

Wednesday, 28 March 2018
from the National Council of Churches in Australia

Easter 2018 Messages from Australian Church Leaders

Chiara Lubich, wonderful Founder of the Focolare Movement, speaks of “Jesus forsaken” and “Jesus in our midst”.

These two phrases convey the Pascal mystery.

God amongst us, born of Mary, endures the humiliation and suffering of the Cross.

It is relentlessly strange. This is the One who was in the world, through whom we have our very being, but whom many seem neither to know as our Incarnate God, nor to give their acceptance. (John 1:10-11).

Yet too, we know how hereafter many suffering people have found that the Cross of Jesus gives interpretation and meaning to their lives.

Why? Because “Jesus forsaken” is also, through the Resurrection, “Jesus in our midst”.

As the French Carol conveys, “love is come again, so that when our hearts are bleak, grieving or in pain, Jesus touch can call us back to life again.”

How beautiful and necessary is our Easter faith, source of unquenchable hope!

With the saints we can thus exuberantly proclaim: “We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song”!

As we all know, in terms of renewing hope in our community, there is much to be done. Let us pray for one another at our various Easter Services this year, “Jesus in our midst”.

*Bishop Philip Huggins, President
National Council of Churches in Australia*

(Note: This year the Western Churches will celebrate Easter on Sunday 1 April and the Orthodox Churches will celebrate Easter on Sunday 8 April.)

The 11 messages follow.

For more information, contact the NCCA Secretariat on 8259 0800.

Anglican Church of Australia

'FROM DESPAIR TO JOY'

One incident in the Gospel of John provides a unique insight into the significance of Easter. It is a deeply human and moving moment, and quite revealing. I am referring to the short passage in chapter 19, where Jesus, in agony on the cross, sees his mother, Mary, and the beloved disciple, John standing before him.

Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son". To the disciple, "Here is your mother". From that hour John took Mary into his own home.

There is so much going on in the Easter narrative it is easy to lose sight of the poignancy of this moment. Earlier in the same Gospel, Jesus declared his intention to bring others to life in all its fullness. Even in this time of torture, he is still looking to others, still directed by love and compassion in these final moments of his life.

From the cross, Jesus establishes a new and deeper relationship between the beloved disciple and Mary. From despair, he calls out a new possibility, a powerful expression of the message that has been ever-present in his life and ministry. It is as much a reality here on the cross as it was in his miracles of healing. Jesus's death and resurrection is love's ultimate expression.

Too often, life's burdens can lead us to despair. One of the beauties of Easter is that it shows how despair never owns the last word. After Jesus's death the disciples' first reaction is despair. They become consumed by hopelessness and their powerlessness to save Jesus from cruelty and suffering. Their focus turns inward as they are gripped by their own fear and anxiety. But soon as they encounter the truth of Jesus's resurrection, the disciples' despair turns to joy.

Christians are Easter people in the fullest sense. We have been bound to a new relationship with God and with each other through these Easter events. We know and live in daily gratitude of what a gift we have been given through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our hope is in and through Jesus.

Easter blessings as you celebrate the greatness of the salvation that is God's free gift to you through Jesus Christ.

The video message is available at <https://youtu.be/VLEPnci9AU8>

*Archbishop Philip Freier, Primate
Anglican Church of Australia*

Catholic Church in Australia

Dear Friends,

May I begin this 2018 Easter message with a wonderful story about St Teresa of Avila. One day the devil appeared to her, disguised as Jesus. St Teresa wasn't fooled for even a second, dismissing the devil.

Before leaving, the devil asked her, "How could you be so sure I wasn't Jesus?"

"You didn't have any wounds – Christ has wounds!"

One of the most striking elements of our Gospel's Resurrection stories is that Jesus is still wounded in all of them. The crucifixion wounds do not heal. They remain open, eternally. The resurrected body of Christ remains marked by his earthly suffering, forever.

In fact, in many of the gospel stories, it is not until the disciples actually see the wounds

In fact, in many of the gospel stories, it is not until the disciples actually see the wounds of Christ that they recognize Jesus for who he is.

Until they see the wounds, Christ remains shrouded in mystery. Christ, in the resurrection, is known by his wounds.

Yes, Christ has wounds and so do we! In fact, our Catholic faith refuses to gloss over our wounds with hollow positive thinking. It refuses to ignore that basic tenet of human life. We will be wounded.

But as people of the resurrection, our promise is that our wounds can begin to heal others.

Some Christians live out this mystery of the Resurrection profoundly. So many people are living the mystery of the resurrection. If only we had the eyes of faith!

The wounded and risen Christ still appears among us:

- in the quiet tender care of our nurses and care givers in our hospitals, especially to the elderly and the dying
- in the patient and professional care of our teachers who generously serve our young people
- in the outreach of our social services like the St Vincent de Paul Society to the needy
- in the quiet heroism of parents as they sacrifice themselves for the good of their children.

Wounded saints are all around us. Their wounds do not embitter them but become fountains of compassion and hope for others.

One such saint known to many of the Melbourne Vietnamese Catholic community is someone we can especially seek to imitate. He is the late courageous Cardinal Van Thuan, who witnessed powerfully to his Catholic faith while locked for years in a Vietnam prison.

Pope Benedict XVI referred to Thuan saying:

"During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope - to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude."

This Easter 2018 let us listen again to Cardinal Van Thuan, as he describes the logic of Christ's resurrection in our lives in this way:

"Jesus cast fire on the earth and he desires the earth to be set ablaze with its brilliant light. You must be the bright flame; from which other torches must be kindled until the whole world is a vast sea of living flame."

Let us allow the Risen Lord to roll away the rocks of pride, ego and selfishness from our hearts, stones that may block the power of his presence, power and love in our lives and in our families.

May the light of the risen Christ that streams from his glorified wounds bring joy, healing and peace to us all.

"By His wounds we are healed"

*Archbishop Denis J Hart, President
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*

We now conclude our Lenten pilgrimage to Easter. Easter is the central foundation of all our Christian lives. In the death and resurrection of Jesus we find hope, light and eternity in the Risen Lord.

This Easter we pray especially for the battlers and strugglers in life. We pray particularly for those who are homeless, hungry, and despised by their own families. May the blood of Christ be poured on the entire world as we receive afresh the redemption that only Jesus, our Saviour can give us. With God's blessing to you and all your communities at Easter.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

*Archbishop Christopher Prowse
Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn*

Chinese Methodist Church in Australia

The Lord Jesus Christ lives! But even if it is proven that he has risen from dead to live forever, what does that have to do with the people of the world today?

Friends, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is ultimately significant because he died for our sins, rose from the dead, has been exalted to the Father, and will return to judge the world. These facts are all part of a whole truth held together inseparably in the prophetic word of God. And the Resurrection of Christ is the fulfillment and clearest evidence of the verity of that word.

And knowing the whole connected truth, we are convinced by the Easter event that Christ died for our sins according to God's word. This is why, for Christians, the celebration of Easter must always be tinged with a sense of regret for the sins we continue to fall into, and so we endeavour continually to bear the fruits of repentance through works of mercy and love.

But the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ also reminds us that He will return to judge the world, and so we are filled with a sense of compassion and urgency for the world that needs to know its coming judgement by our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. And so we preach the Gospel. Together with all true churches, the aim of the Chinese Methodist Church in Australia is to spread the light of Jesus Christ to all around us, for our desire in Christ is that everyone might ultimately know Him, not as Judge, but as the Saviour Lord through faith in Him.

May God be praised and glorified!

*Dr James Kwang, Bishop
Chinese Methodist Church in Australia*

Churches of Christ in Australia

For many, Easter is a time for commerce: the sale of chocolate eggs and hot cross buns, and busy fish and chip shops on Good Friday. It is a time for travel, when many Australians pack their tents, caravans or suitcases for a long weekend away. It is a time for public religious expression: Palm Sunday marches, papal messages, passion plays, and Paschal services.

For Christians, external Easter activities reflect a profound spiritual reality: that the death of Christ deals with human sin, guilt and shame. The resurrection of Christ reveals God's power over death, and gives us hope of the resurrection life to come.

Our newspaper headlines tell us endless tales of crisis, corruption, and conflict. Our mental health experts tell us anxiety and depression is endemic. More than ever, we need to hear the message of love, forgiveness, transformation and eternal hope captured in the Easter story.

*Rev Janet Woodlock, Federal Coordinator
Churches of Christ in Australia*

Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand

EASTER REDEMPTION

Impetuous Peter. Always doing first and thinking afterwards. When Jesus announced to his disciples that one of them would betray him and the others would run off, it was Peter who protested that he never would. In a famous line, Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you, that this night, before the cock crows, you shall deny me three times.”

Jesus led the clamour of protest from the disciples: “Even if I have to die with you, I will not leave you.”

Yet, within hours, as Peter hung around the court that was trying Jesus, he did claim not to know him. Then Jesus caught his eye and he realised what he had done. It was not just the denial: it was the continued denials after the continual assertions that he would not. At that point, Peter probably wished that he could take it all back. He couldn't of course and the memory stayed with him. What was done was done.

Nevertheless, Peter was eventually able to make his peace with Jesus and not let the one mistake define his life. He was after all, the only disciple to put himself at risk by following Jesus after he was arrested. Later in his life it was this courage came through as he faced hostility, persecution, imprisonment and finally death for spreading Jesus' message and refusing to ever deny him again.

When we use fancy abstract word like “Jesus redeemed the world with his death” we should remember that the world is us. The opportunity to start again, no matter how bad things are, is given to each and every one of us, personally: not someone else or an undefinable, hazy group of “them”. It does not have to be one life-changing spiritual event. It can be all of the times when things go wrong, when harsh words or thoughtless acts threaten relationships, the deed of an instant or the slow accumulation of neglect. We can make a fresh start and even, like Peter, be better for it.

We only have to accept the offer.

Easter blessings and the promise of new life to everybody

Dr Joe Goodall, Moderator

The Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Easter reminds us that love can sustain and hold us, no matter the depth of our pain or grief.

The relationships that Jesus created during his lifetime grew and flourished long after his death.

Jesus gives us the assurance that; love for our neighbour, across generations and across continents, will build a better world.

In peace and friendship,

Jo Jordan, Presiding Clerk

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia

The Salvation Army, Australia

RESURRECTION JOY!

“I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.” Philippians 3:10-11 (MSG).

As Christians, Easter is one of the most holy and significant times on our calendar as we celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of our faith, our hope that never disappoints and love that compels us.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we share a unified belief in our risen Lord. Your faith and witness further builds the case for more Australians to understand the wonder a relationship with Jesus will bring to their life. We thank you for your active embrace of Christian living and what it means to be a Christian.

In our travels around Australia over the first weeks of 2018, we have consistently encountered Christians with a spirit of optimism, joy and intentionality in their life and ministry. Let us pick up that word ‘joy’ for one moment. American author, Charles Swindle relates the story of the Christian man whose life was so possessed with the joy and the power of the resurrection that when he frequented a local restaurant, a member of the wait staff asked the reason why he was so happy? “Is it your birthday? Is it your anniversary? Did you get a promotion at work?” “No,” the man said. “It’s the joy of Jesus in my life.” The member of the wait staff replied, “I can never get that as I work on Sunday’s.”

For Christians, because of Jesus’ resurrection, living in a state of constant joy in our lives, our relationships, our service is a daily reality – not just for or captured on Sundays. It is this constant and overflowing joy that is the by-product of a life committed to Jesus. May our joy be evidenced with certainty, confidence and clarity in our interaction with all whom we meet.

One of The Salvation Army’s legendary apostles of holiness, Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle titled one of his many manuscripts: Resurrection Life and Power. If there was ever a need for the demonstration of resurrection life and power by Christians across Australia and the world over, it is now in these days of constant change, doubt and uncertainty. Christians are messengers of the good news; the life, the mission, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul reminded the believers in Ephesus that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is the power available to us who believe. It is a power that enables us to:

- Live a life of joy, victory, poise, buoyancy and optimism;
- Think thoughtfully and creatively;
- Act with courage and compassion;
- Proclaim and demonstrate the gospel without inhibition;
- Move forward with confidence and purpose; and
- Be energised for our daily living.

This Easter we proclaim with certainty, confidence, clarity and JOY – the message of a risen and glorified Lord who continues to transform lives today!

Blessings to you each one,

*Floyd and Tracy Tidd, (Commissioners), National Leaders
The Salvation Army, Australia*

Uniting Church in Australia

I am often drawn back to the gospel illustration Jesus uses to teach what is important and how we should respond to the needs of others. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 has become for me a constant corrective.

My wife and I were in Fiji not long after cyclone Winston. Walking down a street in Suva a man asked for money. I kept walking, but my wife reached into her bag to get some money, I questioned her and she reminded me how many people were forced because of the damage in villages to come to the city. Most had nothing but the clothes on their backs. Immediately I recalled the sheep and the goats, parable Jesus told.

In our Easter remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, his death for our life, this parable speaks to me of what his sacrifice was about – it was about life. Jesus said: "I have come that they may have abundant life!"

Yes, Jesus came to reconcile God and humanity, indeed to reconcile and renew the whole of creation. However the parable reminds us that we have a responsibility with respect to life giving love. To give food or the means of producing food to those who hunger; to give drink or the means to obtain clean water to those thirst; to welcome the stranger, the asylum seeker, the refugee, the homeless, providing shelter and hospitality; to clothe those in need and to care for the sick and the prisoner.

God's love in Christ compels us to extend life giving love to others. As we reflect upon the meaning of the Easter story in our lives and communities, may we find ways to reflect Christ's life giving love for others.

*Stuart McMillan, President
Uniting Church in Australia*

Australian Christian Churches

The standout message of Easter is hope: hope for this life and hope for the next.

It is the abundant life and eternal life that Jesus spoke of, saying "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of." (John 10:10 The Message)

On Friday we reflect on the death of God's Son, Jesus, who died in our place for our mistakes and our sin, and then on Sunday, we celebrate the fact that the grave couldn't hold Him and He rose again.

Let's celebrate hope this Easter – that Jesus Christ is not dead but He is risen.

*Pastor Wayne Alcorn, National President
Australian Christian Churches*

Australia Baptist Ministries

Easter is approaching with its themes of bunnies, holidays and religious services. But it also about heroism. This theme was prompted by recently viewing a movie that documented the sinking of The Rainbow Warrior in New Zealand, in 1985 and the ensuing death of its photographic protestor crewmember, Fernando Pereira. The crew of the Rainbow Warrior was protesting against the French nuclear tests in the Pacific. Explosives planted by French undercover operatives destroyed the ship.

The Warrior's protestors didn't expect to die but were cognisant of the dangers in confronting super powers. However, it seems they were prepared to risk their lives and comfort for the greater good; in this case, the end of Pacific nuclear testing. They were heroes.

Throughout history, people have died for the sake of others. Whether noble, or misguided, these are history's heroes. They are ordinary people who give all to save lives, bring about change and create what they believe in. They live around us; fighting fires, rescuing people, saving lives, caring for disabled family members. Author James Runcie's character, Sibella Leber in "The Perils of the Night" reflects, "You only know what you really believe in when the hour comes and you have to stand up for it." Sometimes, as an ordinary hero like Pereira, you have to die for it.

At Easter, Christians around the world will celebrate the heroism of Jesus who died for the most important cause of all; namely humanity's reconciliation with God. We pause on Good Friday to reflect on his death on that 1st century Roman cross. His painful death as the ultimate sacrifice for our sake. This is the bitter irony that this good person should stand in our place and make amends for our failure.

But as history attests the bleakness of Friday was transformed on Easter Sunday. The pain and distress was changed into certainty and hope when 3 days later Jesus rose from the dead.

It is so easy in the midst of the Easter holidays to miss the significance of Jesus resurrection. Here is the statement of God's purpose that individuals would experience the fullness of life through accepting the gift of transformative power accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Easter story prefigures with every other story of courage and self-sacrifice. It opens the opportunity for each of us to experience God's embrace of acceptance and confidence for the future. Easter gives hope that disaster can be turned into triumph, injustice will be overturned and evil will be defeated.

*Rev Keith Jobberns, National Ministries Director
Australian Baptist Ministries*
