

# THE Easter CELEBRATION

*What does it really mean?*

By Curtis Peter Van Gorder

**E**ASTER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL of the year, celebrating Jesus' resurrection three days after His crucifixion. Like Christmas, the meaning of Easter can be obscured by our traditions, which are often hand-me-downs from our pagan past.

The published results of a poll conducted by Australia's *Sun-Herald* newspaper in which people were asked what Easter meant to them were in this order: chocolate Easter eggs (54 percent), a long-weekend holiday (39 percent), the Royal Easter Show (21 percent), a religious occasion (20 percent).

Sydney's Roman Catholic archbishop lamented, "For many, Easter has no religious significance at all; it is just another secular festival."

The Easter bunny? Lots of chocolates? Egg hunts? Where did it all start?

Some scholars believe the name "Easter" comes from *Eastre*, the Anglo-Saxon name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility. Her festival was celebrated on the day of the spring equinox, March 21. The rabbit was a symbol of fertility, due to its high rate of reproduction. At this festival vividly colored eggs representing the bright sunlight of spring were given as gifts or used in egg-rolling contests. Eggs were rolled at one another, and the egg that remained uncracked the longest was the winner.

Yet, despite its pagan past, today Easter also has many meaningful traditions celebrated around the world.

Greek Orthodox children are sometimes seen tapping red-dyed eggs together. One child says, "Christ is risen," and the other replies, "Yes, He has really risen!"

In Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA, the Moravian trombone band plays hymns around the city before dawn on Easter to call their flock to attend a sunrise

**The meaning of Easter is not found in cute bunnies and colored eggs. For us who know Jesus, it's so much more. It's when He conquered death and the grave. Easter is the fulfillment of Jesus' love.**

—Amanda White



service at the old Moravian cemetery. At the service, the trombones rock out with joy as the sun peeks above the horizon.

Easter is intertwined with spring in the northern hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> New plants are shooting up everywhere at this time. I remember the beauty of the dogwood and magnolia trees blooming in all their glory, filling the air with their sweet scent at Easter.

In Japan, I saw wild lilies sprouting up in many uncultivated fields during spring. The lily is a favorite symbol of Easter that is often used for decorations at this time. The pure white blossoms remind us how Jesus took us, dirty as we were, and washed us clean. As the lilies sprout after a long winter, so Christ gives us new life through the hope of His resurrection.

Candles are burned during many Easter celebrations. In Russia, Orthodox Christians hold a prayer vigil service on Easter Eve. A large lit candle on the altar represents Jesus being the light of the world.

This candle is in turn used to light each worshipper's candle. This tradition represents the spreading of Jesus' light throughout the world.

Many people around the world dramatize the Easter story in "Passion plays." Perhaps the most famous Passion play is performed by the villagers of Oberammergau, in southern Germany. It was first performed in 1634 by the village in gratitude for being

<sup>1</sup> For much of the Christian world, Easter is the first Sunday after the full moon after March 21—which means anywhere between March 22 and April 25. For the Eastern Orthodox Church it can be celebrated later than this.

Jesus' death on the cross  
was not the end;  
it was  
only  
the beginning.

spared from destruction by a plague. With only three exceptions, the play has been performed every 10 years since 1680.

In East European countries a lamb is an important symbol of Easter. Many people serve lamb for the Easter feast, or make a lamb-shaped cake. Jesus is referred to numerous times in the New Testament as the Lamb of God.

It is quite amazing that on the very day that Jesus was crucified, the Passover lamb was being sacrificed in the Jewish Temple. Sacrificial Passover lambs needed to be "without blemish" (Exodus 12:5). Christians believe that Jesus was without sin, and His death purchased forgiveness of sin and salvation for all who will accept Him as their Savior. Upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NKJ). Because He rose from the dead, we also have the promise of eternal life in Heaven after we die. Easter is a time to celebrate new beginnings. Let Jesus touch your life, if He hasn't already, and He will give you not only Heaven hereafter, but also a wonderful new start here and now.

❖

*From Jesus:* When I was dying on the cross, I felt forsaken. But when I rose from the dead everything was new, everything was different, all the pain was forgotten. There was no remorse or sorrow, because the anguish of dying was consumed by the joy of My resurrection. The pain of death was swallowed up by victory.

Easter is a holiday celebrating victory, triumph, and overcoming. So think about the good things I have brought your way. Think on the good, the positive. It's a day to forget any sorrow or pain or discouragement, and to focus on the joyful and the victorious.

Remember the great love I have for you—the love that led Me to give My life for you, and the love that gave Me the power to rise up in new life, also for you.