



Easter Around the World

Why Do We Celebrate Easter?

Easter is a Christian festival that celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The idea that Christ sacrificed himself for mankind on his crucifixion day, and was then resurrected (brought back to life) after being entombed, is a key belief of the Christian tradition. Christians of Western and Eastern faith, Catholics and Protestants believe in this key act of Christ.

The Name

Easter is called **Pascha** or **Paches** in many European languages. This is because this was the original name in Greek and Roman for the celebration. It may have come from the word **Pesach**, the Hebrew word for Passover, as the celebration of Easter is linked to the Jewish celebration of Passover. **Pascha** was also the name given by the early church to Jesus Christ, particularly when discussing him in connection with the Crucifixion and Last Supper.

In English speaking countries we use the word Easter instead. The ancient monastic historian Bede relates it to Eostremonath (or the Month of Eostre). This was the English month that corresponds, in our current calendar, with April. Eostre was most likely a goddess worshipped by the local people during that period. The

month went from being a celebration of a goddess figure to a celebration of the resurrection of Christ when the British people became Christian.

The Date

Figuring out when Easter falls each year can be tricky. It is not a set celebration but instead is calculated using a lunisolar calendar like the Hebrew calendar. Technically it falls on the 1st Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or soonest after March 21st. This is partly because it was originally linked to the Hebrew (Jewish) feast of Passover or **Pesach**.

Jesus and his followers were actually Jews and came together for a Passover feast (now known to Christians as The Last Supper) in Jerusalem. It was at this Passover feast that Jesus explained that one of the disciples had betrayed him and that he would be arrested and killed. At the Passover feast Jesus handed bread to his disciples saying "This is my body which is given for you". These words and actions are the foundations for the Eucharist we know today which is celebrated at Sunday services each week.

The calculations for the dates of Easter were argued over for a very long time. Even today, those who follow the Julian calendar celebrate Easter at a different time to those in Western Europe, North America and Australia who follow the Gregorian calendar. For most of us, in English speaking or Western European countries, Easter is celebrated at some point between March 22nd and April 25th. For some Eastern Europeans Easter is celebrated between April 4th and May 8th.

Celebrations

Easter consists of a number of separate events. Days that relate to Easter but precede it include Shrove Tuesday (Pancake Day), Ash Wednesday and the period known as Lent. The week preceding Easter Sunday is known as Holy Week and this time includes a number of special events relating to Easter.

Palm Sunday

The first day of Holy Week is Palm Sunday and is the celebration of the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. He had come to Jerusalem in Israel to be with his friends and family for the feast of Passover but many people gathered to greet him as he rode by on a donkey. They spread palm leaves on the ground before him as a show of veneration and so this tradition continues in many churches. Where palm leaves are difficult to find, other tree branches can be used. It is also said that donkeys have a cross on their back because Jesus rode one on Palm Sunday.



In Polish towns and villages, artificial palms, which can reach great heights, are decorated. Competitions are held to celebrate the best of these. In Lithuania a type of dwarf spruce may be used. It is cut and various dried flowers are tied onto it in decorative patterns. This creates a **verba**. This staff of flowers will give blessing to the household over the coming months. Many houses have one for each family member.

In Latvia pussy willow is used. Children wake up on Palm Sunday to ritual swats from branches of the plant. In Italy, Spain and many Latin American countries palm branches are stripped of their leaves and the individual strands are woven into crosses and heart shapes that are then dried in the sun. People keep these in cars, at doorways etc. until the following Palm Sunday. In Britain, these dried palm leaves are imported and churches often give each member of the congregation a cross made from palm leaves on Palm Sunday.

Maundy Thursday

This day is the Thursday before Easter Sunday and is the day traditionally associated with the event of the Last Supper. One of the things Jesus did during the last supper was to wash the feet of his Apostles to show his humility. This tradition is carried on today by the Pope and other priests who wash the feet of the faithful during the Mass (church service) on this day.

The word Maundy may come from the Mandatum, the phrase sung at the washing of the feet mass. Alternatively it might come from the Maundsor baskets or Maundy purses traditionally given out to the poor on this day by the King or Queen of England. The word Maundy might then refer to the Latin verb **mendicare** meaning 'to beg'. The tradition of giving out coins to senior citizens still exists today. The Queen of England gives money to one man and one woman for each of the years of her life. This is handed out in red and white

purses and, since 1822, is a specially minted Maundy currency rather than regular coins. These special coins and purses are very precious and treasured.

Good Friday

This day traditionally commemorates the crucifixion of Christ and, in keeping with the solemn nature of the event, is often a period of quiet reflection. In some areas of Germany horse racing and dancing are prohibited on this day. Good Friday is a widely held national holiday. Some people think the 'good' of the



title refers to being good or pious. Others think that the day was once called 'God Friday' and this has since changed to 'good'. The German for Good Friday is **Karfreitag** (**kara** is Old German for 'grieve' or 'mourn' and so this is 'Grieving Friday').

In many countries this day is considered a fast day, a day for eating less and abstaining from consuming meat. This is why fish is commonly eaten as part of Good Friday meals in Christian countries. In Britain hot cross buns are traditionally eaten to commemorate the crucifixion and around the world processions take place that venerate the Stations of the Cross. The Stations of the Cross are the 14 (sometimes more) essential parts of Christ's journey through the streets of Jerusalem to his crucifixion. They are displayed in churches in the form of statues or paintings but can also be acted out in the street. The stations traditionally include Jesus falling as he carried the cross, people being kind to him and eventually the crucifixion. The final station is Jesus being laid in the tomb.

Easter Sunday

This Sunday marks the end of Holy Week and the beginning of Easter Week for traditional Catholics. It is the biggest festival in the Catholic calendar. In Western Christianity this day marks the beginning of Eastertide – the 50 days between Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday during which Easter is celebrated. This first Sunday is the one traditionally used to celebrate Easter with bunnies and chocolate. It is called the Sunday of the Resurrection and celebrates Christ rising from the tomb and appearing to the two Marys (Mary



Magdalene and Mary, his mother). In some church groups, particularly in the United States, a sunrise service is held on this day in remembrance of the time of day that the women arrived at Christ's tomb. Some Eastern European cultures celebrate with the giving of decorated eggs since these symbolise the empty tomb. In the US a traditional Easter Egg Roll happens each year at the White House, hosted by the President of the United States and the White House staff.