

So This is Easter

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Here's what you can expect today. At some point today, tens of thousands of Ministers and worship leaders are going to stand up in Church buildings like this one and say something like ... um ... *"Jesus is not dead. He was dead, but He's not dead anymore!"*

You can expect this to be said ... just like you can expect to hear the National Anthem before the football is kicked in the grand final or singing 'happy birthday' before someone makes a wish and blows out candles. *"Not dead."* Somebody's going to say it.

But here's the question. This *"not dead"* Jesus stuff - is it really true - or is it just something nice we say every Easter? I'm serious - this is a pretty important question. The way I see it, nobody's *just sitting* in Churches like this today. In reality everybody's rolling the dice, hoping Jesus really is alive!

You see, if this *"not dead"* Jesus stuff isn't true, then this is embarrassing and you are all fools and I have wasted my life! You'd do better to sing a rousing rendition of happy birthday and call it a day. Oh no, sorry, that's the other day everybody turns up to church isn't it? Well, maybe you should have just slept in today and given all this a miss - if this *"not dead"* Jesus stuff isn't true.

I'm really serious here. If this *"not dead"* stuff is just religious mumbo jumbo; if it's not actually true - then all this stuff, sitting in rows, singing a bunch of songs, listening to some preacher talk ... it all has just about as much significance and meaning and power and relevance as making a wish before you blow out some candles!

On the other hand, if it is true, then hey - just imagine the possibilities!! Jesus - not dead? I mean, He was dead - that's for sure and certain. Even the historians who don't believe any of the spiritual stuff about Jesus are all in agreement - Jesus of Nazareth was executed and he was well and truly dead, buried, the funeral is over, the casseroles have all be eaten, but now, all of a sudden this dead man is up and walking around, talking to people, showing up in all kinds of places - hey, he even cooked breakfast on the beach for his old buddies!

Not dead? Ha! Well, what do you do with a guy like that? In my way of thinking, a guy like that deserves to be heard. Don't you agree? And when that guy He says, *"I am God,"* we should believe Him and we should celebrate and shout it on the streets. We should sing like we've got nothing to lose and everything to gain. We should tell the world that God is not dead ... He's alive and He's right here now!

As for me ... I know that My Redeemer lives ... I know He is risen ... I know He is alive and here right now ... I was talking with Him in this very place this morning before you all arrived ... so I've made *my* choice about this 'not dead' stuff - I hope you have too - then the songs we sing will sure make a heap more sense!

Now I know there are days in our lives that aren't easy. There are moments we would rather forget. There are times to give in, give up or move on. But not today. There are days when the darkness surrounds us and the night appears to be endless. But not today. Today there's a light that breaks every darkness because Jesus is alive and here and so are we. Today you're invited to look into a tomb that once held the body of Jesus, but is now, by the power of God: EMPTY.

This is Easter and what I just said was so predictable, many of you could have written the script! That's the sort of thing you always hear on Easter Sunday in Church, isn't it? But in reality, every day is Easter Day. Every day brings new life and hope and promise and resurrection power, because Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive! He was alive yesterday too! He was alive last week. He will be alive tomorrow and the next day and the next day! In fact, Jesus conquered the grave and rose from the dead over 2,000 years ago and He has been alive and among us through His Holy Spirit every day since then.

So why all the fuss on this *one* day? Why do we focus on the resurrection once a year on Easter Sunday? That's an excellent question! I am so glad you asked. I only hope you are glad when I answer.

It's no secret, to those who know me, that I have never been a big fan of 'holy days', religious rituals, rites and ceremonies or, for that matter, anything else they didn't have or need in the Church which Jesus birthed and the Apostles built so quickly. The early Church knew nothing of what so many of us now consider is important or normal in the Church. No day or week is more or less 'holy' than another and whatever is true of the gospel of Jesus Christ is equally true 365 days a year!

The Apostle Paul did not "*.. preach Christ crucified*" on Good Friday and "*Christ is risen*" on Easter Sunday – Good Friday and Easter Sunday didn't exist when Paul was planting Churches everywhere he went. He preached Christ crucified, risen and coming again every day! He knew nothing of Lectionaries and Ecclesiastical calendars when he was growing the Church at a phenomenal rate – which continued for over 200 years, until religion took over!

When this all began every day was lived in the shadow of the cross and the empty tomb. Every day was Pentecost. Every day Paul preached what the Holy Spirit told him to preach, regardless of the time of year. Easter was not an event to be celebrated once a year, it was the essence of the gospel to be preached and lived every day!

Now fast forward 20 centuries and we see millions of people turning up to services on this one day to hear about this incredible miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That seems to fit in a society and culture where there are lots of things we celebrate only once a year. We only have one birthday a year. We only have one Christmas a year. We only have one Mother's Day and Father's day a year. We only have one wedding anniversary and Valentine's Day a year ... and we only have one Easter every year.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus is not an anniversary celebration! How could we even think of reducing the power and reality of the atonement of Jesus Christ to an annual festival or celebration? It is supposed to be a life-changing, powerful reality every moment of every day! We run the risk of trivializing the life, death and resurrection of Jesus by promoting it as a festival or religious 'Holy Day' once a year!

Now don't get nervous folks. I'm not advocating we cancel Easter! Once a year focused on the essence of our faith is better than not at all. I am just passionate to see that we don't miss encountering God personally as we blindly follow traditions which never came from God anyway. While ever I have breath I will be pleading with those who claim to be followers of Jesus to accept that so much of our Church practice actually hinders the spread of the gospel message. It confines it. It contains it. It narrows its focus – rather than enlarging its reality and power and purpose so it fills every day and every heart and every circumstance in every life!

We need to set Easter free from the prison of what we have called 'Holy Week'. We need to release the life-changing message of Easter from the religious celebration of Easter! We need to let the power of the cross and the empty tomb impact the world and people's lives every single day of the year!

Now I know that the death and resurrection of Jesus were actual events in our human timeline and that is what has produced another annual event or celebration / commemoration we call Easter. But did God ask us to celebrate an event or does God call us to experience the spiritual reality behind that event? You know the answer.

In Romans 6, Colossians 2 & 3 and 2 Timothy 2, we are told that we are united with Christ in His death and raised with Christ to new life. This is the regeneration of our spirit by God which ushers us into the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven. That is the reality of Easter - What happened in the eternal Kingdom of God – not what happened in time and space on the other side of the world before we were even born.

I am praying that we develop a holy discontent for an anniversary celebration of an event where we regurgitate the same old story year after year – a story which, for most of us, has done nothing to change our lives, our family or our community since the last time they heard it the year before!

We need to unlock the prison which keeps the power of Easter hidden most of the year. Let's tell each other and the world the truth – that Jesus is truly alive and present. Instead of continually celebrating an event which occurred on the other side of the world 2000 years ago when Jesus rose from the dead on a date in time and space - we should be celebrating the eternal present reality of the living Christ in our midst.

Religion wants us to just celebrate past events because religion will always rob us of the power of God's real presence here and now! Religion is form without substance, ritual without power, doctrine without experience and it's an abomination to God. We need to break free from the constraints of religion as we welcome and celebrate the risen Christ here, in our midst.

Because we serve a RISEN, present Saviour, He's in the world today. We know that He is living, whatever men may say. Do we really believe those words? Is the risen Christ as present in your life and mine as He was when He cooked breakfast for his friends on the beach that morning, after rising from the dead? If He's not, then hang around this Church some more, because my highest priority and my primary reason for being here is to welcome you to the king's banquet, show you to your table and make sure you have a personal encounter with King of Kings and the Lord of Lords – every single time we are together. When that happens, everything else God dreamed of for you and for this Church and this community will follow. It's that simple.