

The *intercom* In Church and Community



From the Senior Pastor Easter Forever!

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is the cry of the faithful this joyous Easter season. The tomb is empty. Death has been defeated. Sins are forgiven. Love wins, and hope springs eternal. Thanks be to God! Alleluia!



Every year, on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, the church around the world celebrates the resurrection of Jesus with great pageantry and passion. But Easter is more than just another holiday; the empty tomb changed the course of history and the Spirit of the risen Christ is present and active in and through God's people even today.

In the church, Easter is not only the festival that is celebrated at the end of Lent and Holy Week but it is also a season that spans seven Sundays, beginning with Easter Sunday. At Our Savior's this year, we're taking our cues this Easter season from the hymn "Alleluia! Jesus Is Risen," a song that proclaims the eternal nature of this greatest of all church festivals (emphasis mine)—

1. Alleluia! Jesus is risen!

Trumpets resounding in glorious light!
Splendor, the Lamb, heaven *forever*!
Oh, what a miracle God has in sight!

Refrain: Jesus is risen and we shall arise.
Give God the glory! Alleluia!

5. City of God, Easter *forever*,
golden Jerusalem, Jesus the Lamb,
river of life, saints and archangels,
sing with creation to God the I Am! (*refrain*)

It's Easter that gives us reason to hope beyond death. It's Easter that gives us a vision of an eternity spent in the wide embrace of God's love. It's Easter that lifts us beyond the weight of our brokenness and empowers us to live each day as an agent of God's grace and mercy. Easter is forever.

Because of that, throughout the season of Easter we're going to peel back the layers of this Good News to reveal more than what some might call a pie-in-the-sky-in-the-sweet-by-and-by nature of *Easter Forever*. We'll explore Thomas's resurrection resistance and the community's capacity for holding space for his doubt (*Easter! However...*); we'll travel to Emmaus and remember that Easter is not easily contained (*Easter Wherever*); we'll celebrate that Easter is experienced and practiced quintessentially in community (*Easter Together*); we'll claim

continued

"Alleluia! Jesus Is Risen"

Text: Herbert F. Brokering, b. 1926

Text © 1995 Augsburg Fortress

Ministry Spotlight

Symbols and Traditions of the Easter Season

By Pr. Tim Lemme



Although we eagerly anticipate the celebration of Easter Sunday each year, it is important to take time to consider the deep significance of Eastertime, from Holy Week—where Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil remind us of God's great sacrifice of love, for us

and for all of creation—through the cross and resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day, and all through the Easter season. See Pr. Randy's article in this month's *Intercom* for more on that.

To help you experience the richness of this season, let's consider the symbols and traditions that surround this, holiest time of the church year. As you do, think about the things that made and continue to make this season special for you.

Two ancient traditions anchor worship on **Palm Sunday**: an entrance procession and a reading that proclaims the entire passion narrative from the year's appointed gospel. It is as if Holy Week from its very beginning signals its intent to open the scriptures as widely as possible to welcome us as participants in a scriptural story that continues to unfold in our own time and place. The most obvious thing we seek at this service are palm branches. They come to us from the scripture story itself, but how did they end up in our service?

Palm branches' use in worship represents the biblical story of townspeople honoring Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey prior to the crucifixion. The point of the Palm Sunday procession is not that we close our eyes and imagine that we have gone to the holy city of Jerusalem back then, but that we open our eyes to see that the holy city, and Jesus, are here with us, today.

The service begins with a parade that once again welcomes Christ's arrival, but ends with the story of his arrest, torture, and death. Together, these two striking and contrasting liturgical events remind us of the week we are about to journey through together, a week that also begins with celebration, and ends with death.

Some of the things seen and heard in the **Maundy Thursday** service are foot washing, dramatic readings, stripping of the altar, and sometimes the reenacting of the Last Supper.

The washing of feet is a way for us to remember the humble service Jesus performed for the disciples at the last supper, and that we too are to humbly serve each other in the same way.

We also remember that on Maundy Thursday Jesus observed

Passover with his disciples—the Last Supper. Passover is the time when Jews remembered their freedom and exodus from Egypt. During the feast Jesus shared with his disciples, Passover took on a whole new meaning. The bread and wine now became the sacrificial giving of Christ on the cross for all of creation. The bread symbolizes his body that would be broken, and the wine, his blood, which would be poured out for the forgiveness of sins. The Last Supper is remembered today in churches on Maundy Thursday, and every time Christians share the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Stripping of the altar symbolizes the pouring out of Christ's entire self, his passion, being stripped of all he had to give, even his life, as it is poured out on the cross for the salvation of us all. This action, together with the recitation of Palm 88 or 22, concludes the service as the congregation leaves in silence, and prepares to return for Good Friday worship and the rest of the story.

The **Good Friday** service is actually a continuation of the service that began on Maundy Thursday. On Good Friday, we find ourselves standing before the Cross of Christ, as our journey through Holy Week comes to a close.

The Veneration of the Cross, where the cross is carried into the worship space, and the words, "Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the Savior of the whole world," are said repeatedly. The procession anticipates the Easter Vigil's procession with the Paschal candle, when the candle shines with the light of Christ rising in glory.

A service of Tenebrae ("Service of Darkness") is often a part of the Good Friday observance. As the service continues with the reading of the passion story from John's Gospel, candles are extinguished until only one single candle, the Paschal candle, remains lit. The candle represents the presence of Christ with us. The purpose of the service is to recreate the betrayal, abandonment, and agony of the events leading up to the death of Jesus on the cross, and it is left unfinished, because the story isn't over until Easter Day.

The service concludes with the *strepitus*, a loud noise symbolizing the earthquake at the time of Jesus' death, and to represent the closing of Christ's tomb. The service ends with participants leaving in silence.

Among symbols associated with Good Friday, the *crown of thorns*, a vivid reminder of Christ's suffering, recalls the thorns Roman soldiers twisted together and placed on Jesus' head as they mocked him as the King of the Jews before the Crucifixion. The *cross*, the most common symbol of Christianity,

was a tool of torture and death, now the sign of salvation for Christians. Veneration of the cross on Good Friday originated in fourth-century Jerusalem and continues to this day.

The Easter Vigil often begins with the congregation gathering around a fire lit outside the church to symbolize the conquering of darkness. The Easter candle is lit from this fire. The congregation then lights their own individual candles from this Paschal candle, signifying our call to spread the light of Christ to the world.

Fire reminds us that Jesus is the Light of the World that leads the world out of darkness. Just as Jesus defeated death by rising on that first Easter Sunday, so too are we, in our baptism, joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a reminder of this, we are given a candle at our baptism to remind us that we are called to be Christ's light in the world.

Other fun symbols and traditions of Holy Week and Easter include the *Easter Bunny*—in 18th-century German folklore, *Osterhase* or “Easter Hare”—who left eggs for children to discover on Easter morning. The tradition followed German immigrants to America, where the Easter Bunny became a mainstay of American Easter mornings.

The hare or rabbit's burrow helped the animal's adoption as part of Easter celebrations. Believers saw the rabbit coming out of its underground home as a symbol for Jesus coming out of the tomb. Perhaps this was another case of taking a preexisting symbol and giving it a Christian meaning.

After the Easter Bunny, the *Easter egg* is the most familiar Easter symbol. Many ancient cultures viewed eggs as a symbol of life. Hindus, Egyptians, Persians, and Phoenicians believed the world began with an enormous egg. The Persians, Greeks, and Chinese gave gifts of eggs during spring festivals in celebration of new life all around them. Other sources say people ate dyed eggs at spring festivals in Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

Early Christians looked at the connection eggs had to life and decided eggs could be a part of their celebration of Christ's resurrection. In addition, in some areas, eggs were forbidden during Lent; therefore, they were a delicacy at Easter.

Eggs were dyed red for joy and in memory of Christ's blood. Egg-rolling contests came to America from England, possibly as a reminder of the stone being rolled away.

What about the familiar *Easter egg hunt*? One source suggests it grew out of the tradition of German children searching for hidden pretzels during the Easter season. Since children were hiding nests for the Easter Bunny to fill with eggs at the same time they were hunting pretzels, it was only a small leap to begin hiding eggs instead.

The Easter egg hunt also represented the resurrection of Jesus. Christians would hide dyed eggs for their children to find, symbolizing the search for Jesus's body after the crucifixion.

Today, children typically search for plastic eggs filled with candy rather than cooked eggs, but the source of the tradition is the same.

Easter lilies are symbolic of new life as well as purity. They symbolize Jesus' resurrection and the promise of everlasting life.

Soft pretzels are technically an Easter food! Legend has it that soft pretzels were created during the seventh century by a monk as food to eat during Lent. At this time, Catholics weren't allowed to eat eggs, fat, or milk during the 40-day fast for Lent. Pretzels require only flour, salt, and water. Their shape is said to represent a common prayer position of the time (arms crossed in front with hands placed on shoulders). They are a traditional Lenten food in many parts of the world, even though the fast rules have now been significantly relaxed.

In many parts of the world, *hot cross buns* are a traditional food for Good Friday. Each bun features a cross on top, which symbolizes the cross on which Jesus died. The spices included in the buns are said to be representative of the ones that were used to prepare Jesus' body for the tomb. ♦

Sources for this article include Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days, *Augsburg Fortress*, 2023; and “*Understanding the History and Symbols of Easter*” at Crosswalk.com

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the power of Easter to transform the world despite great resistance and persecution (*Easter Whatever (Happens)*); we'll rest in the promise of the Advocate, who is with us always, especially when trouble comes our way (*Easter Whenever*); and we'll lean into the promise of Easter of a better day (*Easter: It Gets Better*).

Regardless of where you're at in your faith journey, Easter is

for you, so join us for worship this Easter season and know without a doubt the hope and joy of *Easter Forever*.

In Christ's love,



Pr. Randy Gehring



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