saturday and Sunday. Accommodation comprises a mixture of single, double, twin and family ensuite rooms, towels and basic toiletries are supplied.

If you would like to attend this retreat or require



for further information, please email Barry Robinson at [barry.robinson@gracecom.church](mailto:barry.robinson@gracecom.church) or call 07791 867933 for an application form. The form should be returned to Barry with a £10 deposit per person. The balance is payable on arrival.

As spaces at the centre are limited and will be allocated on a first come first served basis, application forms should be returned as soon as possible to secure your place.

## SEP APPLICATIONS ARE LIVE

Applications for SEP 2024 are live at our website: [sepuk.org](http://sepuk.org)

We are moving to a new venue this year, the Rock UK Frontier Centre in Northamptonshire, a Christian charity passionate about developing young people, helping to transform lives in an outdoor adventure setting.

Also for 2024, we have taken the decision to move to a one week camp. Many people are unaware that the cost per camper has been subsidised by the church to a significant degree and this policy will continue, but moving to a shorter period will make SEP's future more sustainable, while also enabling us to attract more staff in order to continue providing a good selection of top quality activities.



This year SEP 2024 will run from Monday 12 to Sunday 18 August.

For more information e-mail [admin@sepuk.org](mailto:admin@sepuk.org)

## GCI WEST HAMPSTEAD



BY GEOFF STILWELL  
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Grace Communion West Hampstead is a church, formed in September 2023, combining the former Central London Church, meeting at the Indian YMCA in Fitzroy Square, and the former Camberwell Church, meeting at the Salvation Army Hall in Camberwell. We now meet at Sidings Community Centre in West Hampstead, close to Kilburn, chosen mainly because of good transport links.

We have been praying that God would provide opportunities to serve the local community and we were contacted by a church in Kilburn asking if we could sing carols at a local Sheltered Housing Unit. So on 15 December a group of our members, with members from the Kilburn church, and some residents of Spring Court, gathered to sing carols with guitar accompaniment. Refreshments were served, concluding an enjoyable event, which presented an opportunity to meet some of the residents. We are in touch with the Sheltered Unit managers and hope to plan other events in the future.

Like the early churches in Acts 2 we fellowship around a table and eat together, occasionally doing better than sandwiches and cake, preparing a more substantial meal and inviting local people to join us.

A Fellowship Meal was arranged for 26 November 2023, just before Christmas. Several people were invited who regularly volunteer in the weekly Food Bank and Warm Hub at Sidings. Also invited was Richard Scurry, site staff, who ensures the hall is set up the way we want it, after the Food Hub finishes and the manager of the Sidings Community Centre, Sue Measures. Unfortunately, illness prevented many people we'd invited from coming.

Before the meal we enjoyed a service with glorious worship songs from Barbara Wilkinson and a



message based on Ephesians 1:15-23 from Vanessa Garcia. It was an enjoyable occasion with lovely food, including West Indian Chicken, Jollof Rice, Lentil Quiche and salads. We enjoyed fellowship at its best.

*Geoff Stilwell is a member of GCI West Hampstead*

## GCI HARBOROUGH ONE YEAR ON



BY SINEAD HENDERSON  
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Our Christmas Day 2023 community outreach marked one year since our first event. Since that exciting beginning we have hosted quizzes, cream teas, barbecues and harvest celebrations - a total of seven events. Each one is prepared prayerfully and with the anticipation of sharing Jesus' love with those in our neighbourhood.

Christ says, in Matthew 25:44-45, whatever we do for those God gives into our care, we do for him. So we reach out to the lonely, to families, to people seeking a place to serve, to those looking for friendship, and we create spaces where they can join our church family.



At each event, we are able to offer up prayers for the food that God provides and we also have opportunity to share a little of our faith.

At the Christmas Day 2023 outreach, I likened God's church to a family and one to which everyone can become a part of, where no one is excluded and where everyone can find love and acceptance. This resonated with so many people and led to some beautiful and fruitful conversations.

The next natural step was to invite them to join us in church, or to take a walk with us and have tea and cake if they wanted to ask questions or talk about something. Several are interested in joining our family and we are excited to see where the Lord is leading us.

God is very much at work in our community and we know he doesn't need us but we also know he delights to include us in what he is doing. We hope to live and share the gospel with the not-yet Christians on our doorstep, and with God's grace we will.

*Sinead Henderson is a member of GCI Market Harbourough*

## TODAY IS FRIDAY...BUT SUNDAY IS COMING



BY BARRY ROBINSON  
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“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him...” Luke 23:33 (NIVUK)

The evening was getting worse. Jesus was betrayed. One by one he was abandoned by his disciples and left to face a sham trial alone. He was beaten. Mocked. Ferried between Herod, Pilate, and the Sanhedrin. Bound as a common criminal, he was treated no better than an animal. Exhausted, wounded, and humiliated, the Son of God was crucified. He died an agonising, slow and public death, surrounded by mocking enemies, a heartbroken family and a few disciples watching from the edge of the crowd.

These are not easy things to think about. It is uncomfortable to dwell on pain and suffering. It is hard to silently reflect on what it meant for Jesus to go through all of this. It's around this point that I want to jump ahead in the story – after all, we know how this ends: Jesus rose on the third day conquering sin and death, that's the bit I want to think about.

Perhaps, for a moment, I need to place myself in the shoes of the disciples. They had no idea how it would end. For them, this really was the end. Can you imagine the fear, the confusion, and the horror they felt seeing this happen to Jesus? Can you imagine the bleak darkness that overtook them? Can you imagine the despair they felt as their world crumbled before their eyes?

During the time we call Good Friday and Holy Saturday, we are being asked not to skip ahead in the story to its resolution, as we are so often tempted to do in our world of instant gratification. Rather we are being encouraged to stay the course – to sit for a while with the pain, grief, and loss.



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Why would a loving Father allow the disciples to go through a period of such darkness, and why do we as followers of Jesus have to experience dark times? Maybe it is in these moments that we realise just how lost and alone we are without Jesus. We realise how harsh, brutal and cold our world is without him. Just imagine a world where death is the last word, where there is no meaning or purpose to life – this is where the disciples were at.

So, let's not skip past Good Friday and Holy Saturday. This is not the end of the story, but there is no story without them; without the cross, there is no resurrection. We must be prepared to sit with the story as it happened, and in the process, our stories are grafted into Jesus's story. We too go through dark and painful times in our lives, times when character is forged and testimonies are written, but it is not the end of the story.

Today is Friday, but Sunday is coming. Jesus is risen, he is risen indeed! Hallelujah.

Prayer: *Loving Father, in the dark times of our lives may we see our need for Jesus more clearly. In Jesus's name, we pray, Amen.*

This study is part of the Word of Life devotionals. If you would like to receive it daily, please subscribe via [wordoflife.gracecom.church](http://wordoflife.gracecom.church)

# BECAUSE JESUS LIVES



BY DEBBY BAILEY  
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Jesus reassured his disciples before his death in John 14:19, “Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Since I live, you also will live.” Jesus’ promise isn’t just for the future, but for now.

As we approach Easter, our thoughts are focused on Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. I’ve been thinking about my own journey and how my relationship has evolved. Initially, it was mostly going through the motions of prayer and reading Scripture. But along the way, Jesus became more of a friend, comforter, encourager, and guide. My dependence on him has grown to get through each day of life.

Sometimes I think, what would I do if I lost this or that? But Easter is a reminder that the one thing that I cannot live without is Jesus. A few years ago, I had a lot going on in my life on all fronts: work, church, and family. I felt myself approaching a breaking point. One day during my lunch break, I walked down the street to a church near my office. I went to the altar, and my prayer was simply, “Jesus, I need help.” I laid on the altar and wept. As I picked myself up and walked back to work, I felt immense relief.

I knew, somehow, that Jesus would work things out and that everything would be okay. This is just one



Photo: Hibrida13, istockphoto.com

time, out of many, when my precious Savior helped me live. As I reflect on my personal journey and prepare for Easter, I know I can face each tomorrow because Jesus lives.

*Prayer: Lord, open the eyes of our hearts to see you more clearly. Please give us the reassurance we need to face each day with confidence, knowing because you live, we can also live.*

*Debby Bailey, Pastor Pikeville, KY, US*



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