

Between Easter Eggs and the Empty Tomb

BY MARK MCGCLINTOCK

The best outcome of crafting Easter worship with children in mind is that everyone in the congregation may hear the Easter story in a new way. For adults steeped in church tradition, the opportunity to regain a childlike wonder at the miraculous life, death, and new life of Jesus is good news indeed.

If you ask children in the United States which holiday is their favorite, the top answer (by a landslide) will be Christmas. It will likely be followed by Halloween, with Valentine's Day and Easter vying for third place. A 2011 Harris poll indicates that adults favor the holidays in a similar order (with the addition of Thanksgiving sliding into second).¹

The secular trappings and sweet treats that adorn these celebrations allure people of all ages, even those who practice little religious allegiance. Bunnies and chicks are cute and cuddly, unlike a crucifix or an empty tomb, and candy-filled eggs provide an immediate gratification that the promise of a future resurrection lacks. Amidst the glitter and gluttony of the holiday marketplace, how do we communicate to children the sacred nature and narrative of Easter in a meaningful way?

IMAGINE THAT!

Christianity has incorporated elements of the prevailing cultures throughout its history. For instance, early celebrants of Christmas and Easter adopted popular traditions, including evergreen trees and decorated eggs, from pagan festivals that predate Jesus' birth but coincide with the two Christian holidays. German Lutheran immigrants in the late nineteenth century brought to America the myth of the *Osterhase*, a hare (that venerable

harbinger of fertility) that brings colored eggs on Easter Sunday for well-behaved children. Over the years these imported symbols of the seasons have made their way into Sunday school, children's sermons, and church decorations.

Before we set out on an icon-bashing spree, let us agree that it is not our job to purge our congregants' homes of bunny baskets any more than to strip away Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, or unicorns. The Puritans and Quakers tried to do so by omitting the celebration of Easter altogether, preferring to emphasize the atoning death of Jesus or the equal sanctity of every day of the year. Myth is not the enemy of truth, however. Young children build their understanding of the world through a blend of personal experience and fantasy. Imagination, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, is the precursor of reason. I would add that imagination is the precursor of faith. James Fowler calls it the stage of "Intuitive-Projective faith."² Children who can envisage a friendly though unseen bunny who shares joy through gifts can begin to contemplate a divinity whose nature is love and who delights in sharing.

THAT WASCALLY WABBIT

Fun and fancy are well and good (they help awaken children to the excitement of the Easter season), but leave the baskets at home. The Church should avoid mixing magical creatures with the message we proclaim as reality. Why? Preschoolers naturally weave together different narrative strands, and on the ride home from church may explain to a bemused parent, "Jesus died in a hole in the hill, and every year the Easter bunny comes out of the hole with eggs for everyone." In the postmodern age that sees all truth as relative, it is important that children be able to distinguish between the biblical and the secular.

Resist the temptation to add to the confusion by introducing a live rabbit at church—or worse, a person in an Easter bunny costume, which will surely distract (and may frighten) little ones from the Bible story. Children need to hear the gospel clearly and distinctly as the central theme of our faith that defines our identity and our values.

WHICH CAME FIRST—THE CROSS OR THE EGG?

Eggs are a still more ubiquitous image of the holiday. If your congregation's Holy Week traditions include an egg hunt, plan for a location other than the church property and, ideally, not on Sunday. Gimmicks for incorporating eggs into children's sermons and Sunday school lessons abound on the Internet, but the relevance of eggs to the resurrection account requires a level of symbolic thinking that young children have not yet developed.

Preteens may connect the emergence of a bird from a hatched egg with Jesus' departure from the tomb. Unlike fledglings and chicks, which are part of the natural order, Jesus' resurrection transcends nature and transforms the status quo. Early Christians grasped the topsy-turvy irony

of the event, that Jesus overcame not only death but the entrenched systems of injustice that condemned him.³ Elementary school children, for whom fairness is a priority, will resonate with the victory of justice. Be sure that an object lesson with eggs does not overshadow the transformative power of the Bible story.

THE CHILDREN'S HERO

Instead of symbols and substitute objects, let the story speak for itself, both in the telling and the modeling. Children learn through experience and example. Jesus is their hero, and the people at church who demonstrate Jesus' character and deeds make their hero real and approachable. When children hear that Jesus, who loves and heals "the vulnerable and afflicted children," is mistreated by bullies, they identify with him for being "vulnerable to the ruling powers, threatened with death, and reliant upon God."⁴ When children receive forgiveness from adults at church, they understand the importance of Jesus' forgiveness from the cross. And when Jesus rises in spite of abuse, they rejoice that good has triumphed over evil.

DYING TO SIN

Of course, resurrection presupposes death—a topic few adults enjoy contemplating, much less explaining to children. Rather than avoid the subject, church leaders should interpret Jesus' death in ways that are relevant. Children understand primarily what they physically sense and emotionally feel. For those youngsters who have had a family member or friend die, death means a broken relationship with someone they love. Even infants grieve when someone to whom they are attached goes away. Children will intuitively grasp the disciples' sadness when Jesus died and their joy when he surprised them by returning.

Take care in describing the reasons for Jesus' death. Sin is an abstract term, and

as soon as we try to give concrete examples, we run the risk of making the concept too small. Sin is more than stealing, lying, and killing. Sin is, in part, thinking that what I want is more important than what God or anyone else wants. Young children can comprehend that some people did not like what Jesus taught; they did not want Jesus to change things, and so they put him on a cross to die.

Instead of symbols and substitute objects, let the Easter story speak for itself. Children learn through experience and example. Jesus is their hero, and the people at church who demonstrate his character make their hero real and approachable.

Avoid the grisly details. One of my worst experiences in ministry was hearing an evangelist describe to a sanctuary full of families the trial and crucifixion in ways that made Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* seem tame. To make matters worse, he insisted that everyone in the room was responsible for the execution because of our sin. Terror and guilt may produce a desired behavior (or inhibit an undesirable one), but they seldom inspire the change of heart or the lifelong commitment Jesus calls his followers to make. Scary manipulation can subvert children's belief in the loving nature of God and actually lead to protective, secretive, self-absorbed behaviors—quite the opposite of what Jesus teaches.

AHA'S AND ALLELUIAS

Children need to know about Jesus' death in order for Easter Sunday's celebration to make sense. His resurrection was a surprise! No one expected the man buried in a tomb to become alive again. Children enjoy the thrill of making new discoveries, and there are many to be made on the holiday. The change in paraments and clerical vestments, the use of bells or special musical instruments, and the larger crowd in the worship service—all of these experiences are still a novelty for young children. Tap into their excitement by teaching them about the amazement of the people who met Jesus when he had risen. The disciples were themselves like astonished children for whom everything is new—a new way to know that God loves us, a new message to share, and a new job (to tell everyone the good news of God's love).

Plan Easter worship that engages children in the celebration. If you have refrained from using "Alleluia" during Lent, urge the children to sing and shout the word in song and litany. Give each child a bell to ring whenever an "Alleluia" is proclaimed. Have children help decorate a cross with flowers from congregants' gardens. The aroma, the visual splendor, and the feel of the soft petals will enrich the jubilation of the day. For churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary, Carolyn C. Brown's *Sharing the Easter Faith with Children* provides a treasure trove of ideas for interpreting the readings, hymns, and other elements of liturgical worship in child-friendly ways.⁵

In sum, here are some guidelines to keep in mind as you share the Easter story with children: avoid mixing secular traditions with the sacred space of worship and Bible study; focus on the biblical narrative; engage children's senses; pay attention to the feelings in the story—fear, surprise, sadness, and especially joy; and include children in your worship rituals and plan a few surprises.

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NOTES

1 Samantha Braverman, Sr., "Happy Holidays! Christmas Is Americans' Favorite Holiday," *The Harris Poll #107* (October 12, 2011), www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/878/Default.aspx (accessed September 27, 2013).

2 James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 133-134.

3 Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 161-162.

4 Sharon Betsworth, "The Child and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Childhood and Religion*, 1:4 (Sopher Press, June 2010), 11-12. Available online at www.childhoodandreligion.com (accessed November 25, 2013).

5 Carolyn C. Brown, *Sharing the Easter Faith with Children: Helping Children Observe Lent and Celebrate Easter* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006). Brown has also written *Forbid Them Not: Involving Children in Sunday Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992-1994), a three-volume guide for leaders of churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary. Her helpful blog is at worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com.



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