The True Origins of Easter

Many questions swirl around Easter, the annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What are the true origins of Easter? When did Christians start celebrating Easter? Where do Easter traditions like eggs and bunnies come from? Are some of the origins of Easter really tied to paganism? These are important questions that we'll try to answer as we examine the early history of Easter.

The exact time and origin of the first Easter celebration is not entirely known. No biblical mandate calls us to an annual celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Yet, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, the death and resurrection of Christ are at the very heart of the gospel: “by this gospel you are saved...For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Earlier, in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul described Christ as our “Passover lamb” and urged readers to keep the passover festival, not on a given day, but with sincerity and truth at all times. The New Testament’s witness to the centrality of the resurrection and Paul’s encouragement to celebrate Jesus Christ as our Passover lamb work together to lay ample foundation for the appropriateness of the annual celebration of the event. It should be no surprise then that the early Church began to commemorate Jesus’ death and resurrection from its earliest days, perhaps even from the time of the Apostles.

Celebrating the Resurrection from the Time of the Apostles
One of the earliest known records attesting to an annual remembrance of the resurrection is an account by Bishop Irenaeus (d. 203 AD). This text recounted a disagreement Polycarp (c. 55-170 AD), the Bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the Apostle John, had with Anicetus, the Bishop of Rome. At issue was when to break the fast prior to celebrating the resurrection. Polycarp advocated celebrating on the day prior to the Jewish Passover day (Nisan 14, which could fall on any day of the week) as this is what he had done in the past with “John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had associated.” Anicetus, on the other hand, thought that the Sunday following Passover was the more appropriate day to celebrate. In the end, they agreed to disagree amicably and took communion together. Unfortunately, the controversy did not end with them, but the point here is the evidence suggests that by about 155 AD, Christian leaders were already celebrating Christ's resurrection on an annual basis, either on or about the time of the Jewish Passover, as apostles like John had done before them.

The controversy surrounding when to celebrate the resurrection was eventually taken up at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). Seeking to unite the Church on the matter, the council decreed that the date should be fixed to the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox, a date that shifts yearly between March 21 and April 25 on the modern, Gregorian, calendar. The Council’s decree made no kind of accomodation to any pagan fertility festival, as some have charged. Rather, it linked Easter to the timing of the Passover. The disagreement had really been a matter of emphasis: the eastern church in Asia-Minor focused on the crucifixion as of primary importance, while the western church, centered in Rome, focused on the resurrection. What is clear is that Easter’s origins go back to the very beginnings of the Church.

The Bunny in the Room

That still leaves us with the elephant...or rather, the egg-laying rabbit...in the room. Are there in fact pagan roots in the modern traditions of Easter? Discussion around that idea emerged strongly in the mid-to-late 19th century, and the question persists to this day in the form of social media posts making the rounds every spring condemning the Christian observance of Easter as pagan. To be sure, when I was a child, Easter meant two very different and very separate things to me: the Easter bunny, eggs, and jelly beans on the one hand, and the death and resurrection of Jesus on the other. How did these traditions become commingled?

The first question: Where did the name Easter come from? Most modern etymologies trace easter to the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess called Eostre. An English monk named Bede (d. 735 AD) recorded that the Saxon people referred to the “Paschal (passover) month” as Eostre and that the festivals once observed in her honor had been superseded by the celebration of the resurrection of Christ (Roger Patterson, "Easter...Origin"). Yet, Bede’s mention of Eostre is the only mention of that name in the entire written record. Could there be other explanations? Possibly. According to Nick Sayers, since English descends from the German, it is more likely Easter, as does its German equivalent Oster, ultimately comes from words meaning east and sunrise, which combined made “an old German form of auferstehen, the modern day German word for resurrection” (Sayers). It may also be a matter of which came first: the words for east, sunrise, and resurrection or the name of a goddess with similar root words? Whatever its actual origin, Easter has been the English-language
name for the annual celebration of Christ’s resurrection for centuries, and it has shed any pagan meaning that it might once have had—Easter eggs and bunnies notwithstanding.

As Bede suggested, the celebration of Jesus rising from the dead overtook and superseded the various pagan festivals for springtime and fertility observed all over Europe. From these many traditions come things like the Easter bunny and eggs, with definite origins as pagan symbols of renewal and fertility. According to Catholic Church sources, the early church did co-opt some of these practices in an effort to redirect them toward the life-giving truth of Christ, and history suggests that it had some success. But as with the name Easter, the trappings of bunnies and eggs have lost most of their religious meaning, whether Christian or pagan. Roger Patterson, who by no means defends eggs and bunnies, makes a very interesting point:

*God is the Creator of everything, so any object from nature the pagans may use in their worship is actually a corruption of what God has created. Christians might use an egg to communicate the idea of Christ’s Resurrection without worshiping the egg, expecting increased fertility, or associating it with a pagan god...Paul did not topple the statues he found in Athens—he used them...to teach about the real God who had created the earth and had risen from the dead* (Roy Patterson, “Symbols & Customs”).

For those who love dying eggs and hunting for them, it can be a fun family tradition. But, can eggs, chocolate rabbits, and jelly beans distract from the true celebration? Certainly. Thus the most important focus of the day must always be “He is risen!”

**For more about Easter**

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Written by Christopher Hunt — https://today.reframemedia.com/authors/chris-hunt

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