

Easter Springs to Life

Diane M. Houdek

The first time I saw kids lining up to see the Easter Bunny at the local mall, I didn't know whether to be amused or appalled. I grew up looking for Easter baskets hidden around the house, chocolate bunnies (preferably solid white), jelly beans and colored eggs. But asking for presents from said holiday rabbit was going too far.

Easter is the high point of our liturgical year, as the resurrection is the pinnacle of our Christian identity. Yet it's the most difficult feast to understand. Unlike Christmas, which brings the Son of God to a human level we can begin to comprehend, Easter raises us to our ultimate destiny. And the resurrection changed not only the lives of a few people, but the nature of human reality itself. Death was no longer the end of all existence.

It's no wonder, then, that the secular world has given us images we can hang our Easter bonnets on. But when the chocolate rabbits are long gone and we're tired of eating hard-boiled eggs, as a faith community we're just beginning to unpack the mystery of the resurrection. As with any life-changing event, understanding doesn't come instantly.

A hollow chocolate bunny may be the best symbol we can have for this glorious feast of Easter. At the heart of the resurrection narrative in all the Gospels is the empty tomb. Each of the disciples must face that emptiness and discover what it means. Our own journey of faith must start in the same place.

Some of the lasting images of Easter and the resurrection take something we can't know at all from our own experience and put it into the context of our daily lives: an encounter with a beloved friend, a simple evening meal, a shepherd and his sheep.

Early Morning in the Garden

John's Gospel has pride of place on the Sundays of Easter. In this Gospel, Jesus is clearly Christ and Son of God throughout. The other Gospels tend to emphasize the historical Jesus of Nazareth through much of his ministry, with glimpses of his divine nature at key moments such as the baptism, the transfiguration and, of course, the resurrection.





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Surprisingly, then, John's Gospel also features some of the most individual and personal encounters of any described in the Gospels. Because John has stressed Jesus' true identity from the beginning, the willingness of his characters to grapple with the resurrection event comes as less of a shock. Mary Magdalene, Peter, the beloved disciple and Thomas all come to terms with the Risen Christ.

Mary, lost in her grief, mistakes Jesus for the gardener and wants to know what happened to the body. Peter, often reprimanded for being impetuous, seems unwilling to jump to any conclusions when confronted with the empty tomb. The beloved disciple, seeing with the eyes of love, accepts the truth of the resurrection and proclaims it to the others.

Everything Jesus did was motivated by love. Pouring out his divinity in the incarnation and pouring out his humanity in the passion were signs of his love for us. The resurrection is no different. This is what John helps us understand.

Facing the Unexpected

On the evening of that first Easter day, the disciples were confused, even frightened, by rumors flying through their

small group. These friends and followers are gathered in the upper room where—just days before—they had celebrated Passover. Like any group of people in the aftermath of a tragedy, they're consumed with the events that have taken place and the effect those events have had on them. They're just beginning to grasp how the crucifixion might threaten their own safety.

Now word is beginning to spread of the resurrection. "Mary Magdalene says she's talked to Jesus in the garden." "I've seen where we laid him. He's not there. I believe he's been raised." "I don't believe it. It's madness." Some are sitting quietly in an out-of-the-way corner, struggling with grief tinged with both hope and disbelief, too confused to enter into the conversation.

Then, Jesus is in their midst saying, "Peace be with you." That's all. A blessing of deep peace. Three times he says this. Some things are beyond understanding, beyond figuring out with our rational, problem-solving minds. But we know that our emotions can be untrustworthy at times, influenced by so many things.

We see in the first appearances after the resurrection that faith transcends

both emotion and reason. Faith responds to God's peace with a simple acknowledgment: "My Lord and my God."

Faith is a living, growing thing. We move back and forth between faith and doubt, but we keep doing God's work in the midst of the questions. The apostle Thomas seems to be one of those people who blurts out what other people around him probably are thinking but are reluctant to say. Can we fault him for wanting some kind of proof? Would we believe our friends if they told us some extraordinary, impossible story of a dead friend come back to life?

But Thomas, confronted with Jesus' presence, also moves beyond that need for proof and recognizes a truth much deeper than the physical presence of the Risen Jesus. In a moment of recognition, he sees the truth that has been with them all along. This Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God.

An Evening Meal

Luke's Gospel for the third Sunday of Easter tells us that two disciples are traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They're survivors of tragedy. The holy man they have been following was accused of blasphemy by the leading religious and civil authorities, and then publicly, shamefully executed. Suddenly everything they've believed has been called into question. And if they were close to Jesus and his inner circle, they've also lost a close friend and are caught in a personal and intimate grief that's still very new, very raw.

While Luke tells us Jesus explained the Scriptures to them, I'm imagining that it wasn't an academic presentation, laying out the facts and the words of Scripture like so many documents in a court case. The best spiritual directors bring people along gradually, opening their minds—and hearts—to the truth within. This is especially true when people are going through particularly difficult periods in their lives, whether it's a marriage on the rocks, the loss of a loved one or disillusionment with long-held beliefs.

Most of us have had an experience in which talking things over with a friend gives us a new perspective, helping us to

see things in a different light. We see what we had missed before. The simple act of listening can reveal to us something we didn't know we knew.

In the case of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the discussion is condensed into a day's walk along dusty roads, followed by a meal at an inn. But the wonder of our God is that we can talk things over for as long as it takes for our eyes to be opened, for our hearts to recognize the truth that burns within us. And, like the disciples, we have the grace of the Real Presence, the sign of the Body and Blood of Christ in the bread and wine at Mass. If we're faithful to the inner workings of both our human and our spiritual lives, we will come to know the Lord in our midst.

Shepherd and Sheep

The Gospel for the fourth Sunday of Easter features one of the most endearing images in popular religious art—Jesus the Good Shepherd. Children immediately grasp this image, identifying with the cute lamb held lovingly in Jesus' arms.

Urban—and urbane—adults sometimes have more of a struggle with this image, setting it aside for more sophisticated, rational understandings of their faith, but each year during the Easter season we find ourselves once more confronting this image and reflecting on our response.

Our adult minds, filled with a misplaced pride, sometimes reject the image of the Good Shepherd because we don't want to think of ourselves as sheep. Sheep are not particularly bright animals. Placid, vulnerable to predators, their only real defense is flocking together in a large group. If the whole group strays from a safe pasture, they're all lost. And an individual separated from the flock is easily picked off by a wolf or coyote. The more we know about sheep, the less attractive the image is. But in our hearts, we know this is exactly how we behave sometimes. When we feel threatened, we panic. We bunch together with like-minded people in the belief that our numbers alone will make our position right. We forget that we need God's providential care and we think we can go it alone—but we can't.

At the most difficult times in our lives, we know we need someone to lean on, someone to watch over us. And no one can do that better than the God who knows and loves us in our folly as well as in our finest moments. It's no accident that the psalm most often read at funeral liturgies is Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." We know with every fiber of our being that we need God.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is not the product of some fussy Victorian artwork. In John's Gospel, Jesus himself offers an extended reflection on his statement, "I am the Good Shepherd." This is an image with deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, which emerged, like the Gospels, from a rural, pastoral culture in which sheep and goats provided much of the food, clothing and shelter for the people. The prophets speak of God acting as a shepherd to the people. David, the greatest king in the Old Testament, was chosen while caring for his flock and often was referred to as a shepherd king.

Jesus frames the metaphor in terms of a protective love, a shepherd who risks his own life for the life of his flock. The threat of predators is very real, both for sheep and for humans.

Being a shepherd is no task for the weak. A tiny lamb is cute and cuddly, but in a very short time that lamb is heavy, stubborn and unwieldy. The shepherd must be firm enough to tend the sheep but gentle enough not to frighten them into heart failure. Our God takes much the same approach with us. And so we come to reflect on the Good Shepherd with both a childlike faith and an adult awareness of dangers. It is an image of strong comfort.

When Jesus says he is our shepherd, we sense his intimate care for us, his flock. We recognize his voice, knowing he will lead us to abundant pastures and life-giving water. And we know he laid down his life to keep us safe from danger and the finality of death. We can let go of many of the stresses, large and small, of daily life. We can trust that with his guidance, we will discover where we can go safely—and where we can't. By following the voice of our shepherd, we learn the true meaning of Easter.

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Celebrate Easter With Your Family

Kathleen M. Carroll

Every family has its own Easter traditions (and there are several we all share).
but here are a few ideas for celebrating the day:

—**Take the whole family to Mass.** Easter is one of our most solemn holy days of obligation. Why not gather your extended family for church and then share your holiday feast together afterward? Some traditional Easter entrees are lamb (representing the Lamb of God) and ham (representing the freedom from some of the restrictions of the old Law).

—**Fill your Easter baskets with unique treasures.** Rather than the usual collection of chocolate bunnies, marshmallow chicks and crème eggs, try some new treats. Plastic, colored eggs filled with coins, small toys or quotes from Scripture are fun alternatives.

—**Have an Easter Egg hunt with a twist.** Hide eggs (or baskets) around the house or in the yard. Instead of making it a contest, encourage kids to work together to find all the hidden goodies, and to share what they find. It's a wonderful spiritual lesson for this holiest of days.

—**Take time to tell the story.** Children might not make the connection between what they hear at Mass and what they find in their Easter baskets. Help them understand that chicks and bunnies are spring symbols of rebirth and the resurrection of Jesus is the rebirth our faith promises all of us.



Christ Is Risen!

Christians praise the Paschal Victim!
Offer thankful sacrifice!
Christ the Lamb has saved the sheep,
Christ the Innocent paid the price,
reconciling sinners to the Father.

Death and Life fought bitterly
for this wondrous victory;
the Lord of Life who died reigns glorified.

Tell us, Mary, what you saw along the way.
“The empty tomb of my living Lord!
I saw Christ Jesus risen and adored!
Bright angels testified,
shroud and grave clothes side by side!

“Yes, Christ my Hope rose gloriously
He goes before you into Galilee.”
Share the Good News,
sing joyfully: His death is victory!
Lord Jesus, Victor King, show us mercy.

—Sequence for Easter Sunday

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) What are your family's Easter traditions?
- 2) What do you think about the commercialization of Easter?
- 3) Name some practical, personal effects of belief in the resurrection.

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