

# Good Grief - Easter Service

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 09 April 2023

Preacher: John Lowrie

[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you very much, folks, for leading us in worship to Paul and the team. That was great. Very much appreciate that. Turn with me, please, to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. 1 Thessalonians chapter 4. It's nice to be with you, especially Easter. Easter's such an exciting time, isn't it?

I mean, I came across in the children's talk just how much the death and the resurrection of the Lord means to us. So excited to become your interim pastor for a few months. Beginning in May, I've been preaching. I'm preaching this week. I'm preaching next week. And then for the next two weeks, I think, the next two Sundays, certainly Lucille and I will be away just trying to recharge. I've been doing up my flat since January. I've got cabin fever. I just need to get out, get some fresh air. So we're looking forward to that. But we'll be here this week and certainly next week. So excited. Very much know the laws leading and guiding that you've led us. He's led us this far to be your interim pastor. Looking forward to getting to know you better as well. It feels strange. I've never been an interim pastor before. You're kind of a pastor, but you're not the pastor.

So how I'm going to, whatever course I'm going to steer through that will be strange for me, but we'll give that a bash and we'll see how we got on. That'll be good. Let's come before God in prayer first before we read His Word. Our loving Heavenly Father, we come to You on this special day in our church calendar where we recall the resurrection of Your Son. And Lord, we thank You that that was not just an event that happened then. That has implications for the whole of history, even past, since the beginning of the world and into the future. It has implications for each and every one of us. That the grave is not the end. So, Father, we do just pray that something of the reality of that might be impressed upon us. And that the glorious gospel would be impressed upon us as well. The hope that You have given to us through our sins being forgiven. So, Father, just draw close to us. Speak to us now, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 4, and we're reading just a few verses from verse 13. This is entitled, in my version, believers who have died. The church here is anxious about, they've heard the good news, they've believed. People have believed they have died, and Christ still hasn't returned, so they're wondering what's happened to them. Are they going to, are they lost? Would it not have been better for them to be alive? When is Jesus coming back? And so forth. So, it's really the question that Paul is answering here, or the comfort and encouragement he wants to bring to them, is to impress upon them that believers who die in the Lord are not lost. It's as simple as that.

[ 2 : 44 ] It's a simple message. So, let's read from verse 13. Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

And hopefully, we'll be encouraged as we think about these words for a few moments or so. I was out walking with Lucille, and we walk every day. Every day, we try and get a couple of miles in. We have our dinner. We go for a walk along the Fisher Row Harbour or whatever. And I was coming to Lucille, commenting to Lucille yesterday, it's so quiet in Scotland. After London, after North London, everything's so quiet. Almost feels as if Scotland's fallen asleep. After London, it's just so nice.

I like peace and quiet. And there's something that I do that not many people do. I love cemeteries and crematoriums. If you ever want some peace and quiet, just go to a cemetery. And if you go to one that's well kept, everybody's out hustling and bustling. You're in the park, and the kids are going bonkers, and you can't hear yourself think. In a cemetery, usually they're cutting the grass. There's maybe one person putting flowers in a grave. But you are there. And it's usually well kept. It's usually nice, whether it's a crematorium or a cemetery. They are such great places, and yet everybody avoids them. Maybe once a year, they might go and put flowers down. I really commend them to you, especially in a city. We were living in London. London has many great cemeteries. I don't know if you ever go to London and visit the cemeteries. I commend that to you. I don't think you do, but I really, honestly, when you've done St. Paul's, and you've done Westminster, and Big Ben, and the tourists, and kiss me quick hats or whatever, head off to you, pick some cemeteries. [ 5 : 36 ] St. Pancras Cemetery near King's Cross in St. Pancras. There's a cemetery there. Do you, do anybody know that cemetery? Do anybody know there's somebody well-known buried there?

Thomas Hardy is buried there. Thomas Hardy is the guy who wrote *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and far from the madding crowd. Before he was a novelist, he was a draftsman. That's what he used to do, and as a young man, he was charged, because the train lines were coming into St. Pancras. He had to clear the graves. I'll see if I can get this thing to work. That's the Thomas Hardy tree, and that's what he did with the gravestones that were left over. He placed them in this form round the tree. Actually, the tree in the past month has just fallen down. Can you believe that after about hundreds or so years? Can you imagine somebody doing that with headstones nowadays? You'd get lynched if you did that, and just made a nice wee pattern with these headstones. Well, that's what Thomas Hardy did, and that's in St. Pancras. I had to do many funerals, and many of the funerals were held. One of the crematoriums that I used quite a lot was Golders Green, a big Jewish community in Golders Green, but everybody and their dog is buried there. It's such a fascinating place in Golders Green. Here is what it looks like. As I said, there's three chapels in that, and that's the back of it. That's the crematorium part, and these are just some of the people, let's get this thing to work, that are buried in Golders Green. It's a who's who. Peter Sellers is not on that list. He's buried there as well. Loads of famous folk. If I showed these to my daughters, they just wouldn't know any of these, but I'm looking at the edge of your car. You'll know most of these folk. You'll know who these people are, and more. If you go to, would you call it Covent Garden, the big square where they do the performing? That is St. Paul's Church behind there. That's called the Actors Church. There's another list of other well-known people that are buried there. Just up the road from us was, would you call it, Highgate, Highgate Cemetery. You have to pay to go into Highgate Cemetery. George Michael and people like that are buried there. Michael Faraday, Douglas Adams, Hitchhiker's Guide to the... It's just a who's who, but the gravestones there are fascinating. You can spend a whole day, and it's money well spent going into that place.

[ 8 : 13 ] It really is good. The most famous resident there is Karl Marx. He's buried in Highgate Cemetery as well. Loads of people go there. Here's another one, not in Highgate, but buried in London.

Amy Winehouse. It doesn't matter how famous you are. You end up, and it's sobering when you sit in a cemetery, and you're surrounded by dead people. It reminds you of the brevity of life. It reminds you, it awakens you into making your life count. These people are all dead, but your life is still alive. You're still alive. You're breathing. You've got your flask, whatever. You should have the desire to make your life count. Near where this was a cemetery right behind the church in East Finchley. This cemetery, Islington and Camden, is nowhere near Islington and Camden, so I don't know why it's called that. But this is the largest cemetery in the UK, not because of area, but because of the number of people that are interned there. There's over a million people in that cemetery. You get lost.

Every time I have to do a funeral, I have to trace my steps, almost with breadcrumbs in case I get lost. And this is the size of, it's just a vast, vast expanse. And you get different types of grave in this place. You'll get maybe Greek community. They will bury them in a particular way. You will get affluent families. They'll have a wee mausoleum for the dead. And then you have something like that.

[ 9 : 49 ] No information about naan. Just a wee stick and a wee rickety fence and a wee bit where somebody used to put flowers in. Going to cemeteries are very, very sobering. In this particular, or

there's also military graves as well. People are buried in a particular way. And in that particular cemetery, there are these streets, amongst others. That's how you find your way around. There's avenues.

There's not a St. Andrew's Avenue, which has left me a wee bit bitter, I must confess. When I discovered that, I went, what happened to St. Andrew's? There's no St. Andrew's. But as you look around, you see the occasional Scottish flag. And you just hone in on it, and off you go. And you go to see this. This is particularly, this one particularly I'm using. Because he's buried amongst all these Irish folk. And what's particularly interesting is he's a ranger supporter. That just made me laugh.

I thought, he probably wouldn't have been seen dead before. But now he is dead. The Lord has a sense of humor and says, that's where you're going to be buried. So, you can have a laugh even in cemeteries as well. There are also personal mementals. All life is in graveyards. If an alien came down and wanted to know something about our planet, he or she, if you get female aliens, would learn a lot about planet Earth by visiting gravestones and reading what's on them. Here is, oh, by the way, almost every single Scottish grave. You may get a flag, but you'll always get a can of iron brew.

It's amazing. That's our identity. When you leave Scotland, iron brew, and you have, anyway, every single grave, Scottish grave, in that cemetery had that. But it might be that, or it might be Rangers, Celtic, Arsenal, Spurs. Something that means something to the person who's dead. This was their whole life. It really is quite something. And then you get statements.

Here is one. Here is two. Very different from each other. How somebody thought that was a good idea to put that in a tombstone. I hope the beer is cheaper up there, Bob. And this gray one, that's a massive, on the way out, that was a massive big marble kind of tomb. And that's what was on it.

[ 12 : 22 ] Hardly said anything. Troubled in life, may you rest in peace. That tells a story right there, doesn't it? And you think, I wonder how his life was troubled. Some people live their whole lives like that. Troubled in life, but now they've passed on. And it's great when you see this on tombstones.

And it's great. And if you know nothing about the people, if you saw that in a tombstone, you'd think the person in there knew something about life, and knew something about death, and knew something about Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. And it's always a breath of fresh air. So I'm saying all life is in cemeteries. So I commend cemeteries to you. Find one. There's a great one I discovered up at Inveresque. You've got a seat, and you can just look out. It really is quite something. And the thing about cemeteries is they are quiet. They are dead. Nobody goes to them. Life is all happening outside. But what I like to think about is if the Lord returned at that very moment, those places would be highs of activity, perhaps. The dead in Christ rising. I was at a wedding on Thursday, and then I was talking to somebody who's moved into—it's not a nursing home, but it's a communal area. They have their own flat. And I says, do you mix with people? And he says, yeah, we get to see your neighbor a wee bit. And I said, do you get a chance to tell them the good news? And they says, yes. They asked this woman, do you know what happens when you die? And she says, nothing. And a lot of people believe that, that you die and there's nothing. You can put a wee quip about Bob and Bea, and that's it. It's a wee nice wee sentiment, but you supported Arsenal, but it's all finished, and there's nothing. Nothing could be further from the truth. The grave is not the end. And Paul is writing to this church in

Thessalonica to impress upon them the resurrection and what we believe as Christians. So, let's look at this very briefly this morning as we look at this together. I only have two points. And in this passage that we read—I don't know if you noticed this—Paul mentions quite a few things about what we believe. He's speaking to Christians. He's speaking to Christians who believe that Jesus died and who rose again, but they're uncertain about those who die and Christ hasn't returned, and uncertain about what will happen when Jesus returns. So, Paul, in these short verses, fills them in on some things, and this should really encourage us on this Easter Sunday morning. So, first of all, he says, we believe in Jesus Christ. He mentions this at verse 14. For we believe that Jesus died. That's what he says, first of all, about what we believe about Jesus Christ. He died. We believe, if you're a

Christian, that the death of Jesus Christ is important. In Inverest, I was looking at the gravestones there last week, I think it was, and it was the strangest thing. I'd never seen it before.

There was a good—maybe there's loads of them like this, but certainly in one area, a name, dates, and where this person died. Joe Bloggs died in a nursing home or whatever, and I thought, what a

thing to put on a gravestone. I wouldn't want that to—John died in the royal infirmary or something like that. Say something about their life, what they did, not just, he died there. That's him. He lived between there, and he died in that place. I think I'd rather have Bob in the beer thing than that. It just seemed a wacky thing, but it was the early 1900s. That's what they seemed to put on gravestones. But the death of Jesus Christ is very important. It is crucial to everything. And Paul says, we as Christians believe that Jesus died.

[ 16 : 35 ] The reason for his death is important. His life wasn't taken from him. He laid down his life. He says this in John 10, 18, no one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. His death had a plan. There was a purpose in his death. John the Baptist says of Jesus when he came, look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And he does that by his death. His death has a purpose. So, we believe that not only that Jesus died, we know why he died. We know he had a purpose. And that is the good news, that he who had no sin became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. He died as a substitute on the cross. He died to bring us back to God. 1 Peter 3, 18, for Christ also suffered ones for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. If Jesus hadn't come, if he hadn't died, there would be no hope for the world. But Jesus died to take away the sin of the world. And Paul says this, we believe that Jesus died. That's what he means. I don't know if you're here this morning, and you know that he died. You've seen, you know, something of history. But I wonder if you know why he died. And it's important. That is the \$64,000 question. What does his death mean to you? It has to mean something for you and for your sins. It's not enough to just acknowledge it here. It has to be embraced by you and say, I'm a sinner. Jesus died for me. I needed him to die for me. I love him because he died for me. Paul says to this church, we believe that Jesus died. And that's what he means. But it also says, we believe Jesus rose again. Jesus taught this before he died. He began to teach them, Mark 8, 31.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man, name that he has for himself, must suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests and teachers of the law. He must be killed. This is him laying down his life again. And after three days, rise again. He must rise again. If Jesus doesn't rise again, his death is in vain. He has to rise again. And it really is so exciting. Paul was impressing upon us. If you're a Christian and this is another, this is Eastern number 50, it's very easy to become familiar with this. It's so exciting. Before we left London, we used to have a service in Good Friday during the day, half 10. At 12 o'clock, the congregation would hot foot it down to Trafalgar Square for the Passion Play, which happened about 12 and happened about 3. And I says to Lucille, we've been here all this time. We've never managed along to the Passion Play. So we went.

And we got there. And it just so happened, the guy who plays the part of Jesus, this was his last one. He was on the news, the London news saying, this is my last one. Somebody else can do this. The place was packed. And we just happened to stand there at the top of the stairs, if you know this, looking down towards Westminster. And you've got Nelson's column and so forth. And it was all happening here. And we're a bit in the distance. But at the part where Jesus is crucified, and then he rises again. It just so happened, he appeared here. And obviously, it's not Jesus.

[ 20 : 21 ] But there was something just quite magical to be there. Wow. And everybody's cheering and going crazy. And he was so close to us. And just seeing him going by, we just thought, one day it'll be like that.

We will see the Lord. He has risen again. It really was so exciting. Just sent a shiver down my spine, just being there. Just a wee taste of what it might be like. And it was great. He rose again. And Paul wants to impress upon them that death does not separate us from Jesus. Jesus, because Jesus has risen, he is the firstfruits of those who die. Firstfruits is a great expression in the Bible, especially as it relates to Jesus' death. Firstfruits is a kind of agricultural term.

In London, I chopped down a tree with a big massive, first thing I saw, look at the height of that tree. It's bigger than this building. Apple tree. Every apple that fell got bruised on the way down. So, I thought I'd take a chainsaw to it. And I'd shorten this thing quite a bit. And for the next four or five years, there wasn't a single apple appeared on this until the last year when I just gave up cutting it back anymore. And apples began to appear. And the term firstfruits is that a farmer sees something and suddenly the fruits are beginning to appear. And what this tells him is that the crop is about to follow. The rest of the fruit will follow. This is just the first of the certain fruit. And because Jesus has risen from the dead, he is the firstfruits of what will certainly be for everyone. Everyone will rise

again. Look at that image behind there. All these people in the graves. I'd love to be in that cemetery. A million folk interred. When the Lord comes back and, woefe, it's all happening there, the dead and Christ rising again. That is quite something.

And Paul impresses this upon them. Christ has risen. He is the firstfruits. And then he says that those who believe, Jesus will bring. He talks about those who have died before Christ has returned. [ 22 : 41 ] And as the Father raised the Son, so you and I, so everyone will be raised back to life. Death is not the end. Then he goes on to tell them not only about the death of Jesus, but the resurrection. We also believe in the resurrection. Verse 13, we don't want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death.

And note the word sleep. The Greek word is the word that we use for cemetery. The word cemetery just means sleeping place. It's a dormitory. It's not, when you look at cemetery, that's where you go when you die. But the actual meaning is that's where you go to sleep. Remember Lazarus. Lazarus has fallen asleep.

And you don't die. You fall asleep. And then you're raised back to life. And it is quite something. And so cemeteries, these people are asleep, waiting to be raised back to life. Everyone sleeps in death. Paul mentions this, people falling asleep. Then there is awakening, and there's an order. Paul impresses upon them. He says to them that we who are alive will not precede those who have died. In other words, you're worried about those who have died and Christ hasn't returned. Let me tell you that you will not precede those. They will rise first. And afterwards, those who are alive will be caught up together with them in there. My mother has passed away. She's buried in Blantyre, and she will precede me if the Lord come back tomorrow. She will be raised before me. And that's a great, great thought. And that's what Paul wants to mention, the order. The dead in Christ, verse 16, will rise first. Then he explains how this will happen. After they rise, after we rise, it will happen when the Lord himself comes down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, with the trumpet call of God. Jesus said he would come back and take us to be with him. [ 25 : 03 ] It's his desire. There was a first coming. There is a second coming. And people will need to realize that. And it won't be done in secret. Notice how that's described. It will be noisy. There's trumpets.

There's a loud call. The loud call speaks of a king going out and pronouncing war or whatever. It won't be done in secret. Every eye will see him. Every eye will hear. It's a loud command. There's a shout. There's a trumpet. It will be audible. It will be visible to all. This trumpet call of God. And those of us who are alive will be caught up to be with others in the air. And it's the whole idea of it being sudden, caught up suddenly. You're just like a fish. You're whisked away. And it really is quite something. And then it says, and so we will be with the Lord forever. A new heaven, a new earth, every tear wiped away. No more death or sorrow or pain. And that's why Paul says, encourage one another with these words. So, can I encourage you, if you ever go to a cemetery, and just imagine all these bodies rising. It will surely happen. Imagine the Lord coming back tomorrow, and you too will be caught up together with them. But I must finish. Because although everyone will be raised back to life, not everyone will be raised back to eternal life. The Bible makes this very plain. And Jesus taught this. He says there will be a separation between those who love and who are trusting in the Lord and those who have lived without Him. Matthew 25, when the Son of Man comes in His glory and all angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before

Him, and He will separate the people one from another. As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, He will put the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left. He will say to those on His right, Come, you who are blessed of the Lord, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. Then He will say to those on the left, Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. This is serious, isn't it? Life might have been all Arsenal football scarves and beer drinking, but there is a day of reckoning for every one of us.

We need Jesus to die for our sins. We need Him to rise to give us life, and we need to trust in Him. And there is hope for even the most unlikely. Here is one final grave, the Kray twins.

[ 27 : 58 ] Grant them eternal rest, O Lord. When I saw this, I thought, really? Do you think that's going to happen? But even for the worst of sinners, there is hope beyond the grave. Not simply because you put it on a tombstone, but because you've realized you need Jesus as your Savior just now, and you come to Him in repentance and faith. Lord, forgive me. Help me to live a life worthy of

you. And He will come in, and He will transform your life, and He will give you a purpose and a hope. And if the Lord returns, great if not, and you are buried in whatever cemetery that might be, well manicured or not, you will rise one day to glory. May each of us know this for ourselves. Let's stand, and we're going to sing a closing song. There is a hope that burns within my heart. Do you know this?

No? Yeah, a couple of you's not. Well, there'll be a duet anyway. We'll see how that goes. We'll give this a go. There is a hope that burns within my heart. Thank you, folks. Amen. Let's close in prayer. Our loving Heavenly Father, from our hearts, Lord, we marvel at your great plan of salvation. We thank you, Father, for the death of your Son, how we cling to His death, how we cling, Lord, to His death on the cross for us, where He took our sin, and He knew that separation from the Father, that we might not know that separation. We thank you, Lord, that you did not leave him in the grave, but you raised him back to life. We thank you that He truly is the firstfruits of what will surely follow. And we thank you, Lord, that we are numbered amongst the redeemed this morning. So, Father, from our hearts, we praise and thank you for His death and for His resurrection, and we long for His return. Until that day, Lord, keep us rejoicing and keep us witnessing to those who know you not. And we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.