

## WHAT IS EASTER?

Easter is the sacred celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead. It is the oldest and holiest Christian festival, the climax and center of the liturgical year, and the holy day to which all other holy days point. Even denominations that do not strictly follow a liturgical calendar commemorate Easter with tremendous joy and thanksgiving.

## WHERE DOES THE NAME "EASTER" COME FROM?

According to the Venerable Bede, an Anglo-Saxon cleric and historian of late 7th-century/early 8th-century England, Easter gets its name from *Eostre* or *Eastre*, a Teutonic goddess of the dawn whose annual festival took place on the vernal equinox, the first day of spring in the northern hemisphere. While some scholars dispute this theory, it appears that "Easter" comes from the same root as the English word "east," the direction of the rising sun. Similarly, the German designation for Easter is *Ostern*. In many other languages however, the name for the festival of Christ's resurrection comes from *Pascha*, the Greek/Latin transliteration of the Hebrew word *Pesach* (Passover). Examples of this derivation can be seen in the Spanish *Pascua*, Italian *Pasqua*, French *Pâques*, Dutch *Paschen*, Russian *Pashka*, Norwegian *Påske*, Finnish *Pääsiäinen*, and Turkish *Paskalya*.

## WHEN IS EASTER?

The most commonly stated rule for determining the date of Easter is that it is the first Sunday that follows the first full moon after the vernal equinox. This means that in Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Protestant churches, Easter can fall as early as March 22 and as late as April 25. In actuality, the rule given above is a something of an over-simplification because the calculation of the date of Easter involves ecclesiastical definitions that do not exactly correspond to astronomical observations. For a complete discussion of the definitions and algorithms used to calculate the date of Easter, refer to [The Date of Easter](#) from the web site of the [Astronomical Applications Department of the U.S. Naval Observatory](#).

## WHY DOES THE DATE OF EASTER MOVE?

The gospels tell us that Christ's death and resurrection took place during Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the sacred commemoration of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt ([Exodus 12:1-17](#)). Passover is a festival that always falls on the evening of the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month of *Nisan*. The Feast of Unleavened Bread follows immediately on 15 *Nisan* and lasts seven days. Although Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are separate festivals, they have usually been considered to be a single multi-day observance. Therefore, the gospel of John refers to Passover as the "Day of Preparation" and the Feast of Unleavened Bread as a "High Day Sabbath" ([John 19:31](#)). The ancient Hebrew calendar is based on twelve lunar months, which is a total of approximately 354 days -- 11 days short of the full cycle of the seasons. Passover must fall in the spring because that is the time of year that lambs are mature enough to slaughter for the feast ([Exodus 12:5](#)). To keep the month of *Nisan* in the spring, a 13th month is added to the Hebrew calendar every three years or so. The result is that Passover always begins in the March/April timeframe but on a different day each year. Since the date of Passover is moveable, the date of Easter, which was originally based on Passover, is also moveable.

By the middle of the second century A.D., Christians determined the date of Easter in several ways based on local ordinances, but two methods were predominant. In Asia Minor (modern Turkey), churches celebrated the resurrection of Jesus on 14 *Nisan*, the first day of Passover, whether or not this day was a Sunday. Congregations in other areas celebrated the resurrection on the Sunday after 14 *Nisan*. This discrepancy in the dating of Easter was one of the topics on the agenda of the [Council of Nicaea](#), an official gathering of hundreds of theologians and bishops that took place in the year 325. The council established the rule that Easter is to be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. Disagreements on the dating of Easter persisted, however. Differences in language and theology and poor communication between widely scattered churches resulted in many more years of controversy before the Nicene

formula became generally accepted.

A significant disparity continues to exist today. Churches of the Eastern rites (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, etc.) base the date of Easter on the vernal equinox of the Julian calendar of the Roman Empire. Western rite churches (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Protestant) follow the Gregorian calendar, a revision of the Julian calendar that went into effect in Europe starting in 1582. The result is that Eastern rite Christians typically celebrate Easter anywhere from a week to more than a month after Western rite Christians. In 2008 for example, churches of the Western rite celebrated Easter on March 23; Eastern Orthodox churches celebrated it on April 27. It also sometimes happens that the two dates coincide (as they did in 2007).

In 1997, a special conference of representatives from the [World Council of Churches](#) and the [Middle East Council of Churches](#) urged that all traditions abandon previous methods of computing the date of Easter in favor of modern and scientifically precise calculations that use Jerusalem, the site of the Lord's death and resurrection, as the meridian from which astronomical measurements are based. While this proposal (commonly called the [Aleppo Statement](#)) would result in a unified date for Easter that is faithful to the Nicene formula, it is unclear what, if anything, will ultimately come of it. What all Christians need to remember is that it is the reality of the Lord's resurrection that unites the Body of Christ, not the date on which we choose to celebrate it.

## **WHAT ARE THE GREAT FIFTY DAYS?**

Contrary to what many people think, Easter is not a single day. It is actually a season that begins on Easter Sunday and continues for seven full weeks. This seven-week cycle is known historically as the *Great Fifty Days* or the *Week of Weeks*. During this time, the church celebrates the Lord's resurrection, His appearances to the disciples after Easter, His post-resurrection teachings, His ascension into heaven, and the disciples' eager anticipation of the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Ascension Day -- the 40th of the Great Fifty Days -- is frequently commemorated with a special evening worship service since it always falls on a Thursday.

## **WHAT IS WORSHIP LIKE DURING THE EASTER SEASON?**

The Easter season is the most joyful and festive season of the Christian year. Worship during this time features the prominent return of the *Gloria in Excelsis* ("Glory in the highest") and the *Alleluia* ("Praise the Lord"), expressions of joy and praise that were removed from the liturgy at the beginning of Lent. Hymns and organ music are often reinforced with trumpets and trombones, adding to the celebratory nature of the season. An old custom that is observed in some churches is that kneeling is done away with on Easter Sunday. Standing -- a symbol of rising and resurrection -- is the posture for the confession of sins and the reception of Holy Communion. Chancels and sanctuaries are usually decorated with banners and flowers, especially Easter lilies. White, symbolic of gladness and holiness, is the liturgical color for all the Sundays of Easter. Finally, the paschal candle is allowed to shine continuously throughout the Great Fifty Days.

## **WHAT IS A PASCHAL CANDLE?**

The paschal candle is an ancient symbol of the risen Jesus and commonly used in liturgical parishes during the Great Fifty Days of Easter. It is a very large white candle, the largest and tallest of all sanctuary candles. Paschal candles are always inscribed with a cross, the current year, and the Greek letters alpha and omega ([Revelation 1:8 and 22:13](#)), signifying that the Lord is present in His church now in the present year and forever in eternity. Sometimes, five grains of incense, symbolizing the five wounds of Christ, are pressed into the arms and center of the cross with pins or small nails. The paschal candle is prominently featured in the service of the Easter Vigil at which it is first lighted and brought into the sanctuary. According to ancient liturgical tradition, it is allowed to shine continuously throughout the Great Fifty Days until it is finally extinguished on Ascension Day. After that, it is removed from its place next to the altar and placed near the baptismal font. It is lighted at baptisms to remind Christians that in baptism we are crucified and raised with Jesus ([Romans 6:3-5](#)). The paschal candle is also lighted at

Christian funerals as a reminder that those who die in Christ are raised up with Him.

### **WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF EASTER EGGS AND THE EASTER RABBIT?**

In many ancient cultures, eggs were a common symbol of new life. In medieval times, Eggs came to represent the Lord's resurrection. Just as Christ broke out of the tomb on Easter morning, the yolk of the egg breaks out of its shell when cracked. The decoration of eggs for Easter is part of the folk traditions of many cultures, although it has little or no religious significance any more.

The Easter rabbit is a popular secular symbol for Easter that has never taken on a Christian interpretation. It seems to have originated from the hare, a symbol of fertility in ancient Egypt and later on in parts of Europe. It is not altogether clear how the Easter rabbit became associated with the laying of eggs.

The [Christianity Today Web Site](#) has several resources that explain the meaning and origin of many Easter symbols. The article [Why "Easter"?](#) is particularly useful.

### **WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EASTER TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH?**

The foundation of the Christian faith is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ lived the righteous and perfect life that we, because of our fallen and corrupt nature, cannot. He suffered the penalty for our sins by taking our guilt upon Himself and dying horribly on the cross. He rose bodily from the dead that first Easter morning ensuring that we who have been baptized into His death and resurrection will rise again in glorified bodies on the Last Day. This is the great paschal mystery that Christians have celebrated since the earliest days of the church. As the apostle Paul joyfully declared: *...Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive... "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!* (1 Corinthians 15:20-22 and 55-57). On Easter Sunday therefore, while secular society occupies itself with eggs and rabbits, the Christian church celebrates God's great triumph over sin, death, and the devil with the ancient greeting:

*Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Special thanks to [SAINT PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH 12022 Jerusalem Road Kingsville, MD 21087](#) for the above summary of information.