



What is *Easter* all about?

Rediscovering year-round hope

By David B. Crabtree

Easter Sunday, yesteryear.

I sat slumped over, as preteen boys do, in the church orchestra playing third-chair trumpet. From my vantage point a glorious morning sun created dusty shafts of light illuminating brightly colored Easter hats and smart new dresses in white and pastels. The church was filled, as churches usually are for Easter Sunday morning. It seemed extra joy had found its way into the old stone building.

At the appointed hour the great pipe organ sounded and the people rose to sing full voice “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!”

Extra “hallelujahs” punctuated the Easter sermon. Passions ran high, and people lingered after the service. It seemed that everybody was on their best behavior that high and holy day in the church of my childhood.

Dear old Sister Mildred was waiting in the lobby after the service tightly clutching a bag.

“A little Easter gift for you and your sisters,” she said with a wink.

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I knew what was in the bag, and I had no intention of sharing that solid chocolate rabbit with my sisters. I might part with a few of the chocolate eggs Sister Mildred included as a bonus, but that rabbit was all mine.

Rabbits and eggs didn't make much sense to me then, and it was much later that I discovered that rabbits, eggs and lilies were just carry-over symbols from ancient pagan holidays our Christian Easter celebrations displaced. But had I known, I would have eaten the rabbit anyway. I can't remember anyone making too much of a fuss over egg hunts and the like.

Easter Sunday night belonged to the choir. For this one event, the platform became a stage and my Sunday School teacher showed up as the stage director. The ushers became stagehands, and a mechanic with a beard played Jesus. He didn't have to say anything, just lift his head and hands on cue and look gentle. The ladies waved palm branches and sang "Hosanna." Those not in the cast of the great cantata came dressed like they had tickets to the opera.

The church was packed for our rare bit of stagecraft and some mild special effects in the telling of the greatest story ever told. The audience applauded each song. The narrator kept us on track. An invitation for salvation was offered just after the finale.

In the afterglow of a great Easter Sunday, the cast and crew enjoyed the warm camaraderie of a grand effort. The props were stored, rented lights returned, the lilies were tossed and the curtain fell on Easter for another year.

Over time, the Easter customs of wearing bonnets and bright new clothing have faded a bit. Cantatas are not quite as prevalent as they once were. I haven't heard of an Easter parade in years. Chocolate rabbits and egg hunts endure, despite their dubious historical associations. But Easter sunrise services have dwindled. Many traditions, both meaningful and trivial, have tired in a culture that hurries everything and everywhere.

But amidst the folded sets and fading customs in my mental Easter archives, one image stands immovable, unchangeable, irreducible and

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irreplaceable — the Cross.

The message of the Cross cannot be contained in a single Sunday, nor can its glory be fully sung in any cantata. The Cross is more than a remembered religious relic; more than a storied political travesty; more than an inspiring symbol of faith. The Cross is where religion becomes magnificently personal.

On Calvary, Jesus died for me ... for all of us ... for once and for all. He bridged the chasm of our separation from God. He took the totality of all things that made us unworthy and estranged before God, and He died for them, and with them.

If the story ended there, it would hardly have been recounted beyond a single generation. If the last image of Easter were a wooden cross, and were that image to somehow survive until today, we would be faced with uncomfortable questions. Why did the Man so many believed to be God's Messiah die as a criminal? What was the point of all His teaching about God? Did that teaching die with Him?

But even with the full reality of the Cross, Easter's story is only half told. Jesus' short journey from Golgotha to Joseph's tomb spanned an immeasurable spiritual distance that allows any repentant sinner to experience Easter's victory.

As night was falling over Golgotha, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and laid in a borrowed tomb. As the sun was rising just three days later, it revealed a tomb quite empty and a truth unrivaled in all of eternity. God raised Jesus from the dead.

The apostle Paul called this Resurrection "the first fruits," drawing from the common imagery of the Jewish harvest. Paul leaves no doubt that Christ's resurrection from death to life foreshadows a bodily resurrection to eternal life for you and me (1 Corinthians 15:23). Even now, the Resurrection is a spiritual reality for those who have believed God's Word and placed their trust in the Savior (Colossians

2:9-12). Easter's triumph is found in two simple declarations: "Christ is risen," and "We have eternal life."

Should something so glorious be relegated to a single day, celebrated only through a musical play, or marked by some fading tradition? Shouldn't Easter be celebrated with the dawn of each new day? And how should we celebrate?

Somehow, we need to catch the wonder of the Resurrection again. We need to be amazed by God's grace, overwhelmed by His love, made speechless by His joy and awestruck at His gift of eternal life. We need to reacquire ourselves with words like "wonderful," "marvelous" and "glorious." We need to get past the familiarity of the Easter story to its essence and thrill again that God should love sinners like us. We need to recognize that the Easter message carries the one thing all men are looking for in these dark days of crisis: hope!

Who can imagine the disillusionment Jesus' disciples felt during the three days between Golgotha and the empty tomb? Their hopes were crushed. Tombs are terminal! Nobody goes to a graveyard for a pick-me-up. Yet, against the backdrop of a stone-cold tomb, God turned death to life, darkness to light, trouble to triumph, and defeat to victory.

Easter is the holiday of hope; the declaration of resurrection; God's assurance that, no matter our desperation or loneliness or brokenness, we might know hope!

So let's sing the anthems and the new songs with absolute abandon. Let's use the arts to tell the great story. Let's consider the meaning of our traditions and establish new ways to draw attention to our risen Lord. Let's infuse our Easter observances with joy and love, and find hope in the knowledge that Christ is risen — and we are risen with Him. **tpe**

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