

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 14

Easter Origins and Early Church Practice

BACKGROUND

Easter Sunday. Easter week. Easter season. These terms are known throughout Christianity and most every Christian celebrates them to a greater or lesser degree. The celebrations vary. Some celebrate with fasting, while others do not. Some celebrate with nighttime services, even vigils, while others simply attend Easter Sunday services. For some, Easter begins on the Sunday when they awake and “go to church,” while others begin Easter with Ash Wednesday and a 40-day Lent period.

Also, we have the traditions that seem to have little to do with the Christian concept of “Easter” as the resurrection of Jesus, and yet many Christians still celebrate them. For example, Easter egg hunts and visits from the “Easter bunny” have traction among many in modern American churches. Similarly, it is not unusual at an Easter Sunday morning service to find people decked out in new, brightly colored Spring clothes.

If we search our Bibles for the word “Easter,” we do not find it.¹ If we search the Internet, we find multiple write-ups, many suggesting the concept is a pagan one that has erroneously crept into the church. A good number of these suggest that the mere celebration of Easter is a corruption of Christian truth and an unknowing nod to the demons and false gods associated with pre-Christian thought.

So, what do we make of this? What does church history teach us about this holiday? How did these various traditions get started? What can we know about the roots of the Easter season and Easter Sunday in particular?

To answer these questions, we temporarily leave the chronological coursing of the church that we have thus far pursued. Instead, we take a sweeping view through two full centuries of the church. We must first begin our study with a brief refresher on the background that gives rise to Easter, namely the death and resurrection of our Savior.

¹ There is no mention of Easter in the Bible unless you are reading the King James Version! In Acts 12:4, the King James reads, “And when he had apprehended him [Peter], he put him in prison...intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.” The King James translators missed it on this one! The Greek word is *pascha* just like we read everywhere else in the New Testament. The proper translation is picked up by most every other version, “Passover.”

BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF EASTER

The nation of Israel in biblical times kept two calendars, one was based on the agricultural seasons and is commonly called the “civil” calendar. It started in the fall and is still acknowledged by Israel today with the New Year celebration known as *Rosh Hashanah*. Additionally, Israel had a religious calendar that had its origins in Exodus 12. When the Jews were in Egyptian captivity and God was preparing their Exodus, God instructed Moses that on the tenth day of the current month (the Jewish month of Nisan), each man was to take a lamb for his family. The lamb must be male and without blemish (Ex. 12:5). After preparation, the lambs were to be slain and the Jews were to put the lambs’ blood on the sides and tops of their doorframes.

After the Jews sacrificed their lambs and placed the blood over their houses, the Lord passed through Egypt striking down the every first born except where there was blood of the lamb on the door. These homes were not visited with death, but rather the Lord passed over the homes saving those inside. Because of this event, a final plague on Egypt, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and allowed the Jews to leave their slavery.

God told the Jews to remember the day and to celebrate it as a lasting festival to the Lord (Ex. 12:14, 24). It signaled God’s redeeming hand as he brought his people out of slavery. The sacrificial lamb was called the “Passover lamb” (Ex. 12:21) because it was the signal by which God passed over homes bringing salvation to those inside rather than death.

Thus began the Jews’ Exodus from slavery and Egypt and deliverance into the Promised Land. It was to be remembered as the “first month, the first month of your year” (Ex. 12:1). And with that command and those events, Israel had a religious calendar established to go along with its civil calendar.

The celebration was known in Hebrew as the *pesach*, Hebrew for “Passover.” This celebration was honored and kept at the time of Christ. Christ himself, naturally, celebrated the Passover. In the gospels, we read of Christ’s celebration in each gospel account of his life, death, and resurrection. As Matthew records the events, Jesus told his disciples to go into Jerusalem and set up the celebration at the house of “a certain man” (Mt. 26:18). During the celebration itself, Jesus taught his apostles (although they did not understand the significance of the teaching until after the indwelling of the Holy Spirit) that the celebration itself was a prophecy Jesus had come to fulfill. Jesus took the bread of the Passover and explained it was his body. Jesus took the Passover cup and explained it was Jesus’ blood, not wine.

Jesus taught that he himself would fulfill both sides of the Exodus story. Jesus would be the Passover Lamb slain so that those covered in his blood would not be visited by death from God. Instead, those covered in the blood of Christ would enjoy liberation from the bondage of sins' slavery and redemption to a Promised Land. A new year, but more than that, a new life, would begin for each who partook of the sacrifice of Christ. In that sense, Jesus was the Passover lamb. Moreover, Jesus was also set to fulfill the second side of the Passover story. For Jesus would be the first born who was slain to bring about the redemption. For Pharaoh let the people go only after suffering the loss of the first born throughout his realm. Similarly, sins' enslavement of humanity would only be broken through the death of Jesus, the first born and only begotten of God.

Following this Passover celebration on a Good Friday, Jesus was crucified and literally became the slain lamb for the people of God (Mt.27:27-56). But the story, of course, did not end there. Just as the Passover marked the beginning of the new life in the Jews ("This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year" Ex. 12:2) so in the resurrection we have, not only an end, but also a beginning. For on Sunday following the crucifixion, the tomb in which the killed Messiah was laid was empty. God resurrected Christ. Christ conquered death itself (Mt. 28:1-10).

As we read this in our New Testaments, the word used for the Passover is *pascha* (πασχα), which is a transliteration of the Aramaic word for Passover.

EARLY CHURCH CELEBRATIONS

The earliest church certainly celebrated the death and resurrection of Christ as the Passover lamb slain for mankind. The New Testament church would gather on the first day of the week as a day of worship and remembrance of Christ (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2). While the Acts and Corinthians passages just cited called "Sunday"² the "first day of the week," by the time of John's Revelation (95ish A.D.), the church was calling Sunday, "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). By the time of the Epistle of Barnabas³ (written sometime between the destruction of the Temple in 70 and the rebuilding of Jerusalem by Hadrian after 135), the Lord's Day was also called, "the eighth day," the day of God's "beginning of another world" (Epistle of Barnabas, 15:8).

² *Sunday is our translation of the common pagan name for the first day of the week. The pagan Roman world termed it the day of the sun, or dies solis, if we were speaking Latin!*

³ *We will examine this early church writing in a bit more detail in our coming lesson on the early church's interpretations of the Old Testament.*

It seems a fair interpretation of scripture that at first, the earliest believers thought Jesus would return to earth quickly. The church as an apocalyptic community (a community anticipating the imminent apocalypse/return of Jesus) did not think in terms of yearly celebrations. Indeed, if Jesus were to return any moment now, we would not be concerned with setting up a ritual celebration a year from now! So, the early church celebrated the crucifixion and resurrection on a weekly basis.

As time wore on, the church settled in to an understanding that while we are to live as if Jesus might return at any moment (1 Thess. 5:2) and while we do not know the time of his return (Mk 13:32), it might be longer than the church anticipated! (2 Peter 3:8-10) Also, we see outside of the New Testament the church beginning to commemorate events not merely on a weekly calendar, but on an annual one as well.

This would have been a natural transition considering that the early church, with its early Jewish roots and Jewish members, would see the Jewish annual celebrations in their Christian context. So we read, for example, Paul referring to “Christ, our Passover lamb” (1 Cor. 5:7). In fact, Paul goes on to say that we are to “keep the festival” with sincerity and truth.

The *Pascha*, the Hebrew Passover, was celebrated on the 14th day of Nisan as God set out to Moses in Exodus 12:6. The early church could be expected, especially while in its Hebrew infancy, to celebrate Christ as the Passover lamb on that *Pascha* celebration day. In Asia Minor, where the church had most likely its largest number of adherents once Jerusalem was destroyed in 68-70 A.D., the *Pascha* continued to be celebrated for at least the next 100 years on the fourteenth of Nisan,⁴ the day practicing Jews celebrated.

Not all churches, however, celebrated on the 14th of Nisan. For the 14th of Nisan would rarely fall on a Sunday. The churches in the Western part of the empire, notably in Rome and Alexandria, believed that the celebration should fall on a Sunday, not necessarily on the 14th of Nisan. In the view of these churches, the “Lord’s Day” as a resurrection trumped the Jewish calendar of *Pascha*. Therefore, these churches set out a computing of *Pascha* that basically dictated celebrating on the Sunday that followed the 14th of Nisan!

⁴ These churches celebrating *Pascha* on the Jewish *Pascha* day of the 14th of Nisan were termed “quartodecimanian,” an atrociously uncomfortable word in English. In its Latin, however, the word merely means “the people of the fourteenth.”

When we pause and consider that the day of Jesus' resurrection is perhaps the most important day in history, and when we consider that there were differing views of when that day should be celebrated, are we surprised to find out that this was the subject of an early church controversy? And, not a small controversy either! In fact, there were efforts to excommunicate those who celebrated *Pascha* on the Jewish feast day instead of a Sunday, the day of Christ' resurrection.

Eusebius writes of this conflict in his *Church History* (Book 5, chapters 23 and 24) in the early 300's. In his words, "At this time a question of no small importance arose" (23.1). Eusebius explains that the church was honoring this holy time with fasting and other solemn ceremonies. The question of when the fast should end and the Easter celebration begin was significant. For part of Christianity to be engaged in a thoughtful fast, mindful of each moment of the day of the sacrificial death of Christ while other Christians were celebrating the resurrection with food and festival did not seem to mix!

Eusebius explained that the church came together in several conferences/synods and made the determination that the *pascha* belonged on a Sunday, the resurrection day.⁵ The Roman Bishop Victor I (189-198) attempted to enforce the Sunday verdict with an excommunication and disfellowshipping of churches that insisted on the celebration of the 14th of Nisan. In response, Polycrates, the Bishop at Ephesus wrote Victor a letter on behalf of the churches in Asia Minor explaining their position. In the letter, as Eusebius quoted, Polycrates wrote,

We observe the exact day, neither adding nor taking anything away. For in Asia, also, great lights have fallen asleep, [in other words, significant holy ones have died, an apparent response to the position that Peter and Paul among others died in Rome so the Roman position should have greater merit] which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven and shall seek out all the saints. Of these were Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep at Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters and his other daughter, who, having lived in the Holy Spirit, rest at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who reclined on the Lord's bosom, and being a priest wore the sacerdotal mitre, who was both a witness and a teacher; he fell asleep at Ephesus; and, further, Polycarp in Smyrna, both a bishop and a martyr.... All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover, according to the gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith.

⁵ Many of the church leaders we have already studied weighed in on this issue. Iranaeus of Lyon, who we studied for his writings on Gnostic heresies, held a conference in Lyon on this issue. He voted for Sunday!

Eusebius also quotes Iranaeus in his writings to Victor over the issue. Iranaeus reminded Victor that the Roman Bishop Anicetus tried to persuade Polycarp of the need to celebrate the *Pascha* on a Sunday. But, “neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John, the disciple of the Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it, as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the elders who had preceded him.”

So, there was a great division! Over time, the Sunday celebration won out. Fourteenth celebrants were few in number by the late 200’s and finally died out in any measurable amount in the 400’s.

That is not to say that the controversy over which day was proper for celebrating died away, for it did not. There were many more dating controversies yet to arise. While the non-fourteenth celebrants originally would use the Sunday following Jewish *Pascha*, that changed in the 200’s. Some Christians began to calculate their own date for the *Pascha* independent of what the Jews established. The Jewish calendar was based upon the moon (a “lunar calendar”). The rest of the Roman world by and large followed a Julian calendar based on a solar year. As the church worked the dates over and over, several different techniques were used. There were pronouncements on the subject in various church councils. Even today, all of Christianity is not united in which day is proper for the celebration!

Setting aside the date of celebrating, what do we know of the various events surrounding the early church celebration? The church celebrated the *Pashca*, yes, but that memorialization grew into much more. By the 200’s, the church was celebrating the week leading up to the *Pascha* Sunday as a holy week.

As a holy week, the Sunday preceding Easter begins Holy week. It is termed “Palm Sunday,” referencing the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on the donkey (Mt. 21:1-11). As Jesus rode, the masses set palm branches onto the road (Jn 12:10) proclaiming him “blessed” and “coming in the name of the Lord.”⁶

The Friday of the crucifixion is “Good Friday.” Historically, it has been a day of fasting and contemplation over the death of Christ. In fact, out of respect of Good Friday, for many years the Catholic church would urge a full fast, or at least abstention from meat, on each Friday throughout the year.⁷ Catholic canon law

⁶ Florida is named after Palm Sunday! Ponce De Leon first spotted the coast of Florida on March 27, 1513, on Easter Sunday. In Spain, Palm Sunday was termed *Pascua Florida*. The *Florida* part coming from the Latin for “flowery.” Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, p. 191.

⁷ McDonalds added the fish sandwich to the menu in 1962 because of a drop in sales on Fridays!

states the abstention from meat is a sign of penance on the day of the Lord's crucifixion. Fish was an exception to this rule as a symbol itself of Christ. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) made the meatless Friday voluntary rather than mandatory.

As the events of *Pascha* expanded in the early church, we have in the 100's the practice of a "vigil" the night before *Pascha* Sunday. The vigil or gathering was in solemn anticipation and watch honoring the solemnity that accompanied the burial of Christ and anticipating the empty tomb and resurrection. The vigil would occur on Saturday night or early Sunday morning. Typically, the vigil would continue until the dawn welcomed the resurrection day. Over time, this ceremony would take place earlier and earlier on Saturday. Eventually in 1951, Pope Pius restored for the Roman church the practice of the vigil after sundown on Saturday night. Many protestant churches have a "sunrise service" which combines elements of the early church vigil as well as the *Pascha* ceremony.

IS IT PASCHA OR EASTER?

This paper has up to this point continued to call our "Easter" "*pascha*." Why? *Pascha* is the term used in the early church. Easter is an Anglo Saxon term that is unrelated to the Biblical celebration. We find it referenced by Bede (born 673) as co-opted from an Anglo-Saxon celebration for "Eastre," the goddess of spring. The term has continued in English parlance as the term for the Sunday we celebrate *Pascha*. We can now speak of Easter, using a term of pagan origin and be understood by most or we can use the Biblical and early church term *Pascha* and be understood by few to none!

MODERN TRADITIONS

So, why do we hide Easter eggs? And, why the tradition of new Easter clothes?

In the early church, *Pascha* was a prominent time for baptism. Initiates to the Christian faith would spend Holy week in preparation for the baptismal ceremony. The baptism would typically take place on Saturday before Easter and the baptized would put on white baptismal clothes, symbolic of the new life put on in the baptism. Over time, this faded away with the church no longer emphasizing adult baptism. However, the putting on of new clothes in celebration of the new life we celebrate with the resurrection has stayed on! Weiser references (p.220) an old Irish saying, "For Christmas food and drink; for Easter, new clothes!"

Eggs were considered in older church days to be symbolic of the resurrection. The shell was the hard encasing of the tomb from which life sprang on Easter. While the spring coloring of the eggs doesn't seem to have a long historical tradition, the egg itself has a history of association, though lost in histories pages, is quite old. Why are they hidden? No good answer to that one!

As for the Easter Lily, it is relatively recent in origin. Technically called *Lilium longiflorum*, the Easter Lily first came to America from Japan in 1882. It was a natural fit for Easter altars. The lily itself was already associated with Jesus who taught us to "See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet Solomon, in all his splendor, was not dressed like one of these" (Mt. 6:28).

HOLIDAYS AROUND EASTER

The 40 days that precede Easter are called "Lent." From the Anglo-Saxon *lencten*, meaning "springtime," Lent is a period of preparation for Easter. The 40 days is to be spent in prayer and penance.

The earliest references to Lent were not a 40-day period. Eusebius in his *Church History* records that the first three centuries had a preparation fast of one or two days. Often, the fasting period was 40 hours (Eus. 5.24). The first mention of a 40-day period of preparation is found in the council of Nicaea's Fifth Canon in the year 325. By the time of the council of Laodicea (360), the 40-day observance was commanded.

The number 40 (whether 40 hours or 40 days) originated with the recognition that Christ was in the wilderness of temptation for 40 days. Lest everyone wonder how this was done, it is noteworthy that the time period was one of fasting, but that did not mean that everyday was an actual fast. Different rules applied at different times and in different churches. Some allowed eating on weekends, while others were more rigorous.

The fast itself was not total. One meal a day was allowed in the evening. But that meal was not to include flesh meat, fish, eggs, or dairy products. Over time in the middle ages, fish became allowed, as did dairy products.

Lent begins on a Wednesday, termed Ash Wednesday. The ashes represent the beginning time of repentance and focus on transgressions. It is a time where the believer focuses on the sorrows of sin and appreciation of God's detesting of transgression.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Christ, our Passover lamb, was slain on our behalf to free us from sin's bondage.
2. We embrace him in a new life. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold, all things will become new" (1 Cor. 5:17).
3. Spend time contemplating his life, suffering, death and resurrection.
4. Honor him as Savior and Lord. "Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praises" (Rev. 5:12).
5. Receive his hope. "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" (1 Thess. 4:14).
6. Ask someone this week what Easter means to them. You got some trivia now that should make the conversation easy. That may give you a chance to share what the *Pascha* is all about!