



Why Is It Called Easter?

Easter is the name of the most important Christian holiday, the day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead after his crucifixion. The resurrection of Jesus resides at the very heart of the gospel: “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” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). But, why is this holiday called Easter? Where did the name Easter come from? Let’s shed some light on those questions.

Easter is an English word

The etymology of the English word Easter indicates that it descends from the Old German—likely from root words for dawn, east, and sunrise. English is a western Germanic language named for the Angles who, along with the Saxons (another Germanic tribe), settled Britain in the 5th century. In fact, the Old German for Easter was *Oster* (*Ostern* in the modern). English and German speakers have been using variations of the term Easter for over a millennium. However, most of the countries surrounding Britain and the German principalities of Europe have long used variants of the Latin *Pascha* (from the Greek for Passover, a transliteration of the Hebrew *pesach*) as the name of the celebration of Christ’s resurrection. Today, in many non-English speaking countries, Easter is still called by a name derived from the term *Pashca*. A number of other languages use a term that means Resurrection Feast or Great Day. Only English and German speaking countries use the terms Easter or *Ostern*.

Does the name Easter have pagan roots?

Does the name Easter really have pagan roots? That's a common question. Modern [etymologies](#) do trace *easter* to the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn, called *Eostre*. An English monk known as [Venerable Bede](#) (d. 735 AD) recorded the name of this goddess in his book *The Reckoning of Time*. Bede described a relationship between the name *Eostre* and the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, which provides the strongest evidence that the name Easter may have pagan roots:

“Eosturmanath [April] has a name which is now translated ‘Paschal month,’ and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.”

Historians consider Bede a reliable primary source in Anglo-Saxon history. However, Bede's mention of *Eostre* is the *single* instance of that name in the entire written record. Some have wondered if Bede was mistaken about the goddess. German historian, Jacob Grimm, writing in 1835 about German mythology, seemed to confirm *Eostre* of the Anglo-Saxons by linking her to an even older Germanic goddess named *Ostra*—for whom there existed even less direct evidence than *Eostre*—whose mythology he was trying to linguistically reconstruct:

“Ostarmânoth [April] is found as early as...[c. 800]. The great christian festival...bears in the oldest of [Old High German] remains [of] the name ôstarâ... This Ostrâ, like the [Anglo Saxon] Eâstre, must in the heathen religion have denoted a higher being, whose worship was so firmly rooted, that the christian teachers tolerated the name, and applied it to one of their own grandest anniversaries.”

In any case, if we assume *Eostre* and *Ostra* are the same mythological goddess, as Grimm suggested, she was ultimately named by a human. (Only the one, true God named himself; see [Exodus 3:14](#).) So what came first, her name or the root words for her name? It is most likely that the root words for dawn, east, and sunrise existed before the name *Eostre* did, since it would be people, who possessed language, who would give the goddess a name and attribute to her the phenomena of the dawn and sunrise in the east. Interestingly, we mostly remember the name *Eostre* today primarily because of its apparent association with Easter. Yet, the name Easter has come to overwhelmingly signify the most important annual celebration of the Christian faith.

Perhaps there is a more elemental explanation for the English word, Easter. A scholar named [Christian F. Cruse](#) (1794-1865), best known for his translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, which contains perhaps the earliest known reference to a Christian celebration of the resurrection, argued that Easter has etymological roots in the German word for resurrection. In a note concerning Easter, he wrote: “Our word *Easter* is of Saxon origin, and of precisely the same import with its German cognate *Ostern*. The latter is derived from the old Teutonic form of *auferstehn*, *Auferstehung*, i. e. Resurrection.”

Easter in early German and English Bible translations

How did the early Church handle the word Easter? Scholar [Roger Patterson](#) notes how early Bible translators like Martin Luther and William Tyndale went about translating *Pascha* (passover) into German and English, using forms of *oster* and *ester* respectively, most likely because of a root meaning of resurrection, just as Cruse noted. In his New Testament, Tyndale translated Luke 2:41 *ester* for passover, “And his father and mother went to Hierusalem every yeare at the feeste of *ester*.” Luther did likewise when he translated Luke 2:41 into German; he used the word “*Osterfest*.” Similarly, Tyndale translated *passover lamb* in a portion of 1 Corinthians 5:7: “For Christ oure *esterlambe* is offered up for us.” Luther used “*Osterlamm*.” Patterson observes, “It would seem from the translations of Luther and Tyndale that by 1500, the word *oster/ester* simply referred to the time of the Passover feast...Even if the word had an origin in [the name Eostre], the usage had changed to such a degree that Luther was comfortable referring to Christ as the *Osterlamm*.” It’s interesting to note that the English *ester* by 1611 had gained an *a*: the King James used the word *Easter* in [Acts 12:4](#) to describe Passover *after* the resurrection of Christ. What’s clear is that these usages of the word *ester/oster/Easter* perceived no connection to pagan worship.

Our English word *Easter* possibly descends from the name of a pagan goddess. It is also quite possible that Easter evolved from Germanic words meaning dawn, east, and sunrise: words that may have had their own roots in the Old German word for resurrection. Luther’s and Tyndale’s use of Easter reinforce a long established affiliation of the term, not with pagan practices, but with the resurrection of Jesus, as our Passover lamb. Some Christians today feel more comfortable giving the holiday a different name, such as Resurrection Day or Resurrection Sunday. They are completely free to do that, just as others are free to go on calling the day Easter. What truly matters is that on that most significant of days, we celebrate that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

For more about Easter

[Easter: The Most Important Christian Holiday](#)

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Printed on June 24, 2019