



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

Easter Reconsidered



Title

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We believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His death, burial, and resurrection are central to the message of the apostles and the first century church. Today, with the cross, the Resurrection remains as the central theme of our Christian faith.

Jesus' resurrection fulfilled the sign He gave to His critics:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:38-40).

These verses confirm the importance of Jesus' resurrection as evidence for His messiahship and lordship, and they provide crucial information regarding the Easter celebration, to be discussed shortly.

Paul cites Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection as a summary of the gospel of salvation (1 Corinthians 15:2-4). Unless Christ had been raised from the dead, all believers would still be in their sins (vv. 14-17).

Christ's resurrection is authentication that He is God's Son, our Lord and Messiah: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32, 36). Paul wrote that Jesus "through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrec-

tion from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:4).

As Christians, we affirm our belief in the resurrection through Christian baptism. Paul wrote that baptism, signifying spiritual renewal, is a symbolic participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3, 4).

Finally, the resurrection of Jesus sustains our Christian hope for bodily resurrection at His second coming:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him (1 Corinthians 15:20, 22, 23).

We believe in Christ’s resurrection. We preach it, we rejoice in it, we are renewed through it, and our hope of eternity is secured by it! But as glorious as the Resurrection is, not all devoted followers of Jesus choose to participate in the holiday that supposedly celebrates it.

Why not observe Easter?

If the Easter festival exists as an authentic memorial of this central biblical event, why wouldn’t every Christian celebrate it with enthusiasm? Three reasons for reconsidering Easter’s value in honoring the resurrection of Christ are presented here.

Syncretism

Our first concern is that Easter mixes belief in the resurrection of Christ with ancient

practices originating in idolatrous paganism. The intermixing of heathen religious practices with the Spirit-and-truth worship of the one true God is strictly forbidden in the Scriptures. Such intermixing is formally known as *syncretism*.

Reference materials like encyclopedias or Bible dictionaries provide ample evidence that the Easter festival and its customs were borrowed from pagan practices predating the time of Christ. Note these samples of the many sources that confirm the syncretism of the modern Easter celebration:

The name Easter derived from the pagan goddess of dawn and spring, Eostra or Eostre, and the Easter rituals pertained to the rising sun and to the triumph of the ascending spring over winter. Christian sermons and liturgies easily adapted these earlier sun sanctifications to lauding the Son's ascent to heaven.¹

Easter, the annual festival observed throughout Christendom in commemoration of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word Easter-Anglo-Saxon, Eastre, Eoster; German, Ostern — like the names of the days of the week, is a survival from Teutonic mythology. According to Bede, it is derived from "the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, to whom the fourth month, answering to April, was dedicated."

There is no trace of the celebration of Easter as a Christian festival in the New Testament or in the writings of the apostolic fathers. . . . The ecclesiastical historian Socrates . . . states with perfect truth that neither Christ nor His apostles enjoined the keeping of this or any other

festival. "The apostles," he writes, "had no thought of appointing festival days, but of promoting a life of blamelessness and piety."²

Popular Easter customs have pagan origins. Consider the traditions of Easter eggs and rabbits.

Easter eggs: The Easter egg, with its varied history, has become one of Easter's most popular customs. Virtually every culture of the ancient world revered the egg as a symbol of creation and fertility. The egg was credited with hatching, or giving birth to, many of the deities of ancient myths. It was used as a charm to avert evil spirits and bring good fortune. As the influence of the Roman church spread throughout the world, tens of thousands accepted a form of Christianity but held on to many of their earlier superstitions. Since the egg could no longer symbolize their pagan beliefs, they assigned new legends with a Christian theme to the egg.³

By the fourth century, we find accounts of eggs being blessed in the Roman church. Today many people view the Easter egg as a symbol of the tomb from which Christ arose, and as a sign of new life. The custom of rolling Easter eggs supposedly symbolizes rolling the stone away from the tomb where Christ was buried.⁴

Eggs and rabbits are familiar symbols unrelated to the Easter story. Eggs, which represent new life, have been a symbol of spring since ancient times. Christians adopted the egg as an Easter symbol because

of the relationship between Easter and the renewal of life.⁵

Easter rabbits: “The hare and the egg were also supposed to have been symbols of the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre. As such they were emblematic of fertility.”⁶

Rabbits are associated with the fertility of spring because of their ability to produce many young. Some parents tell their children that the Easter rabbit, or Easter bunny, brings Easter eggs.

The Easter festival is full of syncretism, combining many customs of heathen origin with our biblical faith in Christ. Syncretism is forbidden by God’s Word, which holds us to the doctrine of monotheism throughout. There is but one true and living God, and His believers are not to worship other gods along with Him (Exodus 20:3; Mark 12:29, 30).

God’s ancient instructions through Moses demonstrate His serious opposition to syncretism. The Israelites were instructed not to make treaties with the inhabitants of the Promised Land. They were to break down their idolatrous altars, smash their sacred stones, and destroy the symbols of their goddess, Asherah (Exodus 34:12, 13). They were to eliminate all pagan religious objects from the land. The final injunction was “Do not worship any other god . . .” (v. 14).

Long after Moses, Israel was told through Jeremiah, “Do not learn the way of the nations” (Jeremiah 10:2). This was a warning against adopting the cultic customs of other nations or diluting the worship of the true God with paganism. And this observation is made about the people of Israel whom the

king of Assyria resettled in Samaria: “They worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought” (2 Kings 17:33).

Read what Paul wrote about this practice:

The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons (1 Corinthians 10:20, 21).

In 2 Corinthians 6:14—7:1 Paul strongly taught the general principle that Christians are not to form syncretistic relationships with unbelievers and thus compromise the purity of their faith. He raised the rhetorical questions of what these good-and-evil contrasts have in common:

- righteousness and light with wickedness and darkness;
- Christ and the believer with Belial (the devil) and the unbeliever;
- the temple of God with idols.

Each of these demands a negative answer, and Paul concludes the paragraph with a ringing call for Christians to separate themselves from the world and its false practices (2 Corinthians 6:17, 18; 7:1).

Although the Resurrection is a glorious biblical fact, we do not find it being celebrated on a special day by the early church. When it began to be celebrated on a Sunday morning, this intended memorial was soon corrupted by being named after the goddess of spring and associated with

pagan symbols of fertility, all foreign to the Christian faith.

The modern observance of Easter has not abandoned these elements. They are still very much alive and well as part of today's festival. If they had a corrupting effect upon the early Easter celebration, then their influence on the modern celebration is also corrupting. If they were syncretistic at their inception, they remain syncretistic today.

We affirm that Christ is risen from the dead, but we don't understand how the risen Lord is honored by the pagan rites, symbols, and customs often associated with His resurrection.

Truth and accuracy

The second reason for not observing Easter is a matter of biblical accuracy. The earliest report of the Resurrection indicates that it occurred not on Sunday morning, but late on Sabbath:

In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. . . . And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay (Matthew 28:1, 2, 5b, 6, KJV).

None of the Gospels report the exact moment of Jesus' resurrection. However,

Matthew's account declares that the Resurrection had already taken place before the weekly Sabbath ended. This fact is often overlooked by those who attempt to harmonize Matthew's account of the women visiting the tomb on Sabbath with their Sunday morning visits. In their anxious search for the missing body of Jesus, the women apparently made multiple visits to the tomb.

Evidence of more than one visit is in the identity of the different women who are named in each visit:

- Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matthew 28:1);
- Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1);
- Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them (Luke 24:10);
- Mary Magdalene (John 20:1, 10-18).

Further evidence of more than one visit to the tomb is seen in the time of their visits:

- in the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1, KJV);
- when Sabbath was over (Mark 16:1);
- on the first day of the week, very early in the morning (Luke 24:1);
- early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark (John 20:1).

Additionally, the accounts differ regarding the combinations of angels/men whom the women saw on their visits:

- an angel of the Lord (Matthew 28:2);
- a young man (Mark 16:5);
- two men (Luke 24:4);
- two angels (John 20:12).

Then there are different places the angels/men were situated:

- on the rolled-away stone (Matthew 28:2);
- on the right side (Mark 16:5);
- beside the women inside the tomb (Luke 24:4);
- where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot (John 20:12).

The differences in the times, numbers, and locations among these four accounts of the Resurrection make it nearly certain that the women made more than one visit to the empty tomb. We have to allow that their anxiety and confusion in this turbulent time may have caused them to return to the tomb more than once to determine where Jesus' body had been taken. This is confirmed in texts like Luke 24:11, 25 and John 20:11-16.

Given this state of affairs, it is unnecessary to harmonize Matthew with the other Gospel reports of the women's visits on the first day of the week. Matthew reported the women's visits with two references to time:

- "in the end of the sabbath";
- "as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week."

Matthew's account covers the earliest visit of the women to see the tomb. It occurred at the end of the Sabbath day, just before sunset (Matthew 28:1, KJV; Leviticus 23:32).

Matthew's first reference to the time of a visit ("in the end of the sabbath") refers to the ending of a twenty-four-hour period at sunset.

His second reference to the time of this visit (“as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week”) must be understood in the Jewish sense of the start of a new day — also at sunset. This is also seen in Luke 23:54.

In both Matthew and Luke, the word *dawn* (Greek, *epiphosko*) refers to the approach of a new day. Thus, Matthew’s Jewish readers would understand that Matthew was describing the start of the first day of the week at sunset, not sunrise! We conclude that Matthew reported the earthquake, the descent of the angel, the removal of the stone over the tomb, and the women’s visit as occurring before the Sabbath had ended.

On the other hand, Mark, Luke, and John all described visits of the women as occurring at the start of a twelve-hour day, beginning at sunrise. They reported the beginning of the daylight period of the first day of the week.

Therefore, we find no compelling reason to reconcile the time reference of Matthew 28:1 with the time references of the other Gospels, because they are not referring to the same period of time or the same occurrences.

It is not illogical for the women to return to the tomb the next morning after their first visit late on the Sabbath. They were concerned about the missing body of Jesus and couldn’t be satisfied until they found it. Their inability to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead does not seem strange when you consider the unbelief of all Jesus’ disciples. The risen Lord appeared to them more than once before they fully grasped the truth of His resurrection (Acts 1:3). Apparently,

doubts prompted the women to go to the tomb multiple times.

The important fact in all the visits to the tomb is that Jesus had already risen from the dead! More than five hundred of Jesus' disciples witnessed His several appearances after the Resurrection, but none of them actually viewed events at the tomb when He was raised.

If the resurrection of Christ is to be remembered and celebrated as close as possible to the time it occurred, we would take into account that He rose from the grave not on Sunday but on Sabbath evening, just three days and three nights after His burial late on Wednesday. And we might call it Resurrection Sabbath, not Easter Sunday. (For a full study of the Sabbath Resurrection, contact Bible Advocate Press and request our booklet entitled *The Duration of Jesus' Entombment*.)

No biblical observance

The third reason for reconsidering Easter's value in honoring the Resurrection is that Jesus did not command its observance, nor does the New Testament record a festival in honor of the Resurrection. This does not diminish the importance of Christ's resurrection to Christian faith. It became central to the church's teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul resolved, "I want to know Christ — yes, to know the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10). He wrote to Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead . . ." (2 Timothy 2:8).

The apostles were witnesses that Jesus

rose (Acts 2:32). They communed with their risen Lord (1:3-8) and beheld Him ascending into heaven (v. 9). In spite of these facts, they showed no inclination to memorialize these occurrences by an annual or weekly celebration.

There is no celebration of the Resurrection in the New Testament.

There is no trace of the celebration of Easter as a Christian festival in the New Testament or in the writings of the apostolic fathers. The sanctity of special times and places was an idea quite alien to the early Christian mind.⁷

It is not as though the early church overlooked appropriate memorial services. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, or communion service, in memory of His death (Luke 22:19, 20).

Paul confirmed the importance and meaning of the Lord's Supper as a Christian observance:

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23b-25).

Thus, the Lord's Supper was instituted and modeled by Christ for believers and the apostles continued it, but celebrating the Resurrection was neither instituted nor modeled by Him or the apostles. Therefore, it is biblical to observe the Lord's Supper service as a memorial to Jesus' death in light

of His resurrection, but it is extra-biblical to celebrate a festival honoring His resurrection in the manner that originated centuries after the event. Isn't it better to follow the direct instructions of Christ and the example of the apostolic church than the traditions of men?

Easter as a mistranslation

The word *Easter* appears once in the King James Version of the Bible: "And when he [Herod] had apprehended him [Peter], he put him in prison . . . intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people" (Acts 12:4).

Easter in this verse is a mistranslation of the Greek word *pascha*, meaning "Passover." Elsewhere in the New Testament, *pascha* occurs more than twenty-five times and is translated *Passover* in every case. Thus, it is obvious that the single instance of translating *pascha* as *Easter* in Acts 12:4 is improper and offers no support for the observance of *Easter*.

Summary

Observance of *Easter Sunday* as a celebration of the resurrection of our Lord may well be avoided by faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

The name *Easter* and its customs (eggs, rabbits, sunrise services, etc.) have all been adapted from paganism and incorporated into it; thus *Easter* is tainted with syncretism.

The Gospel writers do not support a *Sunday Resurrection*. Matthew reported that Jesus had already risen from the dead

when the women arrived at the tomb near sunset on Sabbath. If the Resurrection were to be celebrated on any particular day, the Sabbath would be more appropriate than Sunday.

Observance of Sunday as the day of Resurrection is an invention of the post-first century church. Instructions to celebrate the resurrection of Christ are absent from the Scriptures, nor do any Bible texts refer to its celebration at any particular time by the apostles or the first century church.

The Bible does not forbid annual celebrations that accurately present the grace and truth of Jesus, but Easter Sunday falls short of that standard. Celebrating Christ's resurrection as a sequel to the Lord's Supper or as a main theme in the next Sabbath's worship, however, can be a joyful, legitimate expression of both biblical freedom and our blessed hope in the gospel — if done with scriptural integrity and without idolatrous influence.

The death and resurrection of our Lord are vital to our faith in Christ. Both are central to the gospel and to our salvation. We demonstrate our belief in the risen Lord when we take communion in memory of His sacrificial death, as He instructed. To avoid man-devised celebrations that overshadow biblical instructions seems only proper.

Endnotes

1. "Feast and Festivals, European," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 5 (1985 ed.), 36.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. VII, 1898 ed., 613, 614.

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3. See Venetia Newall, *An Egg at Easter* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971).
 4. Ibid.
 5. "Easter," *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 6, (2001 ed.), 42, 43.
 6. Robert J. Meyers, *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1972), 109.
 7. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1898 ed.



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