

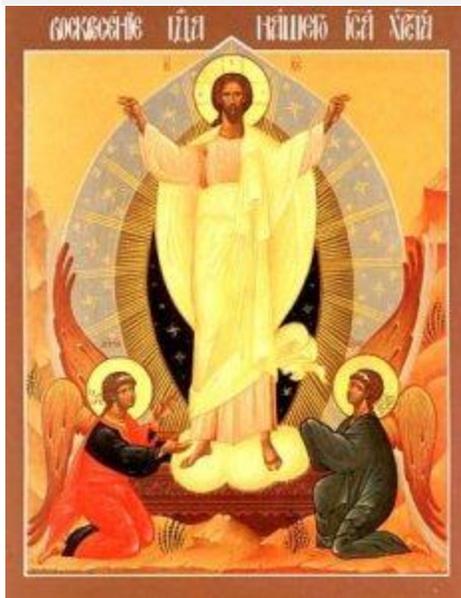
# The True Meaning of Easter

First Presbyterian Church, Easter morning

Every December we hear the question, “What is the meaning of Christmas?” But I don’t remember every hearing an Easter equivalent of that. In December we get a mix of Jesus and Santa and angels and reindeer, and It’s a Wonderful Life, and White Christmas, all to remind us of the true meaning of Christmas. There is no Easter equivalent. I do remember, as a kid, the Wizard of Oz was shown every Easter Sunday night, but I don’t think that movie tells us the true meaning of Easter.



Resurrection Icon



What is the true meaning of Easter?

First let’s take the name. You know, most of the world does not use the word Easter when talking about this holy day. They use a form of the Greek and Latin word for Easter, Pascha, which means Passover.

In fact, the word Easter is derived from the name for the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the Dawn, or the spring, scholars are not sure. Apparently there was a Pre-Christian, Anglo-Saxon festival in the spring, dedicated to the goddess  $\bar{E}$ ostre. When the Christians showed up, instead of introducing them to their Spring festival, Paschal, they just coopted the festival that was already going on, kept the name, but changed the God and the meaning.

That made a lot sense because the goddess symbolized the dawn, which is the time of the rising sun, and Jesus is the risen Son of God. The dawn is about new light, and Jesus is about new life.

So part of the meaning of Easter is New life, but there has to be more than that.

Now when IS Easter? It is not like Christmas, which comes the same day every year. It is a revolving holiday. So here is how the time of Easter is calculated. Easter comes after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox. How did we get there?

Well, originally Easter was tied to the Jewish Passover. But unlike today, where Passover is a set holiday, in the early centuries after Jesus, Passover was a floating holiday. It was tied to the Jewish calendar, and always occurred in the month of Nisan. But the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar. It is based on the phases of the moon, not the rotation of the earth around the sun. And so every couple of decades, they would have to add a month, otherwise the “month of harvest” would be happening in dead of winter. And in the first couple of centuries, they had no system for adding that month.

That put Christians in the tricky position of having to wait for a council of Jewish rabbis to set the date for their most important holy day of the year. So eventually, in 325 AD they decided to come up with their own system.

Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. That first full moon is called the Passover moon, because it signals the start of the Jewish month of Nisan, which is when Passover is celebrated. In other words, when the early church was trying to determine a set date for Easter, they tied it, as best they could, to the Jewish Passover holiday.

So Easter has something to do with Passover. That tells something about Easter, but it does not really get what the meaning of Easter is.

So let’s turn to the story as the Bible tells it.

In the Acts passage we heard this morning, Peter talks about the ministry of Jesus. He basically says that God threw his best at us, in Jesus, and we went and killed him. But that instead of taking that as our final answer, God raised Jesus from the dead. This, for Peter and other people in the Bible, proves to us that Jesus WAS who he said he was. Not only was he a good person, walking around doing and saying good things, he was in fact the Only Begotten Son of God, just like he said he was. When Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves and to love our enemies, when Jesus told us not to spend too much time worrying about the future, because God would care for us, when Jesus told us that to accept the outcasts, and to help the poor, He really meant it, because when Jesus told us he was the Son of God, God showed us he meant that, by raising him from the dead.

The Bible also tells us that Easter is about eternal life. Jesus is risen from the dead, and so shall we rise from the dead one day. What is interesting about that, is that Paul says a lot about how we will one day be risen with Jesus and that our future is tied to the resurrection of Jesus, but...none of the Resurrection accounts in the Gospels say *anything* about how we get eternal life because Jesus did. Now Paul says that, and he says that pretty clearly. But in their telling of Jesus' resurrection, none of them mention it directly. When Jesus comes out of the grave, he does not say, "I have risen, and one day, after you die, you will rise from the dead as well."

If the major point of of Easter is proof that we have eternal life, you would think that AT LEAST ONE of the gospel writers would have told us. If that was the major message of Easter, I am pretty sure that Matthew, Mark, Luke or John would have mentioned it. At least one of them. But in fact, none of them do. As it turns out, eternal life for us is a byproduct of Easter, but it is not the full meaning for the day. There is something else going on.

So in order for us to get a really good handle on it, we need to look at how the gospel of John STARTS.

John 1:1, In the beginning was the word. John starts his story by reminding us of the original story, the story of creation. In the creation story, God creates, and on the seventh day, God takes a rest. Now traditionally what follows the day of God's rest is the Eighth Day—the rest of the story. God sets it all in motion, takes a rest, and on the Eighth Day, creation takes off and becomes what we think of as our world. On the eighth day we get Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah, and Moses, and King David, Deborah and Isaiah and Ruth and Jeremiah, and Esther, Obadiah, and Ehud, the left handed Midianite.

We get Jesus. And the Disciples. And Mary and Joseph. And all the people we have heard about the last few weeks. Nicodemus. The woman at the well. The man born Blind. Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

We get the story we heard last week—the last supper, the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

And as John tells the story, on the sixth day of the week, the day before the Sabbath, Jesus died on the cross, and they put him in a tomb. And on the seventh day, what we call Holy Saturday, Jesus rested in the tomb. In the Old Testament creation story, God rested on the seventh day. In the Gospel of John, Jesus rests on the seventh day.

And is risen on the Eighth day. That is the day of a New Creation, a new Eighth day. The whole world is reformed, it has been recreated. In Lent, after the confession, we heard the same

assurance of pardon; who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ Everyone who is in Christ is a NEW Creation, the Old is gone. That first day of the week after the crucifixion almost two thousand years ago, was not just the first day of the week; it was the first day of whole new creation.

What is the meaning of Easter? It is about a New Creation that God is doing.

What does that new creation look like? Well it looks remarkably like the old one. It is not like on that Easter morning, two thousand years ago the world woke up and saw that everything was different. It was not like the new creation is all fields of butterflies, But then, when Jesus came out of the tomb, he did not look all that different.

All of the Gospels portray a Jesus who looks quite ordinary when he is risen. He is not all lit up, with butterflies and angels flying around his head. He is quite ordinary. If you put the resurrected Jesus in a line up, and asked someone to pick which person just rose from the dead, they would not be able to. Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. In Luke, Jesus is walking down the road with some people, some of his followers, and they don't recognize. He eats fish with his disciples, and Thomas is allowed to touch him, if he wants. If the risen Christ were a visitor at our church this morning, we would not know it.

But it is a different world. In all of the Gospels, the disciples are sent out to proclaim that this is a different world.

So how IS it different? Well, Easter is tied to Passover, as we have seen, and Passover is about the Liberation of people. Easter is about our liberation from an old life, a life where we can get drug down by our pasts, a life where we have to continually carry around our past mistakes, a life where we are defined by the things that confine us. In the Passover story, with the help of God, Moses brought the Hebrew children out of slavery. In the New Passover story, Easter, we help each other out. If the slavery is hunger, we help feed one another. If the slavery is poverty, we help lift each other up. If the slavery is something done in the past to hurt another person, we offer forgiveness. If the slavery is anger or hate, we offer love. If the slavery is that we don't feel good enough, good enough for God, good enough for others, we offer unconditional love. We are all the New Moses, and we all help one another into the new Promised Land.

This new creation is a new world of radical INCLUSION. No one is excluded. Jesus sends the early disciples out, first to their home—Jerusalem and Judea, then to their avowed enemy—Samaria. Yes, whatever God is doing in Easter, God is doing with the Samaritans. And finally, to the ends of

the earth. Whatever God is doing in Easter, God is doing with all humanity. The first few converts are people who were traditionally outcasts in that society.

In the old comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, they form a club, and the sole purpose of the club is to keep the neighborhood girl, Suzie, out of the club. In the new creation, no one is excluded.

Samaritans. Eunuchs, who were considered unclean by all the good people of Jesus' day. And Gentiles. People like you and I. Where the first Passover was directed toward a specific people of God, the new Passover, the Passover of the New Creation is directed to ALL humanity.

And the New Creation is defined by transformation. Although we may look like the people we were yesterday, the new Resurrection life is a life where we are continually transformed, and where society is continually being transformed. Like the resurrected Jesus, it can look strangely like the old creation, but occasionally the New breaks through in surprising ways.

In the post-resurrection stories, a normal looking Jesus shows up, and does some extraordinary things. We will be looking at some of those things in the next few weeks, but suffice it to say that life is never the same for the disciples. They are different people because of Jesus' resurrection. Peter is forgiven for denying Jesus, and becomes the foundation for this new church. Thomas finds his faith, Paul goes from being a persecutor of the church to being its strongest supporter. Two ordinary people walking to Emmaus encounter Christ, and find his words burn within them. The world is turned upside down.

When I was in high school a man came to speak to our youth group. I don't remember his name, but I remember his story. He grew up in inner city New York, and had become part of gang early in his life. He had many run-ins with the law, until he stumbled in a church one day, and found this new life I have been talking about. He left the gang, he left his old life, he left his old ways. He went to school, got a job, got married, and had kids. He became a youth pastor in the same neighborhood where he was once a gang member.

One day, walking home from work, he was mugged. He went to the police station, where he now had many friends, and was shown mug shots of possible muggers. He thumbed through them, and in the end said he did not see anyone he recognized. "Are you sure?" asked the cop who was with him. "Yes, I am positive. I did not recognize anyone in these mug shots."

"No one?" asked the cop again. "No one," he said.

"How about this guy?" asked the cop?

The guy stared at the picture and said, “He does look a little familiar.”

“Well, he should,” said the cop. “That is a picture of you, ten years ago, when we arrested you.”

Sometimes we are changed so radically, we cannot even recognize our old selves.

Easter is a new world! The true meaning of Easter is that we live in and in fact we are co-creators with God of a new creation, a new way of relating. We are given the awesome responsibility of creating this new world with God. Our tools are love, and grace, and faith and hope. We chip away at the anger, despair, distrust, exclusion, pride, self-interest, greed, and misplaced devotions that are the flotsam and jetsam of the old world. We reach out in love to all who are in need, and when we are in need, we take the hands of those who reach out to us. No one is excluded, no one is left out, no one falls short. In this new world, we are one in the Risen Christ.

Christ is Risen!