

Easter

The celebration of Christ's resurrection is central to Christian life and faith. While every Sunday remembers Christ's triumph over death, a specific annual commemoration dates to the time of Bishop Polycarp in the early second century. Easter today is the culmination of the remembrance of Christ's suffering and death that is recalled during Lent and Holy Week. Like Christmas, Easter is not confined to one day but instead is a 50-day season from the first Sunday of Easter through Pentecost Sunday.



When is Easter?

Easter is a moveable feast—it begins on a different Sunday each year. In the Western Church, Easter occurs between March 22 and April 25, generally about seven days after the first full moon of spring. However, the dating of Easter has often been a point of controversy in Christian history. Some of the first controversies were about whether to compute the date of Easter based on the Jewish calendar or independent calculations. The issue became so important that the Council of Nicea took it up, deciding that Easter should be celebrated in common by all Christians on a calendar independent from Jewish calculations of Passover. The Easter date also became a point of contention between Celtic and Roman Christians in Britain, as they followed different reckoning systems. The Synod of Whitby in 664 brought Celtic practice into conformity with Rome. Still today, Easter in Orthodox churches often falls later than it does in Protestant or Catholic ones because they calculate the date using a Julian rather than a Gregorian calendar.



Resurrection Witnesses

While all the gospel accounts contain a resurrection account (or, in Mark, an empty tomb), they differ from each other on a number of details. One of the most significant differences is the list of people who were present at the resurrection. While Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John don't agree on the number and names of the people, there are two common elements among all the gospels: Mary Magdalene was present in all four accounts, and women were the first witnesses to the resurrection.



Symbols of Easter

Most of the symbols of Easter communicate new life as a reference to Christ's resurrection. Eggs are an ancient symbol of new life, and the practice of dyeing eggs seems to have emerged among Mesopotamian Christians. Rabbits are also a symbol of fertility and new life because they give birth to large litters. The Easter Hare first appeared during Eastertide as a judge of whether children were good or bad among German Lutherans. The blooming of lilies in spring likewise represents new life emerging from the dead of winter. The lamb had connections to the Jewish Passover and Christ as the Lamb of God.

Lights of Easter

The end of Lent and the beginning of Easter celebrations begin with a service of light during the Great Vigil of Easter. During the service, all old lights are extinguished, and a new fire is kindled, representing Christ's new life. During the service, the cross and Alpha and Omega (the beginning and the end) are traced onto the candle, and five grains of incense are inserted into it to represent the five wounds of Christ. Once the Easter fire is lit, the flame is used to light a new Paschal candle. Many churches then offer a sunrise service on Easter Sunday to celebrate when the women first saw the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ.

