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THE GOD OF EASTER

Bishop John Henderson

“Easter is something like lifting the roof off your life, and discovering something entirely new that you never knew was there. Not the religion, but the person, Jesus.”

I'm Richard Fox and this is Messages of Hope. It's the Easter weekend and many of us are enjoying time off work, fun with the family and a chance to switch off and forget about all the stress of life. It's a chance to recharge the batteries and head back to normal life refreshed. The real story behind Easter is also about being refreshed. Today John Henderson will talk about the death and life of Jesus and what it means for you.

Isn't it great to have a long weekend!

Space at last! Time enough to do something I really want to do – for my family, for a loved one, or just for me. Friday through to Tuesday is surely enough space to kick back and really be myself!

That's what we think. That's if we're not tied down with having to work on the public holiday, or trapped in a relationship or family life that really brings us little joy, and maybe even pain. Or if we are barely making ends meet, just lost a job, or facing a serious illness. Then it's not so great to have a long weekend – for some of us it means little at all.

This weekend is Easter. Most of us are not quite sure why we still have it, but we wouldn't want to take it out of the calendar. People would probably argue that if Christians want to go to church on Thursday night, Friday AND Sunday, let them! But they shouldn't spoil it for the rest – why sacrifice a super long weekend?

The truth is that the holidays are great, but most Australians aren't too keen on the religion that goes with them. We're happy to eat the icing but leave the cake behind.

Easter eggs, Easter bunnies, lots and lots of chocolate, and some hot cross buns. Why do we do it? Well, it's good fun anyway and good for the retail trade. Recently I heard two popular FM radio hosts debating why we have Easter. One of them was completely mystified while the other one tried to explain that Easter is about Jesus coming alive again.

Well, of course, most of us have heard of Jesus. He's a pretty popular guy when it comes to straight up and down, honest people in history who taught us a thing or two about how to be good people and how to help each other out.

The Easter weekend is really about his murder.

On Good Friday Jesus was killed by people who hated him because of the good things he did. These days we talk about political assassinations and stabbing people in the back, but in Jesus' case they really did it. They nailed him up and they hung him out to dry. All because he was too good for them, and he wouldn't let them corrupt him. When he died,

there wasn't a chocolate egg, or an Easter bunny in sight; just gloomy skies and earthquakes.

Of course, the people who did it knew that it was wrong, and so they tried to cover it up. It comes naturally. His friends buried him but his enemies put a guard around the grave to make sure that nothing went wrong. They wanted him to stay properly dead and out of the way, and no one was going to tell the story differently.

Well, it didn't work, like the nastiest of plans usually don't. All these years later the story is still told, which is why we have Easter. Jesus is always a little more than any of us expect. God wasn't prepared to let him stay dead. Like the classic battle of good versus evil, only different. A few days after they buried him, they found Jesus walking and talking, eating and drinking, and visiting his friends.

So that's where it all started. People told this story so much it spread like wildfire and it became a religion, a faith, a belief in God who comes alive, God who is involved, God who knows loneliness, pain, and rejection, God who doesn't give up against hopeless odds: the God of Easter.

I suppose that's really worth a long weekend, even going to church every now and then!
But is that all?

Like many things that become a tradition sometimes the true essence can be lost. Perhaps you feel like Easter is just a religious festival that doesn't mean much for your life today. Here's John to remind you that Jesus is still alive today.

Over the years people forgot the story, but still tried to practise the religion, robbing it of meaning and hope. They turned it into rules and regulations. People even killed other people when they didn't agree with something they believed in. Jesus wept.

But that's not how it started, and that's not how it has to be. We can be the ones to make a difference. We can be the ones to follow Jesus rather than the religion, and to live the faith, rather than the rules.

That's the question of Easter. If Jesus came alive, if that means he can't die again, then it also means he's still here. He's not far away. You mightn't see him, but that's because we've forgotten to look. Jesus is here in every lonely and rejected person. He is here in every refugee and orphaned child. He is here in every frightened human being who doesn't know which way to turn for help. He's here in you, and in me. He's here for the weak, the vulnerable, the trapped, and the despairing. He once said, "... just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me."

Have you experienced Jesus' love and the joy of Easter? We'd love to hear your story and you can share it with us on our Facebook page, Messages of Hope. Your story will encourage others.

What we usually miss at Easter is the way God has joined us, become one of us. God knows what it's like to be us. God might be up and out there in the universe, some sort of mysterious being we don't know much about. But God is also here; God sent Jesus who became one of us. He experienced life and death. So whatever your problem is, it's a problem God knows about and shares. You are not alone.

That's why Christians go into a church at Easter. A church is not a building; it is a gathering place where people come when they know they are not alone. What happens in that church isn't ordinary; it's divine. It's a communion between people and God in a way

we can barely understand. It crosses the boundaries of everything we normally know and assume. We begin to know something greater than all the stuff we usually spend our lives worrying about.

So Easter is something like lifting the roof off your life, and discovering something entirely new that you never knew was there. Not the religion, but the person, Jesus. In Jesus we see what God is like. And in God we become the people we were meant to be.

From Friday to Tuesday on the Easter weekend is certainly enough time to kick back, relax, and really be you. But did you dream it could be an entirely new you, reborn, rebooted, a complete restart with a clean slate? That's the package, the offer of Easter. You can explore it any time by reading a Bible, perhaps the Gospel of Mark, or trying out a church this Easter weekend and finding out what it's really all about.

For more information about Jesus and how he can refresh your life, go to messagesofhope.org.au, where you can order your free booklet, REASONS TO BELIEVE. You'll read more about who Jesus is for you and how he loves you. You can also order your free booklet by calling 1800 353 350.

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