





Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

-  Celebrating Easter for Fifty Days
(*Easter*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

-  Between Easter Eggs and the Empty Tomb
(*Easter*, pp. 77-81)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Celebrating Easter for Fifty Days

There is no scriptural requirement for us to celebrate Easter for fifty days, or even one day, for that matter. But there is nothing in the Bible that would prohibit joyful remembrance of the resurrection for any length of time. In fact, there is much to commend the practice of celebrating Eastertide.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

Meditation†

Resurrection changes everything.... This is why I need more than just Easter Day. If Easter were only a single day, I would never have time to let its incredible reality settle over me, settle into me. I would trudge through my life with a disconnect between what I say I believe about resurrection and how I live (or fail to live) my life in light of it.

Thanks be to God, our forebears in faith had people like me in mind when they decided that we simply cannot celebrate Easter in a single day, or even a single week. No, they decided, we need fifty days, seven Sundays, to even begin to plumb the depths of this event.

Kimberlee Conway Ireton

Reflection

“The implications of the resurrection lavishly overflow a one-day container,” Mark Roberts notes in his winsome invitation to celebrate Eastertide, the fifty-day season to mark Christ’s resurrection which begins on Easter Sunday. We need the extra time to explore, savor, and grow into those amazing implications. Roberts encourages us to be innovative in our worship during this season because it “is relatively unencumbered by beloved customs and set expectations.”

Eastertide is an ancient and widespread practice. In the first few centuries Christians marked special events that occurred between Christ’s resurrection and the formative events on Pentecost (which means “fiftieth day” in Greek). Today Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate the Easter season for forty days, until the ascension of Jesus. Roman Catholics and many Protestants honor a fifty-day Easter; their lectionaries provide special readings through the Seventh Sunday after Easter.

Thus, according to Roberts, joining with Christian believers in earlier centuries and across various traditions and using this time to draw on the rich resources of the church year are two good reasons to celebrate Easter for fifty days. But the most persuasive reason is that the implications of Christ’s resurrection deserve such extensive attention. “Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the God who raised Jesus from the dead deserves our attention,” he writes. “Moreover, we deserve to have our faith stretched, deepened, and renewed through a season of reflection upon and celebration of the resurrection of our Lord.”



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One example comes from his reflection on Ephesians 1:15-23, which is a lectionary reading for Ascension of the Lord Day or for the last Sunday of Eastertide. In Paul's prayer, "the resurrection...illustrates the 'immeasurable greatness of [God's] power for us who believe' (1:19), Roberts observes. "In a time when so many of us feel powerless, it would be wonderful to rediscover the power of the resurrection." This text also portrays "the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus... as two parts of one sweeping action of God. As a result of the resurrection-ascension, Jesus now reigns above all cosmic authorities." The implications of Christ's lordship cannot be developed on one Sunday, but are "worth examining during the whole of Eastertide."

In the next passage, Ephesians 2:1-7, Paul applies this to our salvation. Roberts continues, "In a stunning use of the metaphor of resurrection, this passage envisions us as already having been raised with Christ and exalted with him to heaven. Yet, we still look forward to 'the immeasurable riches' of God's grace that will be showered upon us in the future."

"Eastertide invites us to be creative, both in personal devotions and corporate worship," Roberts concludes. It leads us to ask: "How can we worship God in light of the resurrection?" "How do we experience the reality of our own resurrection from death to life through the grace of God in Christ?" "How might we live for fifty days – and beyond – as resurrection people?"

Study Questions

1. What are the best reasons, according to Mark Roberts, to celebrate Easter for fifty days?
2. Recall the themes that are usually addressed in your congregation's Easter morning worship service. What new directions might Ephesians 1:15-23 and 2:1-7 take your reflection on the meaning of Christ's resurrection during Eastertide?
3. What might you actually do during the fifty days of Easter? Work together with others to sketch out a series of seven personal devotions or corporate worship services on Easter themes. (You might start by reading the lectionary scripture passages and hymns associated with Easter.)
4. In what Mark McClintock calls "the glitter and gluttony of the holiday marketplace," what has become alluring about Easter to children (and some adults)? How can these facets confuse children?
5. What age-appropriate themes does McClintock recommend for children during Easter? Consider how those themes might form the basis of church worship such that "everyone in the congregation may hear the Easter story in a new way."

Departing Hymn: "The First Day of Creation"

† Kimberlee Conway Ireton, *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 94.

Celebrating Easter for Fifty Days

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Ephesians 1:15-23	1 Peter 1:3-9
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Plan a study/worship series for Eastertide
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the reasons for celebrating Easter for fifty days.
2. To discuss age-appropriate themes for children during the celebration of Easter.
3. To plan a personal or corporate study or worship series for the season of Eastertide.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Easter (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Mark Roberts first celebrated Eastertide when he became senior pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Southern California. He recalls, “the worship director...explained to me that he ordered the worship of our church according to the liturgical year” and that this included “celebrating Easter for fifty days, beginning on Easter Sunday and ending the day before Pentecost.”

“...All of this felt peculiar to me. Yet it also felt surprisingly right. I appreciated the chance to focus in worship on the resurrection for more than just one Sunday a year. As I stood in front of my congregation and proclaimed, ‘Christ is risen!’ I was glad to remind them of this truth and to be encouraged by their response, ‘He is risen, indeed!’ I began to sense unexpected value in having our Easter worship spill over into the weeks after Easter. I wondered how this elongated celebration might influence the soul of my church and even my own relationship with the Lord.

“...I believe our recognition of the season of Easter enriched our worship. More importantly, it helped my congregation and me to ‘know Christ and the power of his resurrection’ (Philippians 3:10) in new and deeper ways.” (*Easter*, 12-13)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to fill members’ hearts with the joy and hope that come to us through Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 1:15-23 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study Mark Roberts shares three reasons for celebrating Eastertide and shows how we might focus on the implications of Christ’s resurrection for the life of discipleship during the season. The next four studies explore some of those implications more closely.

Your group might want to devote a second session to planning a seven-week study or worship series either for individuals or for the congregation during Eastertide.

Study Questions

1. The best reason to mark Easter for fifty days, according to Mark Roberts, is that the God who raised Jesus from the dead deserves such attention. Celebrating Eastertide can draw us closer to God and help us “know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10) in new and deeper ways. The other two reasons that Roberts offers – taking this opportunity to join in ancient and widespread practices and to participate in the church year through commemorative days and scripture lectionaries – reveal how this celebration can draw us closer to Christian believers in other traditions and eras.
2. “One-day Easter celebrations usually focus on the story of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus... to instill awe and wonder, as well as to invite unbelieving visitors to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior,” Roberts notes. This is important, but it only scratches the surface of the resurrection’s implications for the life of discipleship. Ephesians 1:15-23 portrays Christ’s resurrection and ascension as demonstrations of God’s great power that establishes Christ’s lordship over all things. In Ephesians 2:1-7 the resurrection grounds our deliverance from the deadly power of sinful desires and actions. These passages can help us see how (in Kimberlee Conway Ireton’s words) “resurrection changes everything.”
3. Decide on your format: will you create seven personal devotions, group studies, or worship services? For each week in Eastertide, you can find scripture readings (from several church lectionaries), suggested hymns, reflections, movies, artwork, and other resources, at www.textweek.com moderated by Jeneé Woodward. Other websites offer daily lectionary readings for the season.

Here are two ways to use such lectionary-based resources. You might select a day during Eastertide and use resources collected for that day; or you might select a favorite resurrection-themed scripture passage or hymn and then explore how it is connected with other resources on the websites. “I assume that we have the freedom to be creative in the worship of Eastertide, based on biblical themes associated with resurrection,” Roberts writes. His own use of Ephesians is a model of this freedom: Ephesians 1:15-23 is a lection for Ascension Day or for the Seventh Sunday after Easter, but he has added Ephesians 2:1-7 to the mix.

4. Mark McClintock notes the allure of Easter bunnies, baskets of candy, colored eggs, and chicks. He would not purge these from Easter celebrations. “Myth is not the enemy of truth,” he explains. “Young children build their understanding of the world through a blend of personal experience and fantasy. ... 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.” Yet, he continues, “Fun and fancy are well and good (they help awaken children to the excitement of the Easter season), but leave the baskets at home. ... 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.”
5. McClintock advises us to “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.” Elementary school children “will resonate with the victory of justice” in Christ’s resurrection. Jesus is their hero, and his heroic qualities can be modeled by adults in their lives. Even young children can identify with the sadness of the disciples after Jesus’s death, and “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.” He suggests avoiding the grisly details of the crucifixion: “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.” He offers specific ways to help children join in the congregation’s rejoicing in Easter morning worship.

Departing Hymn

“The First Day of Creation” is on pp. 53-55 of *Easter*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.