

EASTER 2020

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What does a rabbit have to do with the foundational event of our Christian faith? Depending on what sources you read the custom of the Easter Bunny came to the United States in the late 1700's. Historians credit German immigrants

who brought their tradition with them to Pennsylvania: *Osterhase*, the Easter Rabbit.

The gentle animal brings and hides eggs. But if the Easter Rabbit lays

the eggs, then it is a female we deal with every year. Again I can ask: why a rabbit?

Everyone knows that rabbits birth large litters of kittens – yes, that's what a baby rabbit is called. A large litter symbolizes fertility and fertility brings NEW LIFE and that LIFE in abundance! Just as Jesus brought new life through his suffering, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into glory. Someone made a connection and here we are a couple of centuries later, inundated with endless commercials for chocolate eggs and shelves of candies, baskets and decorations before Lent even begins!

I have lots of memories of Easter egg hunts in our backyard. Our rabbit in Quincy found some really odd hiding places, like in a bicycle saddle bag, a nook in the apple tree, in a rain spout and even inside one of the budding irises! Someplace in my brain is a photo of my two older brothers and I in our suits with hats, decked out for Easter Sunday Mass. And how many Peeps, solid chocolate rabbits and colored boiled eggs did we gorge down until our teeth actually hurt from the overdose of sugar? There's a certain shade of purple that my brain immediately associates with those supersweet hard-shelled eggs with white goop inside that make your teeth hurt they're so sweet. Huge to tiny baskets with toys, grass that shreds everywhere, spilled egg dyes, boiled eggs that



turned green after sitting out too long – we all have endless childhood memories of Easter and some of its secular elements.

And what about the humble egg itself? How did it become such an integral part of Easter? Prepare yourself for one splendid legend. Once upon a time ... *Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. He said to her, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She thought it was the gardener and said to him, "Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni,"*which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, "Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and what he told her. [John 20:11-18]*

Yes, the Easter egg tradition begins with the woman Mary of Magdala, a wealthy financial supporter of Jesus and his ministry. According to the Eastern Church tradition Mary Magdalene brought eggs to share at the tomb of Jesus but when it was found to be empty, the eggs turned red.



Yet another story has it that Mary gained an audience with the Roman Emperor Tiberius in Rome after the Resurrection of Jesus. She denounced Pontius Pilate because of the way he'd handled the trial of Jesus; she held out an egg and proclaimed to Tiberius: "Christ is risen!" The Emperor was not impressed and told her: "There's about as much chance of a human being returning to life from

the dead as there is of the egg you hold turning red.” And the egg promptly turned bright red!

Dr. Minna Shkul, director of the Sheffield Institute for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield has written extensively on symbolism in biblical literature. Ancient cultures, like the Egyptians, believed gods came forth from the eggs of creation. In Hindu mythology the source of creation was the ‘great gold egg’, Hiranyagarbha. Early Christians believed eggs were symbolic of the stone that covered the tomb of Jesus. And eggs have been part of pagan celebrations of spring for centuries. So overall, Shkul believes that eggs are life-giving symbols and wonderfully represent the richness of spring.



Central and Eastern European countries hold on to incredible traditions and patterns for their Easter eggs. Sorbians use the wax resist method with multi-colored designs and patterns left behind. Pisanica, Pisanka and Pysanka are names from Slovenia, Poland and Ukraine for the richly decorated eggs using wax or scratch methods. Slovenians love black and red, Poles, Germans, Czechs have splendid patterns, along with many, many other countries.

A number of years ago, when I was in charge of decorating the church throughout the year I sprayed a few tree branches white and hung eggs all over them to greet people as they entered St. Peter’s. I happened to be celebrating a certain Sunday Mass in Easter season. A lady

came to me after Mass and was ecstatic that we had honored her childhood tradition; she was from Bavaria and was overjoyed with our egg tree. Germans and Austrians carry on this tradition. I know a couple in Berwyn, IL who hang hundreds of eggs on a large tree in their front yard and it is a blast of colorful, joyful praise. But the winner for *Ostereierbaum* (Easter egg tree) is from a couple in Saalfeld, Germany who spend two weeks hanging over 10,000 eggs on their tree. Pictured below, this is an amazing feat and shows dedication to one’s custom of celebrating the Paschal Mystery in outrageous fashion. And I love it!



Here’s a classic Easter tale from one of Thomas of Celano’s biographies of St. Francis. *On a certain Easter the friars were gathered at the hermitage in Greccio and set the table more carefully than usual with cloths and glassware. When Francis came down from his cell, he saw the elaborate tables and it made him unhappy. He secretly put on a worn hat and tiptoed around to the front door with a staff in his hand. After the friars began to eat he knocked and said: “For the love of God, give alms to this poor pilgrim.” The brothers said: “Come in, brother, for the love of Him you invoked.” Francis, still unrecognized, came in and sat down with a bowl, which he placed on the ashes. “Now,” he said, “I am sitting like a Lesser Brother. The examples of the Lord’s poverty should move us more than other religious. I saw the table decorated, which is not the table of poor people who beg door to door.”*

I don’t believe Francis condemned the friars’ behavior, but he did reveal his love for the

Poor Christ. It was that image of the Crucified Son in San Damiano that spoke to him and the image he used as spiritual guide for the next 20 years of his life. The Cross we all know is a beautiful work of art. Perhaps this year it may take on even deeper meaning in light of how the world is suffering because of the Covid-19 virus. This cross, created in the 11th century, is the one before which Francis was praying and heard “Go and repair my house, for it is falling into ruin.”

The amazing thing about this crucifix is that the fullness of the Paschal Mystery is present to all who gaze at it. Christ is crucified, yet also risen because his eyes are looking at the person in prayer. His halo is that of a conqueror, so Christ is Risen from death.



At the top we see Christ ascending into heaven to the right hand of the Father. Death, Resurrection and Ascension in one work of art. The Mystery we are immersed into at Baptism and called to live our entire lives until we rest in God.

I wanted to write this month’s article about some of the ancient signs of Easter and not spend so much time on the universal suffering with a pandemic like no one has ever experienced. I can’t tell you how grateful I am for our faith and the model Jesus laid out for us with his own passage through death to eternal glory. We’ve been assuaged, assaulted and avalanched by bad news for weeks about something unseen and unwanted. Life brought the world this virus and the world has fought bravely. The numbers are staggering. Multiple layers of feelings keep billions of people on edge. Mixed signals from world leaders did not seem to initially grasp the enormity of Covid-19. Some leaders are more concerned with economic gain than the precious lives of their own citizens. And we’ve all seen the dire suffering and endless rows of coffins of those who have necessarily died alone. We are surrounded by suffering and death.

In literary tragedies, like those of William Shakespeare or Arthur Miller, the main character has a tragic flaw or weakness that brings about his or her demise. It can also be external pressures and manipulative characters who bring about the fall of the central hero. Our present struggle with incomprehensible changes thrust upon every human being and our world by a microscopic enemy was not our choice! This is why I cling to this image of the Christ handed on to us by the Syrian monk who painted it 900+ years ago and Francis of Assisi: death itself is NOT the end of the story of Jesus. His story is NOT a tragedy, nor is ours. Just as Jesus clung to his Father through horrid suffering and excruciating pain and eventual death, we are assured that death leads to everlasting glory and complete union with God. That is the point of our religious system coming out of this Paschal Mystery – we live and we die as Christ Jesus did, only to share in his glory with all those in heaven who faithfully lived our baptismal commitment to the Gospel way of life.

The eggs, rabbits, trees, lilies and flowers of spring – we NEED these life-giving signs that God is with us. This year most of us are even denied the Eucharist along with the power of Holy Week, the Great Vigil and Easter Sunday. You’ll continue to hear “we’re in this together” and it is true. But that is what has been from the beginning of creation and human life: God loved us into existence to be WITH and FOR each other, not to live in isolation. We need these ancient signs to bring joy and happiness into the stark realities of our injured Sister, Mother Earth. We also need the Cross of Jesus to remind us each day of what He did and continues to do for us. We follow Him in dark and sunlit days, aware that He alone brings us the Light of Life and eternal glory with God. You MUST know that we friars here at St. Peter’s long to see you, pray with you and hug you. It’s so painful to walk through our very dark church, yet our faith and these symbols remind us that we are ALWAYS with each other. And I hope that Rabbit brings you a solid chocolate rabbit too! In the Paschal Mystery, may God give you – all of us - peace forever.

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