

# Jesus and the Easter Bunny

After a long day on Tuesday, Wednesday is a silent day, and no events are recorded.

On Thursday, Jesus and the disciples gather for the Passover meal, a dinner that has been immortalized not only in the pages of Scripture but also in art, lore, and literature as the Last Supper. Following the meal was the Upper Room Discourse where Jesus gives final instructions to his disciples. The night then takes a radical turn as they go to the Garden of Gethsemane where they prayed but then were confronted by guards who came to arrest Jesus.

Over the course of that night, Jesus is tried by Annas and then Caiaphas, the high priest. In the morning, on Friday, Jesus is then tried by the Sanhedrin, a governing Jewish body. Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy—for claiming to be not just the Messiah, but the very Son of God.

Jesus is then sent to the Roman authorities to be judged under Roman law. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, first questions him and finds no fault. He is sent to Herod, who Pilate thought would be better equipped to handle a Jewish problem, but Herod also finds no fault. Jesus is sent back to Pilate, who under pressure from the Jews finds Jesus guilty of claiming royal status in an empire where Caesar alone claimed such authority. Jesus' charge was being "King of the Jews".

Jesus is flogged and crucified with two criminals by 9am that Friday morning at Gologtha (or Calvary). And he died at 3pm as he uttered his last words—"It is finished".

But on Sunday, he rose again.

I have wondered what it must have been like for Jesus to bear not just the physical pain, but the weight of the world's sins, on that cross. Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* illustrates the significance of the event with a raindrop/teardrop that comes down from the clouds in the heavens. Others have said that it was not nails that held him to that cross, but his love for us. But even for Jesus, it was a tough thing to face as we recall his conversation with God in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before, as he asked God to take

the cup (of suffering) away from him, if it be the Father's will. But Jesus never got that pardon. He hung on the tree and asked God that question which echoes into eternity—"Why have you forsaken me?" And the only satisfying answer I have ever received was that Jesus uttered those words to the Almighty God so that we would never have to. Happy Easter.

## New Life Community Church

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Happy Easter, New Life Community Church! While New Years, Memorial and Labor Day are some of the holidays we like mark on our calendars because we get to enjoy a day off from the office, the most sacred holiday for us Christians is still Easter Sunday because we commemorate the resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. Clearly, no other holiday holds as much significance and weight like the day we remember Jesus. And yet, I have found that Easter is among the lesser known holidays. So I did

some research and here is what we know of Easter's history and Passion Week:

First, while Easter itself is an explicitly Christian day, Easter has a rather interesting history, fusing different elements from different places—some not Christian at all. Follow me for a little bit here...

Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full moon of the year, which occurs on or after 3/21. So Easter always falls between 3/22 and 4/25. This year we celebrate it on 3/23/08, which is almost as early as we can possibly celebrate Easter. The next time we can expect to celebrate Easter on 3/23 is the year 2160, long after we've passed into the next life. This also means that Easter is a "movable holiday"—it does not fall on a fixed date in the Gregorian or Julian calendars (which follow the cycle of the sun and seasons), but instead follows the lunar calendar.



Now, Easter has a special link to the Jewish Passover, which was a festival meal shared in remembrance of God's passing over Jewish

homes in Egypt saving the first born sons from death (see Exodus) and therefore a highly recognized event. It is generally believed that the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples right before his death (which is God's second act of "passing over" this world through the Lamb's blood) was part of the Passover festival, linking these two symbolic events together.



But not only does Easter have some distant Jewish ties, it is also linked to a pagan festival as well. In the Germanic/Norse culture of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Germanic people had a festival honoring the goddess Eostre (or Eastre)—the goddess of light and the spring season. "Easter" is the Old English derivative of "Eostre". According to the New International Bible Dictionary, the springtime festival and goddess symbolized the **eastern** sunrise, when the sun crosses the equator and day & night are equal length. Thus, as was mentioned above, the Christian Easter falls upon the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the first full moon. The full moon symbolized the "pregnant" phase of Eastre wherefrom the Sun would arrive.

Already we see the diverse origins of Easter. But to add even more to the story, the Easter Bunny was a part of the Easter tradition even before it was formally associated with Christianity. Because the Christian Easter fell on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday following the first full moon of the year, it falls upon the spring season. The goddess Eastre was not only goddess of the sun, but also of spring, which symbolized fertility and renewal. Rabbits in the old pagan cultures were considered very fertile creatures, reproducing often and rapidly. The pagan symbols of rebirth and renewal were expedient for Christian purposes considering the resurrection of Jesus and his saints. Thus, Christians liked how these mythological themes and symbols connected to their own theology and history, and they modified it for their own use.

Now we are seeing a fuller picture of how Easter has come about, adopting and assimilating ideas from different cultures, yet remaining theologically consistent to the Gospel accounts of Christ's resurrection. By the way, according to a popular piece of folklore, Eastre once saved a bird whose wings were frozen during the winter by



A depiction of the goddess Eostre

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turning it into a rabbit. Because the rabbit had formerly been a bird, it could still lay eggs. Hence, we have the Easter egg as part of the festivities surrounding our holiday, even today.

In terms of the larger scope of the week, Easter is part of a bigger set of events. Since Easter signifies Christ's resurrection on the third day, we trace back to Friday as his death on the cross, which we know as Good Friday. But this is only the events of the week's end. In fact, all the Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—while they each have their unique qualities to their respective books and each have information found exclusively in them, they all devote the majority of their books to what is popularly called Passion Week.

Passion Week gets its name from the Greek word *pascha* which means to undergo or experience suffering, which is what the Christ did that week. The week began on Sunday, also known as Palm Sunday. Here, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on a donkey as people lay palm leaves on the road—a very symbolic event recognizing Jesus as a Messianic figure (see Zech 9:9 and Ps 118:25-26). This is also referred to as the Triumphal Entry.

On the next day, Monday, Jesus enters Jerusalem again after spending each night of the week in Bethany. On this Monday, Jesus curses a fig-tree (another symbolic act) and "cleanses" the Temple of the greedy and corrupt money-changers as he quotes from Malachi 3:1.



Tuesday is spent teaching, particularly in parables as he defends his authority before the religious elite. Jesus deals with many questions from both his disciples as well as his detractors. On his leaving Jerusalem, he stops by the Mount of Olives where he gives the Olivet Discourse, a detailed prophecy largely about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple due to the rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the Jewish authorities.