

CARL LAFERTON

RESCUING

CHRISTMAS

THE SEARCH FOR JOY
THAT LASTS

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Rescuing Christmas

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Published by

The Good Book Company

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ISBN: 9781784982683 | Printed in the UK

Design by André Parker

CONTENTS

1. Lying Awake and Looking for Batteries	5
2. We Three Kings of Orient Aren't	11
3. The Gift of Leadership	15
4. The Gift of Friendship	27
5. The Gift of a Clean Start	37
6. Finding a Happy Ending	47
7. They Could Be Anyone	57
PS: Do You Really Expect Me to Believe in a Virgin Birth?	61

*For Benjamin and Abigail –
Christmas is much more fun with you around.*



LYING AWAKE AND
LOOKING FOR BATTERIES

The minutes between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day crawl past like hours when you're a child.

Time staggers as you lie there, sleep refusing to come, waiting for the presents and the food and the fun. I remember lying awake in the dark for hours at a time, only to check the clock on my bedside table and discover that three or (if I had been incredibly disciplined) four minutes had unwound since I last looked at it.

It took days that night to get to the morning. But it was always worth the wait.

It's a magical time, Christmas, for many adults as well as for most children. It's a day of great enjoyment—the highlight of the year. Everything is fun and friendship and feasting (and everyone knows calories don't count in December). We can

hit pause on the real world and just enjoy the day. The commercials confirm it: Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. As one advert from Harrods, the famous upmarket store in the middle of London, put it:

Rejoice, Christmas is coming to Harrods, joyful and triumphant in a blaze of celestial splendour ... brimming full of comfort and joy, overflowing with grandeur and gifts.

Brimming full of comfort and joy. We'll be happy once we get to Christmas.

TIME MOVES QUICKER

The night before Christmas Day moves much faster when you're a parent. The hours skip past like minutes as you try to do all the jobs you should have done earlier in December, but left till Christmas Eve.

Two years ago, we lived through the now-famous (in my head) "Year of the Missing Batteries". Shortly before the shops closed, I discovered that while we had a vast variety of batteries in our home, the only type we did not possess was the type we needed to make one of the kids' presents work; and that the digital camera on which we'd take our Christmas photos had no memory card. I duly raced to our local store.

I assumed that I would be the only person in the shop, but it was heaving with similarly tense,

Rescuing Christmas

desperate battery-hunters, along with the still more tense and considerably more desperate spouse-present-hunters. (The present-hunters made me feel better about myself—I may have failed to get the batteries, but they had failed to get the actual gifts.)

With a rush of relief I found my memory card and batteries. As I left, I smiled triumphantly at a man who had the unmistakable look of a husband who has been told several times by his wife what she wants for Christmas, and is now wishing he'd actually listened. But I had relaxed too soon. The next few hours at home were spent trying—and failing—to put together the wooden playhouse we'd bought the kids, and whose instructions proved about as much help as suncream in a snowstorm.

I do love Christmas. But at the same time, I sometimes find myself just wanting to get through Christmas Day intact and out the other side, back to normal life. Maybe you're the same. You find Christmas as stressful as you find it joyful. There's the stress of who you'll be with at Christmas, and who you'll disappoint. There's the stress of getting the presents (and batteries). There's the stress of how much food to buy, and when to put it in the oven, and trying to remember whether or not your auntie is still a vegan. And you find yourself thinking, "If I can just get through Christmas, then things will go back to normal".

Maybe, though, you'd love to have that kind of stress. You'd love to have a choice of where to spend Christmas, people to buy presents for at Christmas and guests to cook for over Christmas. But you don't. Perhaps Christmas is a day that produces the opposite of joy. It just reminds you of who you've lost or who you've never had, or of what you'd hoped to achieve or change this year but never did. Maybe this year, for very good reason, you're aiming simply to get through Christmas.

JOY IN JANUARY

When it comes to Christmas, all of us are “get to-ers” or “get through-ers”. And the truth is that neither leads to a joy that lasts. There's no joy in getting through, and even if you're a get to-er and Christmas Day, when it comes, feels perfect... well, you still face the adult version of what as a child I came to know as the “4 o'clock feeling”. It's the feeling you get when you realise that it is all almost over, and that the day you've looked forward to getting to is now a day that you're looking back on. It's the feeling you get as you slide back into normality and make the annual discovery that the calories did, in fact, count in December.

The problem with Christmas is that January comes. Reality returns. However joyful Christmas makes you, you can't live in December for ever.

Rescuing Christmas

But imagine if Christmas could be rescued from the stress or sadness of just getting through Christmas. Imagine if January could be rescued from the disappointment if your joy was in getting to Christmas. Imagine if there were a joy that lasted—that endured through January and that wasn't dented by reality. That kind of joy would be worth finding, wouldn't it?

And Christmas does offer that kind of joy. It's to be found, very simply, in getting it. Not in grasping hold of the Harrods version of Christmas—the tinsel, the tree and the traditions—but grasping hold of the events and the meaning of the first Christmas.

The people who experienced that first Christmas and understood its meaning found a joy that did not fade. So can you. Whether you're a get-to-er or a get-through-er, if you get the meaning of the first Christmas this Christmas, then you'll get the feeling of joy, and find it's a feeling that lasts. *That* joy is what this book is about.