

Easter

By Kenneth Parrish

Once again it's that time of year when we turn our thoughts to bunnies, colored eggs, and baskets full of candy. That's right, I'm talking about Easter. But Easter isn't really about all of that. What exactly is Easter?

Easter always occurs in the spring, just around the Vernal Equinox. This also happens to be the time of year when plants begin coming back to life from their winter's sleep. In ancient days this was cause for celebration. The word Easter is derived from the pagan goddess Eostre (Latin: Oestre). Eostre was a spring/summer goddess, and April, which was viewed as the first month of summer, was called Eostremonath.

Eostre represented the re-birth of life and nature after the harsh weather of the winter months. The egg, which may have been a symbol of Eostre, is believed to have represented that very re-birth. The hare, which has become the modern day Easter bunny, is also thought to be a sacred symbol of Eostre, representing fertility.

Now as Christendom began growing as a religion, they wanted a day set aside to honor and remember the resurrection of Christ. It had to be around the same time as the Passover, since Jesus had His last meal with His disciples on that day. The pagan holiday was then chosen. If there was going to be a celebration, may as well make it a Christian one.

However, in the early days, a date for Easter could not be agreed upon. This disagreement was primarily between the Celtic (Culdee) Church and Rome, and lasted for many years, with the Celtic Church keeping the holiday on the fourteenth day after the paschal moon (according to the rule of the Council of Arles in 314 AD, and in spite of St. Augustine and the "Synod of the Oak") and the Roman observing it between the fifteenth and twenty-first. This was pretty much settled at the famous Council of Whitby in 664 AD, with Aldhelm, the Bishop of Sherborne, persuading the Celtic Christians in Cornwall to conform to the Roman usage in the early part of the eighth century AD.

Many traditions and customs seem to spring from this celebration. The most common is that of the Easter bunny. As mentioned earlier, the hare was a symbol of fertility. In Germany, around the 1800's, children were told that if they were good, the Easter hare would bring them eggs. This custom was brought to America with the German immigrants.

Knowing the origin of Easter urges the question many people, especially in recent times, have asked. Should Easter, having pagan origins, be celebrated by Christians? I believe the answer to that question is, "Yes." Just because a concept started out as paganism does not mean that it still is. Symbols mean what your culture teaches you. One looks at the cross today and sees the salvation that was paid for by Christ. However, in the early first century, the cross was looked upon as a means of execution by the Romans.

The same concept can be said of the days of the week. The seven day week was developed in Babylon ca. 2300 BC, and consisted of days to honor the five visible planets and the sun and moon. Their week consisted of: Shamash (Sun's day), Sin (Moon's day), Nebo (Mercury), Istar (Venus,) Nergal (Mars), Marduk (Jupiter) and Ninurta (Saturn). The names we use are from the Norse deities associated with the same planets: Sun's Day, Moon's Day, Tiu's Day, Wodin's Day, Thor's Day, Freya's Day and Saturn's Day. Even a few of our months come from the Roman gods: Janus for January, Mars for March, and Juno for June.

Easter is a fun holiday, but more importantly it reminds everyone of the Lord and His resurrection. It is true that communion is practiced in churches today to remember the Lord. Jesus said to "...do this in remembrance of me." in Luke 22:19, and so we do. That is fine for Christians who regularly attend services, but how about those people who do not? And what of lost souls who never think of our Lord?

Easter is a way of getting people to think about the Lord. A type of ministry, if you will. Remember that Paul tells us in Romans 10:17, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Maybe, through a Easter service, someone is led to Christ and becomes a child of God.

Have fun on Easter. Let the children hunt for eggs. Have the bunny bring candy and eggs in the basket. But remember, above all else, to teach the children about the Resurrection. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

The following illustration teaches that we can have fun with the customs and traditions of Easter and at the same time learn about the Resurrection:

The Tomb is Empty

Little Philip, born with Down's syndrome, attended a third-grade Sunday School class with several eight-year-old boys and girls. Typical of that age, the children did not readily accept Philip with his differences, according to an article in Leadership magazine. But because of a creative teacher, they began to care about Philip and accept him as part of the group, though not fully. The Sunday after Easter the teacher brought Leggs pantyhose containers, the kind that look like large eggs. Each receiving one, the children were told to go outside on that lovely spring day, find some symbol for new life, and put it in the egg-like container. Back in the classroom, they would share their new-life symbols, opening the containers one by one in surprise fashion. After running about the church property in wild confusion, the students returned to the classroom and placed the containers on the table. Surrounded by the children, the teacher began to open them one by one. After each one, whether flower, butterfly, or leaf, the class would ooh and ahh. Then one was opened, revealing nothing inside. The children exclaimed, "That's stupid. That's not fair. Somebody didn't do their assignment."

Philip spoke up, "That's mine."

"Philip, you don't ever do things right!" the student retorted. "There's nothing there!"

"I did so do it," Philip insisted. "I did do it. It's empty. The tomb was empty!"

Silence followed. From then on Philip became a full member of the class. He died not long afterward from an infection most normal children would have shrugged off. At the funeral this class of eight-year-olds marched up to the altar not with flowers, but with their Sunday school teacher, each to lay on it an empty pantyhose egg.

Source unknown