

**THE RISEN KING (EASTER SUNDAY)**

**Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10**

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Easter. For the Christian faith, Easter commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and is, therefore, considered the most sacred of all holy days. Easter—spelled Eastre—is also the name of an ancient Saxon festival and the name of the pagan goddess of spring and offspring. Second-century Christian missionaries, spreading out among the Teutonic tribes north of Rome, encountered numerous heathen religious observances. Whenever possible, the missionaries did not interfere too strongly with established customs, but quietly—and often ingeniously—sought to transform pagan practices into ceremonies that harmonized with Christian doctrine. There was a very practical reason for this. Converts publicly partaking in a Christian ceremony—especially on a day when no one else was celebrating—were easy targets for persecution. However, if a Christian ceremony was staged on the same day as a long-observed pagan ceremony, and if the two celebrations were not glaringly different, then the new converts might live to make other converts. Since the centuries-old festival of Eastre, commemorated at the start of spring, coincided with the time of year of the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Resurrection was subsumed under the protective umbrella of Eastre, saving the lives of countless Christians.

For several decades, Easter (as it came to be spelled) was variously celebrated on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. Finally, in A.D. 325, the Council of Nicaea, convened by the emperor Constantine, issued the so-called Easter Rule: Easter should be celebrated on “the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox.” As a result, Easter will never fall earlier than March 22 or later than April 25. By the way, at this same council, Constantine decreed that the cross be adopted as the official symbol of the Christian religion.

In America, it was not until after the Civil War, with its legacy of death and destruction, that the nation as a whole began a widespread observance of Easter, led

primarily by Presbyterians. They viewed the story of resurrection as a source of inspiration and renewed hope for the millions of bereaved Americans.

I know that some of you, especially the children, want to know where the Easter Bunny came from. The origin of the Easter Bunny can be traced all the way back to the fact the goddess Eastre was worshiped by the Anglo-Saxons through her earthly symbol, the rabbit (more accurately the hare).

And what about Easter Eggs? Only within the last century have chocolate and candy eggs been exchanged as Easter gifts. But the springtime exchanging of *real* eggs—white, colored, and gold-leafed—is an ancient custom, predating Easter by many centuries. From earliest times, and in most cultures, the egg signified birth and resurrection. The Egyptians buried eggs in their tombs. The Greeks placed eggs atop graves. The Romans coined a proverb: “All life comes from an egg.” And legend has it that Simon of Cyrene, who helped carry Christ’s cross to Calvary, was by trade an egg merchant. According to this legend, when Simon returned from the crucifixion to his produce farm, he discovered that all his hens’ eggs had miraculously turned a rainbow of colors. So, when the Christian Church started to celebrate the Resurrection, in the second century, it did not have to search far for a popular and easily recognizable symbol.<sup>1</sup>

Turn with me, please, to the last chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Let’s read together from Matt 28, beginning with verse 1.

<sup>1</sup>After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup>For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” <sup>8</sup>So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (NRSV).

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<sup>1</sup>The foregoing historical survey was taken from Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* (Perennial Library / Harper & Row, 1987), 55-58.

Today, as is our practice every Sunday in the Churches of Christ, we come to the Lord's Table. We come to partake in a celebration of thanksgiving to God for the salvation that can be ours through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This celebration is generally referred to as the Eucharist or the Mass in Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, while Protestants generally speak of it as Communion or the Lord's Supper or "the breaking of bread." Although there is diversity in perceptions and practices, I am thankful that so many professing Christians are drawn to the Lord's Table on Easter Sunday. The Lord's Table should unite Christians, not divide them. It should be a table of faith and fellowship, not a topic of dispute and dissension.

Down through the Christian centuries, the Lord's Supper has been explained and experienced in several significant ways. *Transubstantiation*, a term in Roman Catholic theology<sup>2</sup> meaning "change of substance," is the belief that by the power of God at the consecration in the Mass, the bread and the wine change substance into the actual substance of Jesus' body and blood, even though they seem to retain their natural characteristics. The bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus, although they appear to be only bread and wine. *Consubstantiation*, a term meaning "with the bread" and a theory of the Lord's Supper most closely associated with the Lutheran tradition, is the belief that the body and blood of Jesus is present "in, with and under" the actual bread and wine. Martin Luther taught that while the substances of bread and wine remain, the body and blood of Jesus do become present for the believer. Despite their differences, the Catholic and Lutheran views of the Lord's Supper both teach the "real presence" of Jesus in the bread and the wine. Ulrich Zwingli, a contemporary of Luther, took a purely *symbolic* view of the Lord's Supper and denied that any change takes place. The bread and the wine are symbols, and nothing more, of the body and blood of Jesus. We, in the Churches of Christ, follow in the footsteps of Zwingli. We speak of the bread and fruit of the vine as "representing" the body and blood of Jesus. Just listen to our prayers at the Lord's Table: we thank God for the bread "which represents" the body of Jesus, and we thank God for the fruit of the vine "which

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<sup>2</sup>The Greek Orthodox Church uses *metabole* (Greek: "change") or *metousiosis* (Greek: "change of essence") instead of *transubstantiation*, but the only real dispute with the Roman Catholic Church concerns the moment of consecration.

represents” the blood of Jesus. Sometimes, we call the bread and fruit of the vine “symbols” of the body and blood of Jesus. And perhaps the one word that we use more than any other in referring to the Lord’s Supper is “memorial.” We view the Lord’s Supper as a memorial to Jesus and not the actual presence of Jesus.

Personally, my faith is strengthened by *all* of these understandings of the Lord’s Supper. It is a witness to our human inability to fully describe what God is doing in, through, and by means of the Lord’s Supper. I confess, I do not believe that the bread and the fruit of the vine change their substance; but I also believe that they are more than symbols. *To me, the question is not about what happens to the bread and juice; but rather, what happens to me in the taking of the bread and juice. I need a change in substance!* And I believe that however one understands the Lord’s Supper, the taking of the Lord’s Supper is suppose to work a change in that person’s life. Something more than eating a cracker and drinking grape juice is taking place!

Allow me to illustrate. Baptism. It is a physical act in which a person is immersed in water. But it is more than that. It is more than just a dunking! Something more than getting wet has happened to the baptized person. Although we see only the physical act, we believe that God really is washing away sin by the blood of Jesus Christ. Although we see only the birth of water, we believe that the baptized person has also been born of the Spirit. We believe that in the physical act of baptism God is working spiritual miracles. Baptism is a physical act with symbolic *and* spiritual significance.

It is at this point that we often create a dilemma for ourselves. We do this by distinguishing between the physical and the spiritual. Then we equate the physical with what is real, since it is something that we can discern with our empirical senses. But if only the physical is real, what does this say about the spiritual? Is the spiritual, therefore, not really real? May I suggest that the dilemma we create is not real! A distinction *is* to be made between the physical and the spiritual, but a distinction *is not* to be made between the real and the spiritual. In baptism, both the physical and the spiritual are real. They may be different types of reality, but they are both really real. In baptism, the individual really is being born of the water and really is being born of the Spirit. The spiritual action of God is as real as the physical action of the human.

Now, let’s apply this thinking to the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper contains

physical elements—bread and juice—that convey a spiritual experience. *The Lord's Supper is a physical event with spiritual effects.* The bread and the juice are more than symbols, and the meal is more than a memorial. Something is really happening to me when I partake of the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, I can experience the presence and power of Jesus Christ even if I can't explain it. Just as I believe in the real presence of the Holy Spirit in baptism, I believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper.

John Calvin agreed with Zwingli in rejecting the bodily and substantial presence of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, and yet he agreed with Luther that Jesus is really and essentially present in the Lord's Supper. According to Calvin, Jesus Christ is spiritually present in the bread and wine, and in the Lord's Supper He imparts Himself and His spiritual blessings to those who by faith partake.

I believe that Jesus Christ is really present in the Lord's Supper. He is certainly spiritually present, and at times I wonder if—in some mystical way—He is also physically present. But He is really present. I believe that as I take part in this meal with the faith that I am taking Jesus Christ into my life, that Jesus Christ is in fact coming into my life and transforming me into His image. After all, “you are what you eat.” I believe that if my life is not being changed by the celebration of the Lord's Supper, then I am only eating a cracker and drinking some juice.

We come now to the Lord's Table. Would you pray with me as we prepare to eat the bread? *“Father, we thank You for this bread which, by the presence of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, is the very bread of life. We believe that as we eat this bread, You are feeding our souls and shaping our lives. Through Your Son, who gave His life for us, we pray, Amen.”*

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Would you pray with me as we prepare to drink the cup? *“Father, we thank You for this fruit of the vine which, by the presence of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, is the blood of the covenant. We believe that as we drink this cup, You are calling us into fellowship with You and are forming Your character in our lives. Through Your Son, who shed His blood for us, we pray, Amen.”*