

# Keeping Hope Alive

---

**Sermons and Speeches  
of Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr.**

REVEREND JESSE L. JACKSON SR.

*Edited by*  
Grace Ji-Sun Kim



ORBIS BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York

# 1

## The Message of Easter

---

Rainbow PUSH Headquarters  
Chicago, Illinois  
April 19, 2003

*He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, and see the place where the Lord lay. (Matthew 28:6)*

Easter: Is it a ritual or real—resurrection or recital?

The dictionary definition of resurrection is to regenerate, resuscitate, revivify, or revive. Resurrection is to bring from death to life. This is precisely the story of the One who walked this earth just over two thousand years ago—who saved sinners and hung out with the homeless, who fought for the fatherless and preached power for the poor. For this, he was crucified, he died, and he was buried. The good news is that the ground couldn't hold him. On the third day, he rose from the dead. It was a real resurrection and not a ritual recital.

Today, on this Saturday morning, at our weekly Rainbow PUSH Coalition<sup>1</sup> meeting, we all look forward to resurrection Sunday. Easter Sunday, in the Christian tradition, is when the power of justice triumphed over the evil of injustice, when the deep darkness of Calvary was shattered with the bright beams of the resurrection hope. Jesus had to suffer and struggle to get to new life. His was serious business, having implications for the life and death of the poor, the workers, the widows, and the sick of his time then and of our time today.

We know that during tomorrow's Sunday services throughout the country there will be celebrations and rituals of the drama of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Churchgoers will be sporting their Sunday best—women wearing some of the most striking hats and men boasting some of their finest suits. In fact, for folks who never attend a church or who participate in a worship service very irregularly, they will make it into a church sanctuary at least two times a year, Easter and Christmas. Tomorrow, Sunday stories will be told and testimony will be given about how you were there when they crucified my Lord. Songs will be sung, sermons will be preached, and tears will be shed, for he is risen for you.

But there is fact and there is fiction. When the real Jesus was crucified, Peter denied him, Judas betrayed him, and the disciples hid from him. Is our Easter process in the contemporary context a ritual or is it real? Do we really know about the real pain, abandonment, and suffering endured by Jesus? As the Roman state and the official religious leaders crucified him and committed a crime against the Savior, there were no demonstrations and no political protests. The folks who were the beneficiaries of his miracles were absent. The blind man was not there. Jesus had cured him. The prostitute was not there. Jesus had forgiven her. The five thousand he fed were not visible. Jesus had relieved their hunger. The lame were not there. Jesus had made them to walk. The guests at the wedding—where he turned water into wine—were not there. It is obvious that the people admired him but did not follow him. They accepted the rewards, but they did not engage in the struggle. They celebrated when times were pretty and miracles were present. They left the Savior when pressure and persecution covered the land.

And what about us today? Are we ritual or are we real? Tomorrow it will be easy to wear pretty clothes to the party or to church, but these things will not be required to go to Calvary. To get to resurrection Sunday you have to go through Calvary. Calvary is a real price, not a ritual party. Calvary calls us to put on some work boots when we march to free the wrongfully convicted, when we say no

to the bombing of innocent people, when we fight the cutbacks in health care, education, jobs, and environmental protection.

The Easter story is easy reading because the outcome is known. It is easy reading—someone dying for you and rising from the grave like superman. Too many Christian believers seem to treat it like a Hollywood production—the props and blood are not real; the good guy easily gets the woman in the end. But in reality, to save the world from war, pestilence, and famine, Jesus bore the cross alone. If we are to take Jesus's salvation and justice work seriously, then beyond Calvary and beyond the grave is the challenge of the war in Iraq, of people starving in Mississippi, of racism in the church, and of the marketing of religion in a way that does not present the reality of the challenges of suffering, sacrifice, or redemption. The cost of discipleship is, indeed, costly.

There is this story full of drama and danger. In fact, the ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah, seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, projected that the Savior would be born to carry out the prophecy of good news for all of humankind. The incarnation of Jesus in the world was filled with drama and danger. Wrought with life-and-death risk, Jesus was born, despite the fact that Herod had put forth a decree throughout the land demanding the violent murder of all firstborn children to prevent the realization of the prophecy. Jesus grew older, and the brilliance of his salvation and justice-making work on earth shone forth. As he performed successful miracles, he faced and overcame the constant spying, taunting, and entrapment of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Betrayed by one of his disciples, captured and crucified on an old rugged cross, Jesus was the victim of the most historic lynching on a tree. Throughout his ministry he remained faithful despite despicable deeds and a disgusting death carried out by those who conspired against him. Jesus knew he must be a witness to and a servant of God's will, all the while he endured much pain.

Jesus went through three dramatic moods in the final hours. We see him first enduring torment when he retreats to the Garden

of Gethsemane, where his mind became troubled and his soul became sorrowful. Second, he knew the pernicious path of Calvary. He understood the physical, bloody pain of nails in his body, and the psychological pain of being put on public display. But he also realized the price of not bearing the cross; all of humanity's and creation's salvation and liberation were at stake. Pain bearing the cross; pain avoiding the cross. In a moment of anguish and torment, he cried out to his Father to "let this cup pass from me." He asked his daddy to remove this awesome weight of suffering. And third, even at that moment of praying to God, and even when Jesus's human side became weakened and weary, he still followed his faith to the end and gasped out, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."<sup>2</sup>

Before Jesus got to hallelujah resurrection, before he got to glorious Easter Sunday, he understood the rocky road to death. And then he could fulfill the prophecy to save the ungrateful. And then he, himself, would be saved by the Father, raised into heaven to sit at his right hand. To ultimately be in good standing with the father, like Jesus, you have to go through some drama and danger.

We all want the resurrection, we all want the new life, and we all want the new hope. But remember what Frederick Douglass said:

The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. . . . If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning, they want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. . . . Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.<sup>3</sup>

Only the righteous struggle leads to a righteous life. To get to new life, in Matthew 25, verses 36–46, Jesus gives us the criteria. And those criteria for new hope in good standing with the Father are: did we clothe the naked, did we visit the prisoner, did we tend

to the sick, did we welcome the stranger, did we give water to the thirsty, and did we provide shelter to the homeless? Jesus called these folk the least of these. Like him, they were victims of Roman occupation, endured extreme poverty, and were despised by the official temple leadership.

Crucifixion precedes the resurrection. All of this is real, not ritual or play acting. But folks spending all of their money on superficial symbols and clothes to be seen in an Easter festivity are play acting. All of those who sponsor Christmas and Easter parades don't believe in either miracle. They don't have faith in the birth of the Savior, which is Christmas.

Real faith is faith in the real man Jesus who worked this earth. Real faith is faith in the tumultuous circumstances of his birth. Herod had proclaimed a genocidal order to kill all children born male. If found, baby Jesus would have been murdered. His parents, Mary and Joseph, had to hide and disguise themselves, and suffer danger as they secretly escaped to Egypt as refugees—not as forced immigrants looking for a better life for a child, but as political refugees trying to save the life of a child. This is the true story of the birth of the Savior; this is Christmas faith.

The superficial believers don't have faith in the resurrection, which is Easter. Graveyards cannot contain a bloodied body removed from a rugged cross. That is why Easter is a costly redemption. We are redeemed after a sacrificial struggle with principalities and powers. Putting Nelson Mandela in a tomb empowered the struggle for a new South Africa. Killing Martin Luther King Jr. at thirty-nine empowered several generations of freedom fighters. Killing Emmett Till<sup>4</sup> at fourteen empowered the Montgomery bus boycott. Righteous marchers are often resurrected martyrs. This is Easter faith.

Too many of us posture and prance on Easter and Christmas, play-acting faith and reducing it to a ritual, while business institutions are just making money with our willing participation. They are shucking and jiving with our empty celebrations while they laugh all the way to the bank.

Now Palm Sunday was a real drama, Jesus challenging the government. Here was this powerful Roman government, this imperial power, threatened by a man without money, without weapons, who obeyed his father's will perfectly and loved his fellow man unconditionally. Such perfect love casts out fear. And a fearless person is not afraid of loss of jobs or stature or money or death. He becomes dangerous because he is possessed by a countercultural strength.

We worship the cross as a symbol and wear it to show our kinship with Jesus. But Rome had a warehouse full of crosses that they hung people on. It is not the cross but the man on the cross, the causes that he espoused and the people for whom he sacrificed.

The cross was Rome's electric chair. It was no symbol of worship. If Jesus had been lynched in an electric chair, folks would be walking around here today with big old electric chairs for necklaces. You'd see huge electric chairs hanging from walls of the churches. They'd be saying, "It was in the electric chair where I first saw the Lord." It's not form and fashion of ritual. It's the nitty-gritty risk of reality.

It is the man who voluntarily died so we might live, and so fear and death might lose their power. In the end, Jesus was not partying with the rich young ruler or fund-raising with the wealthy in the mansion. His focus was on serving the poor and defending the needy. He was charged with treason, spent a night in jail, and was nailed to a cross like a criminal with wounds in his hands, blood running down his body, and two thieves on crosses beside him. No, he was not with the rich; not partying but enduring pain; the price we pay for justice. The issue remains not the cross, but who was on the cross, and what action got him placed there, and why the priests, the temple leaders, and the government turned on him. The government thought to kill him because the lame, the blind, the weary, and the weak accepted him as the leader of the down-trodden. He moved the people to hope, and the crowd followed him. The powerful sought to crush the spirits of the weak and the

vulnerable by killing Jesus physically. The government needs to control the minds of the masses. But Jesus offered them a new way, a way without government taxes, usury, fear, and manipulation. And the religious leaders hated him. He was not a favorite among other preachers. He would not have been their annual revivalist. He opposed the preachers who turned the temple into a treasury for a den of thieves.

Today, Jesus would be killed and rejected because he would choose the mothers of all babies rather than the “mother of all bombs” that were dropped on Iraq.<sup>5</sup> The real question remains today: what would Jesus be doing in light of today’s challenges—in the face of the destruction of Babylon by bombs, the military budget versus the education budget, the treatment of women in the marketplace, and racism?

As a risen savior with all power, we who follow him have power to do all things through Christ, for he strengthens us. Tomorrow on Sunday, will we use our strength to dye Easter eggs, wear an Easter bonnet, model new clothes, and get deeper in debt, or will we use our power to set the captives free who have been wrongfully convicted? How many jails will we visit on Easter Sunday, those young and wrongfully convicted men and women? We do know that Jesus was on death row, accused of treason, jailed all night, and finally a victim of capital punishment. Will we use our power to emancipate the enslaved and end racial oppression? Do we use our power to end economic exploitation and stop the war machine? The US military buildup is \$400 billion a year and rising. Isaiah admonished us to study war no more and go another way.<sup>6</sup> Take weapons of mass destruction and turn them into creating expanding life options for people.

Jesus promised if you follow him and risk for justice, engage in selfless sacrifice, survive rumors, survive false arrest, survive wrongful conviction, survive death row, survive abandonment by disciples and relatives, and be willing to suffer for the ungrateful, eternal life—resurrection would be the grand prize.



Jesus's way is not convenient; it is uncommon sense, it is countercultural, and it is swimming upstream. The ritual is easier than the reality because it is risk free.

I was in Memphis last Friday, April 4th, as I had been in Memphis April 4, 1968, the day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. In 1968, Dr. King led us as we marched to support garbage workers who could not get collective bargaining and against the US war in Vietnam that was tearing the nation apart—that was real.

Now this April 4, 2003, the garbage workers fighting to be recognized were on one side of town. Marchers from LeMoyne-Owens College staged a symbolic march to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of Dr. King's assassination on the other side of town.<sup>7</sup> They were commemorating Dr. King's death in Memphis. Dr. King came to Memphis in 1968 to organize garbage workers and protest the US bombing of Vietnam. But this particular 2003 march, which was a ritual, had little connection to the workers fighting for justice and little connection to the fight against right-to-work laws, and little connection to the opposition against the premise of the bombing of Iraq in March 2003.

The April 1968 march was one of drama and danger. Dr. King assembled his staff at his Atlanta office. It was an unplanned gathering. In fact, I was called Friday, the night before, to catch a plane early Saturday morning. There were about ten of us in his office. And he began to muse in a deep, dark depression:

Where are we in our struggle? We've won public accommodations. We've won the right to vote. And we're caught up in this ungodly war and unbounded poverty. I've had a migraine headache for the last three days. Maybe I should just quit. Maybe I've done as much as I can in thirteen years. Some of my best friends have turned on me. The press turned on me. Democratic Party allies, they've turned. Maybe I should just go to Morehouse and become president of the college or maybe just write books."

But it seemed that as he talked more and more, he preached his way through and then said: “Let’s move forward.”

At that time in 1968, I remember watching Dr. King go through these three painful dramatic moods in 1968. After several days of migraine headaches, he said:

1. I thought about turning back. Maybe I’ve done as much as I can do. Our movement is in disunity now; some differences over philosophy; some differences over strategy.
2. I even considered fasting to the point of death.
3. We should turn a minus into a plus and move on, on to Memphis, move on to Washington, DC, for the Poor People’s Campaign.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. King talked himself out of death and said let’s move on to Memphis and the nation’s capital.

This reminded me greatly of the similar three moods that Jesus went through at the point of his death. Dr. King spoke to us staff folk on Saturday, March 30. That Thursday, April 4th, he was assassinated. Jesus too was beginning to face the gallows. He too mused in a deep, dark depression: “My disciples, they denied me. They’re hiding and denying they know me. I pray alone and they sleep. The government is against me. The religious leaders are attacking me. I’m being accused of mixing religion with politics. I’ve been accused of treason.” But somehow, the more he mused, the more he talked and prayed his way out of it. At the end, he said: “God, not my will but your will be done. Let’s move forward.”

I later reflected that Dr. King’s three moods were like those of Jesus before his death:

1. Let this cup pass from me.
2. He agonized and prayed as the disciples slept.
3. Not my will but thy will be done.

The temptation is to look at the lives of Jesus the Christ, Dr. King, and Nelson Mandela and reduce them to ritual. If you go

to the tomb in Jerusalem (where Jesus was buried) or you go to the balcony in Memphis (where King was killed) or you go to the prison of Robben Island in South Africa (where Mandela was incarcerated for twenty-seven years), they are not there, the stones have been rolled away.

In the case of Dr. King, a mortal man without guns or wealth, his spirit has been resurrected with such compelling power until no president, no senator, no Supreme Court justice, no billionaire is in the same zone.

In the case of Nelson Mandela, after twenty-seven years in the tomb, he emerged one Sunday morning, freeing his own jailer, taking over the government, and becoming a global moral authority whose name is synonymous with emancipation. That is a lot of stature for an ex-convict. In the case of Jesus, he suffered indignities from the government, a betrayal of his disciples, but trusted God absolutely. Such a trust, such a relationship, was too powerful for the grave to contain; such a power is available to us today.

We too can heal sin-sick nations.

We too can make the lame to walk.

We too can cure diseases, but you got to leave the grave.

Beyond the grave is the resurrection. Beyond the grave are the challenges being fought against poverty, predators, prisons, and for peace. And these are difficult challenges. They invite the scorn of government and frighten friends who will run and hide. But if you hold on to Jesus's hand and to Jesus's formula, you will realize resurrection.