

EASTER RESOURCES

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Part I - Introduction

A very popular item of this [helpforchristians](http://www.helpforchristians.co.uk) site was our **Christmas Resources**. So here's *Easter Resources*.

Christians who observe Holy Week often find that their preparation for Eastertide suffers because they run-out-of-time. This resource may help you.

Part II on **Slogans and Significance** alerts us to the *lack* of meaning our usual Easter slogans, e.g. *He is Risen!* may have to those who do not share our faith. It helps us to bridge the communication gap. It includes a selection of modern slogans.

In Part III there is an unusual feature - a selected **list of Scripture Easter-texts** – each with a short comment. These will provide you with a whole host of ideas

- from posters to home-group courses
- from Easter card captions to sermon topics
- from magazine items to daily readings

In Part IV I give **ideas for Easter Cards** complete with a design; the caption to be selected from the slogans of Part II and/or the Scripture texts of Part III.

Part V contains my **Biblical reflection on our Lord in the Upper Room**.

- It is not designed to help us step back into history, but for history to step forward to us – to bring the Easter experience to a group. If used for this purpose it should take time; it should be delivered section by section in a quiet prayerful atmosphere; silences between the sections may be a good idea; and prayer might be used individually or corporately as appropriate during them or at the end.
- It can be used, as I have often done, as a time for a fresh reception of the Holy Spirit. The gentleness of the text *Jesus breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy*

Spirit... is particularly suitable for those who imagine the Holy Spirit as a frightening and alien force, and who fear opening themselves to him.

- With a little adaption it may be used as a 'straight talk' on the passage.

Part VI is my **Easter Hymn** (repeated here from the site's Hymn section) based on the same Biblical passage as the last section – our Lord in the Upper Room – and is therefore particularly suitable to be used in conjunction with it.

Part II - The Easter Message: Slogans & Significance

To the Christian, for whom Jesus Christ is known, alive and Lord, the greeting '**He is Risen!**' and its traditional response '**He is risen indeed!**' pin-point the meaning of Easter.

[Based on Luke 24, verses 5 & 34]

With our Christian experience we automatically fill such phrases with Resurrection-meaning. But to those who lack Christian teaching and experience, the words themselves could mean merely that he has got out of bed! - whoever 'he' might be! Those unfamiliar with the meaning or experience of Christ's resurrection have *nothing* to give such words meaning. After all, the verb to **rise** is much more associated with getting up, flour, the sun, prices, or – if you're lucky - wages.

In any multi-faith society Christians need to ask again –

- what lies at the heart of our religious catch-phrases?
- which words and images point most clearly to their meaning?

I'll look more closely, below, at the phrase **He is Risen**, but meanwhile note that Easter presents two problems.

1) Easter is Christmas in Reverse!

The first problem is that Eastertide is like Christmas in reverse!

At Christmastide, the sequence of events that we are recalling brings God ever nearer, and more tangible. *In the beginning was the Word* becomes ever more focused until Simeon *took him* [the baby Jesus] *in his arms*. [John 1:1 and Luke 2:28.]

At Eastertide the sequence is *reversed*; God becomes less near and less tangible. While Eastertide begins with God at his closest and clearest – at Jerusalem and nailed to the Cross, the Tomb's fame derives from Christ's *absence* - **He is not here!** Mary is told not to touch Christ, and he actually *disappears* from the couple at Emmaus and, later, from his followers at his Ascension.

[John 20:17 *Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me...But go...'* Luke 24:31 *...and he vanished from their sight*. Luke 24:51 *...he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.*]

It may be the above contrast that accounts for the fact that when the Word *becomes* flesh, word-play on the theme is easy. **What a godsend! What on earth? Good God, what a comedown! Fancy seeing you here! Happy Birthday!** etc.

When, however, the Word *leaves* flesh, word-play is much more difficult, because the Risen-Ascended-Glorified sequence is increasingly beyond our everyday life rather than increasingly immersed into it. This makes the wording of Easter cards more difficult.

2) Good Friday-Easter Day

This is the second problem we have with Easter. The early Christians celebrated Good Friday and Easter Day on the same occasion because they belong together.

Many Christian traditions have inherited a calendar based rigidly on the number of days mentioned by the New Testament writers.

[e.g. Mark 9:31 ...*three days after being killed, he will rise again* and Acts 1:3 ...*appearing to them over the course of forty days.*]

This was all right when many went to Church, but nowadays it means that the major remembrance of the Cross occurs on the afternoon of a working day and separated from the Resurrection. It means that the important truth of the Ascension gets commemorated on a Thursday over five weeks later, and that the gift of the Holy Spirit comes when Easter is all-but forgotten!

It is better to treat the spans of days lightly, and to see that the Easter dawn heralds a whole New Era marked by the following:

- Death is conquered
- Christ is alive and reigns
- Christ's physical presence has been transformed
- In its place we have his *spiritual* presence and power
- This is the work of the Holy Spirit
- The same Spirit is offered by the Father to all Christ's followers.

The particular value of St. John's account of the Risen Lord in the Upper Room (see Part V) [John 20:19-23] is that the story retain close links both

- backward to the Cross - *he showed them his hands and his side* and
- forward to Pentecost. – *he breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit...'*

The Cross-Resurrection are two-sides-of-the-same-coin and should not be separated.
At the Cross, Death is the apparent victor, and Jesus Christ its victim.
At the Tomb, Jesus Christ is the final victor, and death is his real victim.

The Friday-Sunday of the first Easter are days as inseparably linked as the red and green of a traffic light. The green makes little sense unless previously things have been stopped; the red makes little sense unless previously things have been going! Both 'Stop' and 'Go' each require the existence of the other to make sense, they cannot exist alone.

The same is true of the Cross and of the Empty Tomb. Death and Life each require the other to make sense of them.

'He is Risen!'

Let's look at our use of the slogan/text *He is Risen!* remembering especially those unable to pack it with Resurrection-meaning.

1. Who is '**He**'?

A first step to help these words communicate better is to change them to -

- **Jesus is Risen!** or
- **Jesus Christ is Risen!**

Once we do this we come close to the hymn-line **Jesus Christ is Risen Today** – which adds a good 'now' factor.

2. What does *risen* mean?

Its literal meaning can be indicated perhaps by –

Jesus Christ is Risen from the Dead!

This is an improvement, but in New Testament times Christians doubtless said much the same about

- Lazarus
- Jairus' daughter
- the widow of Nain's son
- Tabitha/Dorcas and
- Eutychus.

[John 11:1-46, Mark 5:22-24, 35-43, Luke 7:11-17, Acts 9:36-41, Acts 20:9-12]

Being raised from the dead does not mean that like Jesus they now *live!* None of them *conquered* death; death got all of them in the end! (Compare the Scriptural texts in Part III below.)

The **facts** of Easter mean so much to us because we know the **meaning** of Easter.

In our slogans, our greetings, our 'wayside pulpits', it is worth trying to go deeper than just '**He is Risen**', and to convey more of the Easter message.

Perhaps it would help society if we were bolder, and let them know that Easter touches the greatest issue of life – *death*.

Used in conjunction with a design of the Cross and Tomb (See Part III), what about having **Jesus Christ has defeated Death** instead of **He is Risen!**?

The same theme could be captioned from one of the selection of Scripture texts in Part III, or by your own phrase e.g.

Death - No Longer The End!

Here's Life - the *death* of Death!

Jesus Lives – Life Is Dead Boring No Longer

Life Conquers Death

God Gives Life!

Death Has Been Put To Death!

Jesus Cancels Death for Us

Victory!

Jesus v. Death. Jesus 1, Death Nil

etc. and etc.

Part III - The Easter Texts: A Biblical Selection

Help yourself from the collection below – or phrases from it – to find phrases that you can use as captions, texts, and slogans.

Phrases from the texts, or the texts themselves, could

- litter your Eastertide emails
- could appear on Easter cards, or bookmarks, of your making
- could be used on your notelets to friends
- could be used on your church notice boards and posters
- could be used on your Eastertide handouts, broad-sheets, service details
- they could form the basis of a daily Bible verse
- selected verses could be used as a basis for a series of talks
- selected verses could be used as the basis for a series of Bible Studies.

The translation used is usually the Anglized Edition of the New Revised Standard Version, but where necessary I have turned **pronouns to names** when the person concerned is not specified in the quotation.

I have **numbered** Texts and kept them in **Bible order** for easy reference.

1. Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus...

Matthew 28:5 [Angel to the two Mary's]

If you are searching for God, he knows. Do not be afraid.

2. Go quickly and tell...He has been raised from the dead...

Matthew 28:7 [Angel to the two Mary's]

The Christian's calling and the Christian message.

3. They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell...

Matthew 28:8. [The two Mary's]

We must leave the tomb quickly! Our joy overcomes our fear.

4. Suddenly Jesus met them...and they worshipped him.

Matthew 28:9 [Jesus meets the Mary's]

The essence of worship – meeting Jesus, risen and alive.

5. When they saw Jesus they worshipped him; but some doubted

Matthew 28:17. [The disciples' first encounter with the Risen Christ.]

God does not brainwash us; belief through doubt may be the stronger for it.

6. Jesus said: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 28:19. [The Command of the Risen Christ.]

Easter reveals the necessity, distinctiveness and mission of the Christian faith.

7. Jesus said: Remember I am with you always until the end of the age.

Matthew 28:20. [The Promise of the Risen Christ.]

The Presence of Jesus is ours for all time – and for eternity.

8. The disciples went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Mark 16:20. [The Conclusion to Mark's Gospel.]

Signs are not God's comfort for gatherings of believers, but the way he confirms the Gospel when it is proclaimed.

9. Jesus asked them 'What things?' 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth...'

Luke 24:19. [The Risen Christ meets the disciples on the Road to Emmaus.]

Let the topic of your conversations be 'The things about Jesus'.

10. 'But we had hoped...'

Luke 24:21. [The Disciples returning home to Emmaus.]

This expresses an almost universal feeling. But Easter can transform despair and death.

11. Their eyes were opened and they recognised Jesus.

Luke 24:31 [Jesus makes himself known in the Breaking of the Bread]

Recognising Jesus is not automatic. We co-operate with God to have our eyes opened.

12. Jesus himself stood among them...he showed them his hands and his feet

Luke 24:36. [Christ appears to the Apostles. See also John 20:19-23]

Cross and Resurrection are inseparable. Who the risen person is, is shown by the scars of crucifixion.

13. I am sending upon you what the Father promised; so stay here...until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Luke 24:49 [Jesus addressed the Apostles prior to his Ascension.]

God's purpose is that Christ would hand-on his Resurrection-power to his followers.

14. Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

John 20:17. [The Risen Lord to Mary at the tomb]

Mary wants to hold-on to Christ, but her lasting comfort will be when he is always present by the Spirit.

15. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe

John 20:31. [The Risen Lord to Thomas and others.]

Thomas could see and touch on behalf of us later Christians, giving us no need to.

16. After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days.

Acts 1:3.

If people meet Christ's risen life in us, we enhance the effectiveness of these proofs, and if they do not meet him in us we undermine their power.

17. God raised Jesus up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Acts 2:24.

It is as impossible for those 'in Christ' to be held in the power of death too!

18. This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us our witnesses.

Acts 2:32.

Testimony is strong when it is not just an individual! This is the church's strength.

19. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 4:33, see also 3:15.

The outpourings of the Holy Spirit result in testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

20. Jesus God raised up the third day and allowed him to appear,...to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

Acts 10:40.

This picture is surprisingly true of Christians today, especially at the Breaking of the Bread.

21. Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life

Romans 6:4.

Resurrection life is God's gift to Jesus – and to us. It becomes visible in changed lives.

22. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely ... we will be saved by his life.

Romans 5:10.

Reconciled by the death of Christ; saved by the life of Christ. The two go together.

23. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he...will give life to your mortal bodies.

Romans 8:11

The Holy Spirit that gave life to Jesus also gives life to us and not merely in the future.

24. If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:9

Salvation requires verbal witness to, and inner trust in, Jesus as 'Lord' – as confirmed by his Resurrection.

25. Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures

1 Corinthians 15:4.

God gave indications of his plan to raise Christ in Scripture - for those with eyes to see it.

26. *If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.* [N.I.V. translation] 1 Corinthians 15:14.

There is no Gospel without the resurrection, which guarantees what the Cross achieved and turns it into victory.

27. *So all will be made alive in Christ*

1 Corinthians 15:22.

According to the New Testament it is only 'in Christ' that all will be made alive, 'in Adam' – all die.

28. *Always carrying on our body the death of the Lord Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.*

2 Corinthians 4:10.

A difficult text, but a mystery which many Christian sufferers will be able to identify with.

29. *I want to know Christ and the power of his Resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings...*

Philippians 3:10.

If we are to share in one, we will share in the other. Some suffering may be the flip-side of sharing in the resurrection.

30. *Christ will transform our lowly bodies, so that they will be like his glorious body.* [N.I.V. translation]

Philippians 3:21.

We cannot envisage how, but the Resurrection appearances hint at the possibility of identity retained but transformed.

31. *The Son...is the firstborn from the dead, so that he may come to have first place in everything.*

Colossians 1:18.

'First place in everything' – what a fine motto for those who share Christ's risen life!

32. *...Buried with Christ in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead.*

Colossians 2:12.

Being raised with Christ should be an ordinary (yet extraordinary!) part of Christian living!

33. *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.*

1 Thessalonians 4:14.

The Resurrection is not just past glory, but our future glory 'through Jesus'.

34. (Hebrews 13:20 is listed last.)

35. God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

I Peter 1:3.

A living hope – the answer to despair of the church, and through the church the answer to the despair of the world.

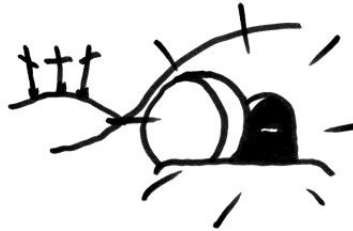
34. Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever, Amen.

Hebrews 13:20.

I have listed this last since it brings this selection to a fitting conclusion, and is my prayer for you.

Part IV - Easter Cards and Images: Make your own

The design I have used for years – modified by different captions – is the one below. As artists have needed to do for centuries, it keeps Cross and Resurrection close together.



Because we read left to right it is natural that the depiction of the Cross is on the left and Empty Tomb on the right.

I have not given the thieves 'tau' crosses (with no upward extension for a placard). It would have been 'correct' but I feel it might have been an unnecessary visual distraction.

The little white patch just visible inside the sepulchre depicts the folded linen – enabling the disciples to see that Jesus was not there.

Such a design needs a caption. Select a phrase from the Scripture texts in Part III, or one of the modern slogans at the end of Part II.

We must not allow the non-religious trends in society to dampen our Gospel proclamation. The more non-Christian the assumptions and atmosphere, the more specifically Christian we need to be.

Let's **use Easter** (before secular forces do with it what they did to Whitsunday!)

Why give your non-Christian friends anaemic cards of bunnies, chicks, eggs, primroses, daffodils and purple-pink-and-yellow views of country churches.

[See also the article **Our Triviality - A Weapon For Evil** on this website.]
Christianity is not nature-religion celebrating the season of spring!

We're celebrating that the Christ who was crucified has been raised victorious over death!

Part V - The Easter Experience: Christ in the Upper Room

JOHN 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.'

Countless people today have experienced this for themselves. I will lead your thoughts and prayers so that it can be true for us here, now.

So let's relax and allow the Scriptures not simply to speak the truth to our ears, but to bring that Truth in our hearts and lives by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Let's identify with what happened in the Upper Room, stage by stage.

1.

The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.

We first identify with the disciples in their place of fear. They had locked themselves in. Their human resources had run dry. Their hopes had been shattered. They had nothing to give any more. They were afraid.

We each know our own areas of emptiness. The areas of life in which we feel so helpless and hopeless. We try to conceal them from others – specially other Christians! – in fact we may feel unable to let anyone near them – we bolt our doors against intruders.

These areas of inadequacy do things to us: they can tie knots in our stomach; keep us awake; make us overactive; make us retreat; or hook us on pills. These cause us to shut people out, just as the disciples locked all their doors.

...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews,

(Pause)

2.

God has a generous cluster of things to solve the problem.

Jesus came and stood among them.

The impossible happens. Through bolted doors, in spite of our fears, Jesus is able to come and stand right in the midst. At the place we feel most empty, he brings the fullness of his presence. To our darkest and coldest areas his presence comes as light and warmth.

To *our* emptiness, God's Easter gift to us is the **Presence of Jesus**. This is the start of change. The beginning of hope.

(Pause)

3.

Jesus says – 'Peace be with you.'

This is a Jewish greeting sure enough, but St. John did not mean us to regard as it a casual 'Hi Chaps!'

'Peace' to the Jews was much more than the absence of war. Only in about a fifth of the 250 times it occurs in the Old Testament has it that meaning. It is all about fullness, well-being, completeness at all levels of life, physical, mental, spiritual, individual, social and national.

[Summarised from Dr. John Wilkinson's *Health & Healing in the New Testament*, Hansel Press, 1980, p.5.]

Fullness, well-being, completeness was just what the disciples lacked most, hidden as they were, afraid behind locked doors! Into such lives, then as now, God offers his second great gift – the **Peace of Jesus**. You don't have to understand it, but accept it. That *'peace of God which passes all understanding that will keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God.*

All God's resources are offered to us: to turn fragmentation into fullness; emptiness into plenty. The images of the 23rd. Psalm has well-known images of God's peace: rich pasture, still waters, comfortable rest. God offers refreshment, provision, restoration, guidance, protection, healing and fellowship. This is the **Peace of Jesus**.

'Peace be with you'!

(Pause)

4.

After he said this Jesus showed them his hands and his side.

What an odd thing and unpleasant thing to do! But Jesus had a reason, which is best explained by the experience of St. Martin.

He once had appear before him a figure who claimed to be the Risen Christ. Knowing well the pitfalls in the spiritual life, he demanded, *'If you are the Risen Christ, show me the marks of the nails!'*

His suspicions were well-founded. There was a foul stench and the demonic apparition vanished!

(The problem of *deception* is not fanciful, see e.g. Mark 13:22, II Corinthians 11:13, Galatians 6:7, Ephesians 5:6, II Thessalonians 2:3, 9, II Peter 2:1, I John 4:1, Revelation 20:3,8,10.) We are warned *do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from god.*

[I John 4:1]

The surest proof of Jesus's identity are the signs of the Cross. This is a spiritual truth of far-reaching consequences, since it is the

- **Cross**

that is the hallmark of everything that is truly of Christ and truly Christian – so much so that St. Paul tells us to glory in nothing else! [Galatians 6:14] (The first thing that any alternative religion will do is to get rid of the Cross.)

The saving **Passion of Jesus** is God's third great gift to those assembled. It means – among a host of other things – that whatever the depth of our pain, however tragic our loneliness, Christ himself has been there. We are perhaps inclined to avoid the Passion, yet we must not so fillet the faith, for as we read in I Peter :

Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

[I Peter 2:24, the final words quoting Isaiah 53:5]

(Pause)

5.

It is only when we have rightly begun to understand the significance of the Cross, that we can see why the disciples then behaved as they did. For next we read –

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

At a natural level what an incredible response! The signs of physical torture make the disciples glad! Why? Because it is the scars of the **Passion** above everything else that

identify the person in their midst as the *Lord*. This awareness ignites in them the great **Gift of Praise**.

Praise has to be distinguished from praise-noise; the two are not one and the same. It is a deep inner response to God. 'Praise' music may enable it to soar, or praise-music can become a cultural substitute for it. Once when travelling to a speaking engagement I saw a road sign *Beware Surface Noise!* It gave me my theme! Praise rooted in the Cross, as here, can never be superficial.

True praise of God is so healing and good for us because it re-establishes everything in its right place. If we think rightly about God, we will praise him. When we praise him, he is given *first place in everything* (see text number 31 in Part III).

[See also the INFOCUS item **Praise - Focusing on the Positive** on this website.]

So far we have seen God's successive gifts to the disciples in their fear and emptiness. the gift of the **Presence of Jesus**

- the gift of the **Peace of Jesus**
- the gift of the **Passion of Jesus**
- the gift of the **Praise of Jesus**.

(Pause)

6.

Jesus appears to repeat himself, but when we read what else he said, it becomes clear why he did so. *Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you'.*

But this time he adds –

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

Everything had been going so well until now. Safely locked up with Jesus in their midst, what could be nicer? Just like a Christian conference!

This is the context in which Christ says to them a second time, and gives them a second time – his **Peace**.

We might regard the Lord's first giving of Peace for when they are *indoors and together*, and this second one, his **peace** for when they are *outside and scattered*.

In any case it is reassuring to know that the disciples needed to be told something *twice*, since most Christian teaching is reminding us what we know already!

If they felt empty and insecure when together, how much more did they need the reassurance of God's peace and provision when they came to leave. This is what Jesus had in mind.

For now, Jesus will demand that they unbolt their doors and **go out!**

They were indoors for fear of the Jews, and what would greet them outside, but the thing they feared *most* – Jews! We can imagine their fears flooding back, their doubts, their uncertainties, their feelings of inadequacy. Jesus demands a U-turn of them.

They needed again to hear Jesus's gift of Peace being offered to them

(Pause)

7.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you !

Their doors were still locked, but Jesus wants them on the other side of them! Perhaps it was a miracle for the Lord to come *in* through the doors but it would certainly take an even greater miracle for the disciples to go *out* through them!

[The Gospel account says simply *the doors of the house...were locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them.* Scripture does not require us to see a miracle here; *the* miracle is the Resurrection and that Jesus is present wherever Christians gather in his name.]

Perhaps 'being locked behind doors' for fear is an all-too accurate description of many churches and many Christians today. If so, it is nothing new. Our problem is as old as the first Easter evening! And it is from that same story that we learn of God's solution – then and now!

On the day I write this some papers are saying that British troops are being sent off to the Middle East ill-equipped – without boots, for instance!

God, in contrast, never sends us without equipping us. '***As the Father has sent me, so I send you.***' and then Jesus gives them the power to obey him.

(Pause)

8.

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

The Holy Spirit was *not given* to improve the quality of their Christian fellowship and worship in the Upper Room! Neither was the Holy Spirit given so that they could retreat into a happier and holier religious life together! The Spirit was *not given* for them to add a touch of spiritual authenticity to their on-going workshop on the work of the Holy Spirit!

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit *after* he has commissioned them, to enable them to *move!* - to empower them to obey him; to enable them to leave; to make it possible for them to get up and go out as ordered!

Had Jesus imparted the Spirit *before* his commissioning of them they might have fallen into the trap of staying in a holy huddle to enjoy his gifts and graces among themselves – as some other Christians would do two millennia later!

The Lord commissions them first, then when they are most terrifyingly aware of their powerlessness, and their inability to obey, **Jesus offers them nothing less than the power of God himself!** The Holy Spirit is given as power for mission – the word 'mission' means nothing other than being **sent**.

Christ's commission demands a complete U-turn: from weakness to strength; from retreat to advance; from defeat into victory, and – I have to add – from a place of shelter to a place of exposure; from a place of deathly security to a place of living risk.

Folk can be wrongly afraid of the Holy Spirit, a fear that is not eased by his earlier title 'Holy Ghost!' Folk are rightly wary of anything that whispers of the spooky or that might override them. Good for them! Point them to *this* passage. When Jesus gives the Holy Spirit he uses what is perhaps the most gentle of all human actions – ***He breathed on them.***

If we are resolved to obey Jesus, but know we lack the ability to do so; if we acknowledge his command to go and witness, but know our fear and weakness of such things; then ask Jesus to breathe afresh his Holy Spirit upon you.

(Pause)

9.

Jesus's final words to them are:

'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

It seems oddly technical and out of place, but what it means is that Jesus is not content simply to equip us with his *power*. He knows that if his Body, the Church, is to continue world-wide what he began in Palestine, that it needs not only his spiritual power – but his spiritual *authority*.

So much of what the Church is *not doing* is because it lacks spiritual power and spiritual authority. So much individual witness to the faith is weak for the same reason.

If we leave the Lord's presence ill-equipped it can only be because we have not taken what he offers us.

Let us hear again his word of **peace**.

Let us hear again his command to **go**.

Let us not try to go in our own power,
but let us take with us what he offers for the task

- the **power**
- and **authority**

of his **Holy Spirit breathed afresh upon us**.

Part VI - An Easter Hymn: The Risen Christ

a) Comment

Its verses are based very precisely on the story of **Christ's Resurrection appearance in the Upper Room**. (John 20:19-23), for which I provided notes in the last section (Part V).

I rarely write new words for new music, but generally prefer to 'marry' new words to Christian tunes which are already hallowed by use and convey, even unconsciously, the message of words already associated with them.

In this case I deliberately wrote this hymn to Stainer's '**Cross of Jesus**' because the disciples recognise Jesus not by his risen glory, but by the indications of his **Passion**. I felt that the singing of that tune, from Stainer's *Crucifixion*, would reinforce the Cross-Resurrection link which we now celebrate on two separate days, but which earlier Christians always celebrated together, as I have mentioned earlier. We need the Cross if we are to begin to understand Easter; we need Easter if we are to begin to understand the Cross. We cannot allow them to be divorced.

Because the event was one of fear *transformed*, the hymn has a strong **healing** content. It could well be used in various healing contexts outside of Eastertide—not least because every gathering of Christians enjoys the promise of the Risen Christ in its midst, and every Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection.

b) HYMN: RISEN CHRIST

Suggested tune, 'Cross of Jesus' (J.Stainer), 8.7.8.7.

- 1. Risen Jesus, we are gathered
here to worship in your Name;
come among us as you promised,
stand amid our fear and shame.**
- 2. Risen Jesus, heal our sorrows,
from our fears and doubts release;
to our restlessness and turmoil,
speak your healing word of peace.**
- 3. Risen Lord, God's love displaying
in your body crucified;
in our deepest pains and darkness,
show again your hands and side.**
- 4. Risen Lord, we see with gladness
signs of our salvation sealed!
Praise you for your Cross and passion,
and the wounds by which we're healed!**
- 5. Risen Christ, sent by your Father,
Spirit-filled to do his will;
you send forth your church in mission,
and command your servants still.**
- 6. Risen Christ, breathe freshly on us
in this resurrection hour,
**give your Spirit to equip us
with authority and power.**
- 7. Glory be to God the Father,
raising up his crucified.
By his mighty Holy Spirit,
Jesus reigns – now glorified!**

** I have slightly altered this line to emphasise the close relationship of the Spirit and Jesus.
The published versions and the one under HYMNS on this website have –
Holy Spirit, now equip us...