

The Great Fifty Days of Easter: Year C

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by Sharon Ely Pearson & Robyn Szoke (2009: Morehouse)

Easter is a festival season of fifty days whose first day is Easter Day, the Sunday of the Resurrection, and whose last day is the Day of Pentecost. Easter begins after sundown on Holy Saturday. The celebration of Easter is initiated with the Easter Vigil, which can be observed after sundown but ideally is kept just before sunrise, so that the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection comes with the dawn of the new day. The Easter season includes the events of Christ's resurrection and ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.



Easter Day is the principal feast of the church year. The word "Easter" comes from *Eostre*, a Teutonic goddess whose name is associated with springtime, growth, and fertility. In most languages the name of the day is *Pascha*, which means "Passover." The resurrection means that Christ has overcome death and in his victory has opened to us everlasting life. Nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). The Lord's new life in which we share is the message of this season.

As the sacrament of new life, baptism is an Easter theme; as baptized Christians we take time during Easter to ponder the meaning of membership in Christ's body, the church. We look at events in the church's life, the sacraments, the accounts of resurrection and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to discover their meaning and what they tell us about how we as a community are to live the life of the Risen Lord. Like the two who walked the Emmaus road with Jesus, we can know Christ in the sharing of the word and in the breaking of bread at the Eucharist.

The Great Fifty Days of Easter are the time when those who have reaffirmed their baptismal vows or have been baptized at the Easter Vigil reflect on the meaning of their baptism. Through the lectionary texts they explore the "mysteries" of their faith. The early church called this period of the process *mystagogia*. Today the whole church enters into this period of uncovering anew the mysteries of faith expressed in sacrament, word, and life lived for others. Each time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist using Eucharistic Prayer A, we say these words:

*We proclaim the mystery of faith:
Christ has died. Christ is risen.
Christ will come again. (BCP 363)*

Symbols and Traditions of Easter

- *Color*: white for festival and joy.
- *The paschal candle*: the darkness of death giving way to light and life, symbolizing Jesus' passing over from death into life. Also symbolizes the light of Creation, the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness, the fire of Pentecost. *Pascha* is Greek for "Passover." The paschal candle is lit from Easter through the Day of Pentecost. The year's date is carved into the candle to show that the Good News of Easter is for every age, including today.
- *The Exsultet* is a song of praise and joy sung at the lighting of the paschal candle at the beginning of the Easter Vigil (BCP 286).
- *The Easter Vigil* captures all of the powerful story imagery of Easter, which is why this service is so important in the life of the congregation. In planning the vigil, keep children as well as adults in mind. Storytellers can offer the readings (as few as two or as many as nine) dramatically. Have the congregation move from a place of sharing the great stories of the faith to another place for baptism, and finally to the Holy Table for the proclamation of the resurrection and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.
- A customary Easter greeting that Christians have used for centuries:
Leader: "Alleluia! Christ is risen!"
Response: "The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!"
- Baptisms and confirmations have traditionally occurred in this season of initiation. Ideally these sacraments take place at the Great Vigil of Easter.
- *Feasting*: breaking the fast of Lent with a feast is a sign of celebration and symbolizes the joy of the Christian community at Easter.
- *The empty cross*: a sign of the victory of Easter.
- *Alleluias* and the *Gloria*: joyful acclamations from the Easter community.
- *Butterfly*: symbolizes resurrection or new life from a cocoon.
- *Egg*: the Easter symbol from which new life emerges.
- *Pomegranate*: a regal symbol, filled with red seeds that further symbolize life and fertility and the open tomb.
- *Ear of corn*: as it bursts open we see the fertile new life within.
- *Easter lily*: symbol of purity and of beautiful new life.
- Each Sunday is a "little Easter," reminding us as Christians of the resurrection, since it was on the first day of the week that Jesus rose from the dead. The joy of each weekly remembrance of the resurrection is always maintained, even during penitential seasons.



Overall Themes as the Great Fifty Days Unfold

- The role of the church is to continue the proclamation of the resurrection expressed with such joy at that first Easter. We hear the proclamation of the resurrection in order to pass on the Good News.
- In a sense, Christ rose again *within* the church. Through the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ is revealed in every new generation. The apostles found themselves filled with the power to continue the acts of Jesus that revealed God's presence.
- The Great Fifty Days traditionally were a time when the mysteries of the faith were revealed to the recently baptized. The meaning of all that the candidates experienced in Holy Week and the Easter Vigil unfolds in this time of intense theological reflection on just what it means to live as a covenant people.



Idea:

Plant grass seed in paper cups on Palm Sunday. Sprits with water and seal in a baggie. On Easter, see the new shoots and sing, Hymn 204 "Now the green blade riseth" (John Macleod Campbell Crum; Music: *Noël nouvelet*)

- For congregations involved in the catechumenal process, this is a time of reflection on baptism. "What difference does my baptism make?" ask the recently baptized as they gather with priest, catechist, sponsor, and those who have reaffirmed their Baptismal Covenant.
- A question to ask each week: How do we know the risen Christ today?

In Year C we read selections from the Acts of the Apostles for the six weeks of Easter following Easter Sunday because we need to hear the story of the first-century church in order to understand our mission in the world today. (Selections from the Hebrew Scriptures are provided as alternatives in all three years. When the Hebrew Scriptures are used, they replace either the selection from Acts or the selection from the epistle).

For the epistle lections in Year C we read selections from the Revelation to John, providing glimpses of God's coming reign, when Christ's work of reconciliation is fully realized.

Idea:

Design an icon of the Resurrection or the Easter Season, using the readings and symbols of the season. The above icon is by Todor Mitrovic.

Each week's theme:

- Easter Sunday – The Resurrection of Jesus the Christ is proclaimed.
- The 2nd Sunday of Easter – Knowing the Risen Christ through faith.
- The 3rd Sunday of Easter – Knowing Christ in sacramental life.
- The 4th Sunday of Easter – Ministry as a way of revealing the risen Christ, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who gives eternal life.

- The 5^t Sunday of Easter – The new community formed out of the resurrection will be known by the love its members have for one another.
- The 6^t Sunday of Easter – The new community formed out of the resurrection continues with the promise the Holy Spirit.
- The 7th Sunday of Easter – The unity of the church, witnessing to the presence of God in their lives.

Easter Through the Eyes of a Child

- Jesus is risen from the dead! Easter has brought us everlasting life because of Jesus' resurrection. The Alleluias are said and sung,
- God's love is stronger than anything, even death. Because of God's love, we do not have to be afraid of death.
- Easter is about new life, coming from what we thought was death and bringing unexpected possibilities and surprises. Easter eggs, Easter chicks, Easter flowers all remind us of the new life in Christ.
- We received new life at our baptism, and during Easter we think about what that baptism means in our lives. Reflect with the children on the ways we keep our baptismal promises:
 - *How do we keep the promises we make?*
 - *How do we show our love for God?*
 - *How do we show love for each other?*

Idea:

Make an alleluia banner for the table, and talk about why Jesus' resurrection would make us so happy. Take a walk and look at all the new life you begin to spot during the walk. Read stories of transformation and new life, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. Name the baptismal promises and reflect on them with pictures of how you live each of them out with your family and friends, at home and at school.

Easter Through the Eyes of Youth

- As the testimonies of Mary and the disciples led many to believe, so the testimony or witness of teens as to Christ in their lives can affect others.
- This is the time to encourage youth to Easter reflection and action. Reflect upon the individual baptismal promises found in the Easter Vigil service, and invite the youth to respond to new ways that they can serve within the congregation:

Idea:

Deliver the Easter flowers that adorn the Sanctuary to those who are homebound or in the hospital.

Go: "Where does God need us to go in school, in our neighborhood, town and beyond?"

Visit: "Who are the friendless, lonely, outcast people in our lives and how do we connect with them?"

Listen: "Who are the people that no one pays attention to?"

Care: "Why, God, are your people suffering?"

Ask: "What can we do for needy people near and far?"

Pray: "God, open our eyes and ears and hearts. Who will help us to live for others?"

Invite: “Who will go with us? Which adults and teens can we invite to follow, to encounter and to become Christ today?”

Easter Through the Eyes of Daily Life

On this day the Lord has acted! On the first day of the week God began creation, transforming darkness into light. On this, the “eighth day” of the week, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. We celebrate this new creation in the waters of baptism and in the feast of victory. Reflect on your baptism and how you live out the promises in every facet of your life. Throughout this season we hear stories of the men and women who recognized who Jesus really is, after failing to do so during his earthly life. We are enlightened by their visions and their visits with the Risen Christ as they proclaim that our Lord is alive and is life for the world. As we begin the great fifty days of Easter filled with hope and joy, be prepared to go forth to share the news that Christ is risen!

Easter Through the Eyes of Our Global Community

The Collects for Easter petition the living power of Jesus to open up new life to all. Our prayers and action can reflect God’s desire of reconciliation for all. During the Easter season, direct attention is placed in prayer to alleviate the extreme poverty of the world. The Christ-centeredness of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is an example of how making a commitment to others is a commitment to Jesus (John 10:10). For the sake of the poor and suffering of the world, our conversion (turning our lives around) at the individual, congregational, diocesan, national, and global levels can make a difference (Luke 18:18-23). Focus on one MDG for the whole liturgical cycle so that during the Easter season, a particular geographic area can be chosen to learn about the people, worship, and need in that area of the world or domestically. The Easter season can be a time to build direct relationships with another location in the Anglican Communion. Enter into mission with another, to help alleviate extreme poverty.

Idea:

Expand on the “Breakfast with Jesus” story and prepare Easter breakfast for a homeless shelter or food distribution center on all the Sundays of the Easter Season. Breakfast can often be bleak and uninspired in these places, and wonderful pastries, homemade coffee cakes and breakfast breads can be a real treat. Invite families to prepare and deliver their delicious breakfast goodies in person, or gather a team to actually serve those in need. For a twist, gather up “breakfast bags” in lunch sacks and visit your local park or area where the homeless can be found. Share the good news along it the form of a good breakfast.

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Collect for Wednesday in Easter Week (BCP 223)