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## *Far Introduction What Easter means for you*

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Why was and is Easter – Jesus’ resurrection- so important?

- 1) Because Christ is risen, He is **more than just a** great man & a great teacher. The overwhelming evidence for His resurrection helps us to realise that **as He claimed, Jesus is indeed God Himself in human form and we must take His directions and His promises seriously.** They matter if we are not to be cut off from the living God.
- 2) John 14: 19b – Jesus said, ***Because I live you also will live.*** MP 52 has chorus – *Because He lives, I can face tomorrow; because He lives all fear is gone; because I know he holds the future, & life is worth the living just because He lives.* Singing or listening to these words may help you as they have helped me to receive grace & reassurance in entrusting my own believing wife & friends also to my faithful Lord. (along with a verse from one of my favourite funeral hymns, *The Spirit lives to set us free. We know His death was not the end, walk, walk in the light.*)
- 3) Because it deals with the continuing problem of the painful reality that our lives and the lives of all believers are still flawed & imperfect yet we can each still know God’s forgiveness and that we are held secure ***in Christ*** – held not in condemnation but in love. Listen now to Romans 8: 1-17.

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### *Reflection: Tie a yellow ribbon (Romans 8:1-2)*

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***There is now no condemnation now for those who are in Christ Jesus.***

..What does that mean for me? Past giants of the church like St. Augustine, Martin Luther & John Wesley each came to find an assurance of Christ’s forgiveness through reading Paul’s letter to the Romans. On 24<sup>th</sup> April 1738, Wesley was an Anglican clergyman, known for his obsessive anxiety to live a methodical, pious religious life that might make him acceptable to God. He wrote in his diary that when that evening, he heard a sermon on Romans, “*I did trust in Christ alone for my salvation, & received assurance that He had taken away my sins.*”

Yet for many, Romans is hard to understand so I will start as Jesus often did, with a story:

.....Some years ago, a group of young people were travelling by Greyhound long-distance bus on a holiday trip from New York to Florida, some 1000 miles away. Not long after leaving, they noticed the poorly dressed middle-aged man sat slouched in his seat & looking very worried. When after 3 or 4 hours, the bus pulled up at a roadside diner, everyone got

out except *Vingo* as the young people had by now nick-named the man. They were curious about him. Where had he come from? Where was he going to? .....Finally one of them sat next to him & said, “*We’re all going to Florida. Would you like some of my coke?*” He took a swig & said “*Thank you*” after a while, he told his story:

..... He’d been in a New York prison for 4 years. *While I was away I wrote to my wife & told her I’d be away for a long time, & if she couldn’t take it, she could just forget about me. I told not to write or nothing & she didn’t. Not for 3 and half years.* Then he said, “*She’s a wonderful woman, really something*”

..... “*& now you’re going home not knowing what to expect?*” the girl asked.

..... “*Yes*”, he replied. “*You see, last week, when my parole came through, I wrote to her again. I told her that I would be coming by on the bus. As you come into Brandon, the town where we live on the outskirts of Jacksonville, where we live, there is a big oak tree. I told her that if she’d take me back, she could tie a yellow ribbon, on the tree & I’d get off the bus, & come home. If she didn’t want me, forget it. No ribbon, & I’d keep going.*”

....The girl told the others & soon they were all involved, looking at photos of *Vingo’s* wife & children & all getting more nervous as they approached Brandon. Then all of the young people were out of their seats, screaming & shouting, crying. All except *Vingo*. He just stood there stunned, looking at the oak tree. It was covered with yellow ribbons, 20 or 30 of them. *Vingo* rose from his seat, make his way to front of the bus, smiled back at his young friends through tears & got off.

.....No wonder a chart-topping song was written about it in 1973?

.....Are we so different from that man *Vingo* who knew that he did not deserve the love & forgiveness he received? Certainly, the first disciples came to learn the hard way that they did not deserve a place in Christ’s kingdom. They had all sinned & come far short of God’s glory. (Romans 3:23) Despite their brave words, Peter, James & John & the rest all deserted Jesus when the soldiers came to arrest Him, & were afraid to admit even that they knew him, even to a young girl by the fire. Probably only John had stayed to the bitter end to be with Jesus as he suffered terribly & died on the cross. Yet the Easter appearances when the risen Jesus met them, helped them know that He forgave them & that their failures were nailed to the cross. & the Spirit given to them &, from Pentecost, to for all who thereafter would turn to God & believe, gave them – & can give us –new courage and assurance. John 3:16-17; 5:24.

Our risen Lord Jesus Christ appeared to Saul, the fanatical persecutor of the early Christians – & stopped him in his tracks. & then through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, & the courage of Ananias & the encouragement of Barnabas, Paul was helped to grasp that when we accept what Christ has done for us – the love, forgiveness & new life Jesus offers to all who will accept Him - we are adopted into God’s family, we are a new creation; we are not judged but delivered from the power & penalty of our sinful natures; & are given instead the Spirit of God’s life.

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. Roman Law knew all about adoption- & as often as not, it was adoption of adults with a binding commitment to confer all the rights & privileges of your family, **and** to also pay off all that you owed: to cancel all claims from your previous life. Christ has taken on Himself the punishment we deserve so we not need not be enslaved by the guilt of past failures. Like present day adopters, but even more so, Christ wants us to share his love & riches – to enjoy Him for ever.

Jesus said “*Whoever hears my words & believes in Him who sent me has eternal life. He will not be judged but has passed from death to life*” Paul makes the same point. *All have sinned & fall far short of the glory of God but are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came through Jesus Christ.* (Rom. 3:23-24) It is the privilege of all who have accepted God’s grace offered through Christ that God regards us as being His – in and united to Christ - that then there is no condemnation. He did not say “There is no charge or fault against us” for there is, & we see it and admit it, but the charges are thrown out. He did not say that there is nothing in us that deserves condemnation for there is, & we see it & admit it, but it shall not be our ruin. He did not say that there is no cross, no suffering for us for there may be, but that there is no condemnation & that Christ assures us that “*My grace is sufficient for you.....*” & as we open ourselves up to God Spirit, that Spirit is working in us with power to enable us to grow closer to Jesus.

Some of you have smart phones that let you record what people say & do – this can bring pleasure or make you squirm. Imagine when that when we die, the Lord sits you down & puts on a video & sound recording. It is called *This is your Life!* You’re not sure what you’re going to see, not just the things that you remember but the things that you’ve tried to forget & you are apprehensive. What happens are that there are blanks & then more & more blanks. Eventually, it dawns on you that these were the times you thought or said or did & you admitted it & asked God for forgiveness. Christ just pressed delete & wiped it out for ever. & can’t ever be retrieved.

But the Christian life & worship cannot just be stories, singing & prayers that make us feel good. The raw reality is that our forgiveness cost Christ the cross. The bible, especially in the Psalms teaches us that we cannot hide from God or pretend to be what we are not. He made each of us as different individuals & knows us completely: all our worries & regrets; fears & hopes, hurts & losses; joys & pain. We can know that God holds us in our darkest moments & as Paul writes later in the chapter, nothing can separate us from Christ’s love. He comes to us where we are & offers His forgiveness; He gives us not condemnation but healing/shalom/God’s peace (John 3:17 and 14:27)

In our hearts, may we join in the next hymn: *Before the throne of God above (MP 975)*