

Easter



A gift for you from the United Reformed Church

So, what is Easter?

The shops have **Easter** eggs in right after **Christmas**, but there's a story to tell between the two.

Jesus was born (we celebrate that at **Christmas**). But we celebrate his birth because later:

he said some things worth hearing,
he was persecuted and executed by the state,
his friends said that he had risen to life again
AND millions of people around the world still follow him
and believe that he is present with us.

Easter is a time when Christians tell this longer story about Jesus' teaching, dying and rising to life.

We share the story every Sunday in some way, but at Easter we take a week or so (Holy Week) to do it, step by step.

The story of Jesus is full of drama; sorrow, joy, friendship, betrayal, politics, religion, pain, death... and then a final, extraordinary and unexpected, hope.

We tell the story and make it live with fasting and feasting, silence and music, crosses and Easter gardens; everything from Handel's Messiah to chocolate eggs, anything to help tell the story and tell the truth.

The story as presented in this booklet draws on the final chapters of Matthew's Gospel.



Palm Sunday

On the Sunday before Easter, you might spot some Christians in your neighbourhood walking with a donkey and waving hand-held crosses made out of dried palm leaves. They might be singing 'Hosanna'.

WHY?

They are acting out what Jesus did in Jerusalem. In something between a political demonstration and a carnival, Jesus rode into town with his followers. People waved and cheered because they loved what Jesus said the world should be like: the meek inheriting the earth, sick people healed, the rich sent away, the guilty forgiven, hypocrisy called out, children more important than kings... Hurray to all that!

**'LOOK, YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU,
HUMBLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY...'**

**'BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES IN THE
NAME OF THE LORD! HOSANNA!'**

Matthew 21: 5,9

*So, is this
anything to do
with Easter bunnies?
NO, just no...
concentrate on
the donkey.*



And then?

Jesus went to the Temple,
the great big religious building in the centre of the city.
He drove out the people who had been treating it like a market,
and turned over the tables of the money changers...

He was angry.

And he upset some people, upset them A LOT.

This was more than shutting down the souvenir shop.

This was saying something like,

'You've got God all wrong!

God doesn't want your money or your sacrifices.

God just wants you to pray here or anywhere... and it's free.

You don't have to pay anyone!'

People like making money out of most things,
so anyone who says that God can be found
without paying anything or using a system or an institution,
will get into trouble.

The best things in life... are free.

**'MY HOUSE
SHALL BE CALLED
A HOUSE OF
PRAYER.'**

Matthew 21: 13



And there's more...

Powerful people then (and now...) just didn't like what Jesus was saying; about things like taxes, death and sex, privilege and titles, economics and religion, the nation, the future...

Jesus said that the most important things about any of us are that we:

feed the hungry, give the thirsty a drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked or visit the prisoners and the sick.

Some people didn't like this at all. So, they plotted to kill him.

WHERE DO CHOCOLATE EGGS COME IN?

Well, most of us like chocolate and it's great for celebrating.

People started having eggs at Easter because they used to eat no eggs at all for the six weeks before Easter (it's healthy to fast and feeling hungry helps with some kinds of thinking and praying).

But since we discovered chocolate, we spend money and some people make money on chocolate eggs, and we forget (sometimes) that we are celebrating a person who never wanted anyone to make money out of religion.

So, we don't have to go mad on buying fancy chocolate.

You can get Fairtrade chocolate of course, which means that those who grow the cocoa beans get a good price.

The kind of justice Jesus talked about.

Thursday

Jesus knew what was coming – he told his closest friends ‘My time is up’. He didn’t run away though, but sat down to have a meal with them.

While they were eating, he took bread, blessed it and shared it. And he took a cup of wine, blessed it and shared it. He said, ‘This is my body’ and ‘this is my blood.’ Broken and poured out – that’s what he would be – and very soon.



WHY IS IT CALLED ‘EASTER’?

The word ‘Easter’ is peculiar to the English language and the English-speaking world. It probably goes back to the name of a pre-Christian goddess called Eostre, a goddess of Spring. A bit like Christmas, the Christian festival took over some of the culture of a pre-Christian festival and used it in a new way. It’s great symbolism to celebrate ‘new life in Jesus’ at a time of the year (for us) when the natural world is returning to life. (That’s where the rabbit comes in by the way – as a symbol of fertility!)

This week in the life of Jesus was at the same time as Passover, when the Jewish people remember and celebrate their escape from slavery into freedom. Celebrating new life just then makes perfect sense too.

Jesus was probably celebrating Passover when he had that last supper. The meal that Christians still share today also carries the hope of deliverance from slavery and for every slave.

Arrested

Christians remember how Jesus waited in a garden, knowing that he would soon be arrested, how he prayed and sweated, while his friends fell asleep.

One of them betrayed Jesus by pointing out who he was... with a kiss, but the others deserted him too and ran away.



WHY DOES THE DATE OF EASTER MOVE ABOUT?

Because it's based on a lunar (rather than a solar) calendar – and that's because the Jewish year that Jesus knew was. The events we remember at Easter were close to Passover, which was set by the lunar calendar. However, it's even more complicated than that, since some Christians use a different calendar from the one we use in the Western world. Generally, in the UK, Easter falls on the first Sunday following the first full moon after 21 March.

Tried, mocked and beaten

It wasn't justice.

The Roman governor (Pontius Pilate),

under popular pressure,

washed his hands of the case,

but agreed that Jesus should be flogged and executed.

The soldiers dressed him up in comedy clothes

and the crowd shouted for his death.

What was the charge?

Blasphemy.

Ironic – since Jesus was as close as you can get to God.

**'BUT THEY SHOUTED ALL THE MORE,
"LET HIM BE CRUCIFIED!"**

Matthew 27: 23



Crucified

Jesus was nailed to a cross and left to die.
A cruel death; painful, slow, humiliating.
The Romans used it to rule an Empire.
They crucified slaves, non-citizens, the most despised.
Jesus died with the humblest people of his day.

There are seven things Jesus is reported to have said from the cross,
but he probably couldn't actually say anything at all.

He died.
And someone kind took his body to be decently buried in a tomb.

Christians remember the crucifixion on **Good Friday**.
What could possibly be 'good' about such a day?
It's only good because it tells us what God is like.

*God is not distant, uncaring, above it all.
God does not pay back violence with violence.
God is not like the powerful rulers of the world.*

God is with us.
God is love.
God suffers instead of hitting back.
God dies where we die.
God takes our place.

This is what Christians see when they see a cross.
No longer a sign of execution and death.
Now a sign of hope.

*This is why the cross is the 'logo' of Christianity.
This is why we put the cross on buns on Good Friday.*

**'ONE A PENNY, TWO A PENNY,
HOT CROSS BUNS.'**

Raised to life

On the third day after Jesus' death, some of Jesus' friends went to visit the tomb and found it empty, and some of them met Jesus, risen from death. His message was 'I am with you'.

We can't explain it, though we keep trying. The best 'proof' is in the experience that Jesus is alive and that he is changing lives.

Christians testify to the ways that pain and death cannot defeat us now and that we are summoned to life in every moment.

Joy is the measure of our lives, even in sorrow, and fullness of life is what we claim for everyone.

Friends of Jesus are friends of life! Even when the world is cruel and life is hard, even when death comes and poverty is deep, we rise, we sing, we shout for joy!

At Easter Christians sometimes greet each other by saying:

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!
Alleluia! *Alleluia!*

'But still, like dust, I'll rise.'
Maya Angelou

**'I AM WITH YOU
ALWAYS, TO THE
END OF THE AGE.'**
Matthew 28: 20



Can I celebrate all this at home?

You certainly can, though it might be more interesting to share the journey and the celebration with others.

Here are some simple prayers to use at home.

THURSDAY

As we share our food together this night,
may thankfulness grow within us,
so that we may live to the full,
treasuring love, tasting life and giving of ourselves.
May all that is broken in us be healed,
all that is poured out be restored
and may God's Kingdom come. Amen.

FRIDAY

O Jesus who suffered and died,
give me eyes to see evil transformed to good,
ears to hear the true message of the cross,
and a heart to know your death-defying love. Amen.

SUNDAY

O God of life,
renew the world with love!
Let hate be banished,
and death be gone.
Let sadness be healed with joy
and all wrong be put right.
Let everything be made new
and all of creation come alive.
Amen.



And Easter Monday?

It's a public holiday in the UK and a gift!

The Easter message is that life is beautiful.

Jesus said, **'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'** John 10:10

So, let this be a day to practise the gift of life... and enjoy it.



What if I came to a United Reformed Church?

You will be warmly welcomed!

You might find:

On Palm Sunday – a reflection on faith and the life of the city – plus a free palm cross.

On Maundy Thursday – a service remembering the meal that Jesus shared with friends.

On Good Friday – a solemn service remembering Jesus' death.

On Easter Sunday – a great and joyful celebration.

You might find something creative happening:

a play or drama telling the story

a time when there's something to make

an outdoor scene in a garden depicting the story.

It makes most sense to go to it all, to become part of the whole story, but each part of the story is packed with significance. Every kind of emotion is involved and sometimes silence is what is needed. This week is the heart of the Christian faith. Come and see what it means, or could mean, for you.



What is the United Reformed Church?

The URC strives to be a hospitable and inclusive church where all, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation or social status are warmly welcome. People in the URC worship God, pray, read the Bible and try to make a difference in their community. They support movements and charities working for justice and peace. We are trying to follow Jesus. We work very closely with other churches, bringing congregations together where we can.

Is the United Reformed Church part of any other church?

The URC believes that we are all part of the one church and we are praying and working to make that oneness much more visible. But, for now, we have a separate identity too.

If you would like to go to church this Easter...

Visit www.urch.org.uk to find your local United Reformed Church.

As well as church services, there are loads of activities each and every week including Scouts, Guides, community groups, foodbanks, associations, youth clubs, drama groups, craft groups, Bible Study, Messy Church, Godly Play, cafés, meeting places, choirs, lunch clubs, sports clubs, hobby groups, Pilots, Friends on Faith Adventures and much more.

We have more churches than M&S has branches, so there's a URC near you!

www.urch.org.uk



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www.urc.org.uk

