

God, Life, and Everything "Why Easter?"

Christian holidays have a lot of baggage. Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Christ, gets all mixed up with a pagan winter feast called Saturnalia. Many of its traditions are coopted into Christian practice. Then there's the whole Santa Clause phenomenon.

Sadly, Easter doesn't have it much easier. The name itself probably comes from an ancient pagan feast (Ostara, named for the goddess Ostara). The venerable Easter Egg and Easter bunny have much more to do with the arrival of Spring than with the resurrection of Jesus.

Frankly, I don't care. We've had so much mixing of traditions - at least the outward expressions - that it's just irrelevant. I don't mind putting a tree in my house at Christmas time to celebrate the ongoing life in the midst of winter barrenness. And I don't mind eggs to celebrate the rebirth of the green time of year.

Neither means that I don't understand or observe what the Christian holy days mean.

So, before you get all caught up in your Easter egg hunt, let's look at what the holiday means. And here, I mean specifically the Christian holiday.

Of course, you know that it celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead after he had been executed on a cross by the Romans. But why have a crucifixion in the first place, and what on earth does the resurrection achieve?

I thought you'd never ask.

Christians have been pondering this and have official stances, but even those are subject to interpretation. One of the most difficult to accept, and convoluted, is that Jesus was a replacement sacrifice to be killed in our place.

I mean, I get it. We see self-sacrificial acts all the time with good people giving their lives for complete strangers. And they are praiseworthy.

In this scenario, we've all been so bad that there's nothing for it but that once we die, we are sent to eternal torment. Then Jesus steps in and says, "I'll take the punishment for you." Except, he's the Son of God, so he can't be held to it, thus the resurrection. And from that day on, there is no eternal punishment for those who claim Christ as their Lord.

You might call this orthodox, but it is not universal. Another, to my mind more reasonable understanding is that we human beings figured out early on that there was a God. Not just to explain the unexplainable. Let's face it, coming up with a divinity to explain things is a lot harder than saying, "Gee I don't know and I don't care. Eat your vegetables," when your kids asks why we exist.

But once we figured out that God exists, and that we are somehow connected with God, we didn't know what to do with it. Like little children relating to their parents, we placed all sorts of magical thinking onto God. If you make him mad, there'll literally be hell to pay. We sacrifice things to make sure that the harvest is good. We kill those who don't worship like us because their god can't be as good as ours.

From Christian perspective, this is an unhealthy relationship with God. Our scriptures and tradition teach that God is love. Everything God is about is loving. Not making sure you follow the rules exactly so. Yet, we miss this entirely all the time. We

miss that God simply wants to be in a loving relationship with us and wants us to love each other in turn.

As we have seen over and over, it's very difficult to get people to believe anything positive - we gravitate toward angst and anger, storm and stress. So the prophets saying, "love each other," just didn't cut it. All the while, with this sick image of an angry, avenging God in our minds, we were getting farther and farther away from who God is.

So, how do we remedy that? The best way to show someone that you love them is to show them, not just say the words. An abusive father can say he loves his children, but abusing them gives lie to the words. How does God show such deep, abiding, unconditional love for us in order to win us back? Not to win good behavior or loyalty - just a healthier, loving relationship.

God chose to act the way a human parent (mother or father) would if their children were in danger. So Jesus came, taught, loved, healed, fed and, like any loving parent would do if it came down to it, died for us. Not to atone for our badness but to demonstrate depth of love for us. To say, "This is the kind of relationship I want, free, open, not cowering and resentful."

The resurrection is simply a way of saying that this really is God speaking, not just a nice but deluded man. It is God who loves us, God who wants to heal the relationship, God who will do whatever it takes to ensure we want to come home.

In short, the crucifixion isn't God taking our punishment for us, it's a mom or dad seeing that their child has wandered into the path of a speeding truck. Mindless of their own safety, they jump in the path of that truck to save their child.

We celebrate Easter, then, to celebrate the transformation of our relationship with God from one of fear to one of pure love, where we enjoy being with God, want to be with God, and want - out of sheer love - to love others the same way. In short, it celebrates stepping into a more mature relationship with God.

Don't get me wrong. I still love Easter egg hunts!

In fact, if you like a good Easter egg hunt, why not join us this Easter morning for our 10 AM Easter service. There's a good old fashioned egg hunt afterwards.

But if you want the full impact of the day, start tomorrow with our Maundy Thursday service (7:00 PM) where we remember the Last Supper and Jesus' arrest. Join us Good Friday for the Community Walk of the Cross at 10:30 AM (starting at Regina Coeli). Then come back to St. James' for the Good Friday liturgy at 7:00 PM. And, for something special, come to the Easter Vigil at St. James', where we begin in darkness and welcome the Light. That starts at 8:00 PM.

Easter. Don't much care about the non-Jesus parts. They're fun, but they don't have any more significance to me than just a fun game. Jesus, though... that's what it's all about.