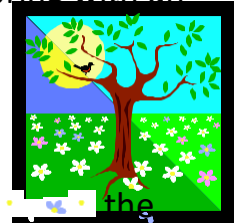


## Easter History



Easter is a spring festival that celebrates the central event of the Christian faith: the resurrection of Christ. Easter is the oldest Christian holiday and the most important day of the church year. Easter also has its non-religious side. Easter was originally a pagan festival.

According to St. Bede, an English historian of the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, Easter was derived from the name Eastre, the Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility, to whom the month of April was dedicated. The festival of Eastre was celebrated at the vernal equinox. The ancient Saxons celebrated the return of spring with an uproarious festival.



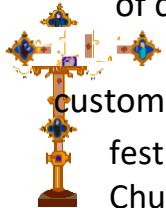
When the second-century Christian missionaries encountered the pagan celebrations, they attempted to convert the ancients to Christianity. The festival of Eastre occurred at the same time of year as the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Christ. As the Christians slowly converted the Saxons they altered the festival to make it a Christian celebration. The early name, Eastre, was eventually changed to its modern spelling, Easter.

Easter is also linked to the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection occurred after he went to Jerusalem to celebrate



Passover, which commemorates the ancient Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt. The early Christians, many of whom were of Jewish origin, were brought up in the Hebrew tradition and regarded Easter as a new feature of the Passover festival.

The specific day on which the resurrection should be celebrated became a point of contention within the church. Early Christians celebrated the



resurrection of Christ every Sunday. However it soon became customary to celebrate just one day each year, during the Passover festival. The problem was deciding which day to celebrate. The Eastern Church wanted to celebrate Easter on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, the day Early Christians observed Passover, regardless of the day of the week. The Western Church wanted Easter to always be on a Sunday.

Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicaea in 325. The council decided that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox. The Alexandrians, noted for their advanced astronomical knowledge, calculated March 21 to be the date for the vernal equinox. So Easter became a "movable" feast which can occur as early as March 22 or as late as April 25. Some churches in the East continue to observe Easter according to the date of the Passover festival.



Easter is more than just a single-day observance. It is actually an entire season of the Christian church year. It includes Lent, a 40 day period leading up to Easter Sunday. The week preceding Easter is called Holy Week and includes Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. The 50-day period following Easter Sunday is called Eastertide and includes a celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Lent always begins on a Wednesday, called Ash Wednesday. The 40 days commemorate the time Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and



resisting temptation. Lent, is a time of fasting, prayer, and repentance. Lent is actually 46 days rather than 40 days. The 40 days of Lent are supposed to be days of fasting, which means days of discipline and self-restraint. But Sunday is never a day of fasting, but a day of celebration. So each Sunday the Lenten fast and penance is suspended.

Holy Week begins the Sunday before Easter with Palm Sunday. It commemorates Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem, when people cut palm branches to spread on his path as he rode humbly into the city on a donkey. Holy Thursday, also referred to as Maundy Thursday, is in memory of the Passover meal Jesus shared with his followers. This meal became known as the Last Supper, because Jesus died soon after. Good Friday commemorates the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and his death at Calvary. It is also known as Black Friday. A day of mourning, Holy Saturday, focuses on the transition between crucifixion and resurrection. Holy week and the Lenten season end with Easter Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

