

THINKING ABOUT EASTER
A Sermon for EASTER SUNDAY, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Have you ever asked yourself, “What is Easter?” or more to the point, “What do I think of Easter?” Many people are not introspective and would not ask such questions of themselves, so let me ask you directly, What do you think of Easter? Is it a day devoted to white rabbits that somehow lay colored and decorated eggs? Is it a day on which your family eats a midday meal that features some special foods? Is it a day when women wear hats they would never wear any other day of the year? Many of these customs are good, such as special foods: Hot-cross buns, special cakes or ham, which signifies God’s changing of the food laws; some are neutral, such as the hats; and some are downright bad. All kinds of strange customs have grown up around Easter that actually have nothing to do with the reason we celebrate this day.

The reason I got on this idea was an E-mail I got from an old friend, a high school classmate. She sent me this Happy Easter E-mail card that I printed out. Here is what it looks like. If you are in one of the back pews, you may not be able to see all the detail. At the top in blue print it says, “HAPPY EASTER EVERYONE” above a picture of a wildly overdressed white rabbit who is balancing a decorated egg on one finger while a bluebird holds up the tail of his coat. Underneath that it says: “All I need to know I learned from the Easter Bunny!” after which there is a bulleted list of 8 cutesy sayings such as:

- Everyone needs a friend who is all ears.
- Let happy thoughts multiply like rabbits.
- Keep your paws off other people’s jelly beans.

After all that there are some more words that point to candy; and then it ends with: May the joy of the season fill your heart. And may God bless you! Happy Easter! This is followed by another picture of a rabbit prayerfully hoping he smells jelly beans.

Now, I don’t see anything overtly evil in this, and I certainly would not impute any evil motive to my friend for sending me this. She is a devout Christian who is very active in her church. I am trying hard not to come across as some sort of Puritan, someone who sets a stern face at the thought that someone, somewhere might be having fun and enjoying themselves.

This card is designed so that, on its surface, it would not offend anyone except certain atheists and members of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which is an actual organization in the USA. After all, it says “Happy Easter” twice, and “May God bless you” once. Even so, That is more than enough to send those people running to a microphone to scream that their misinterpretation of the First Amendment of the Constitution should be forced down everybody’s throats.

I said “I don’t see anything overtly evil in this card”, and I don’t, that is not overtly. On the surface it is completely benign and offers a sweet message, but like those Happy Holiday cards at Christmastime, which never mention Christmas or Christ, it does not mention anything about why we celebrate Easter. This E-card is only two steps away from being as bland and noncommittal as a Christmastime “Happy Holiday” card: First the “may God bless you” gets removed, and then “Easter” gets changed to “Holiday”; and there you have it, a completely secular, nonsectarian, and nonreligious card; and the devil applauds.

Anyone who has read C. S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters* knows that this is a tactic of the devil – to woo people away from the Christian religion by diluting it and secularizing it so that over time the religious holidays become less and less holy-days and more and more secular holidays until for many people the secular meaning is all that is left.

At the beginning of this, I asked, “What do you think of Easter?” After this little introduction, perhaps we should change the question to What *should* we think of Easter? That may lead us to a correct answer. Let us back up just a bit.

At the Synod of the Diocese of Mid-America back in 2009, Bishop Riches, the Presiding Bishop of the Reformed Episcopal Church preached the sermon at the “full dress” service of Holy Communion. At each Synod we have a service at which all clergy are dressed in full Choir dress, Cassock, Surplice, and Stole. The schedule is such that the day on which this occurs is a Saint’s Day on which there will be some ordinations so, all clergy are wearing Red stoles. At the beginning of the service, all of the clergy process into the church behind the choir. It is a beautiful thing to see and to be a part of.

Bishop Riches was preaching to all the diocesan clergy that day as well as to the Ordinands with a sermon entitled, “Preach Christ Crucified!” I have a 3 by 5 card right above the center of my computer screen on which I copied a similar message from a commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 in which St. Paul says, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 [18 All this is from God, who through](#)

Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. What the commentator said, which is what I printed on that card is this: “The ministerial office, through which the mediatorial work of Christ is itself mediated to man, must continually hold up the offer of reconciliation through Christ alone. This must be the salt of every sermon.” Consider also that St. Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23: “²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,”

I have to ask, “Why should we preach Christ Crucified?” To many Christians that question, Why preach Christ crucified? is a dumb question that goes right along with “What should we think about Easter?” We struggle with the basics of our faith just as the disciples did. Remember the next-to-last verse of the Gospel lesson: John 20:9 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. We often need that figurative whap up side the head with a 2 by 4 to get the message, just as did the disciples who were on the scene. They went back to their homes while a distraught Mary Magdalene stayed there at the tomb and then looked into it again. The next 7 verses of St. John 20 tell us much more of the story: John 20:11-17 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Suddenly, there He is, Jesus Christ; and a woman who has followed Him closely for about two years in the company of His mother does not recognize Him until He speaks to her and lets her recognize Him. The scriptures and His own prophecies that he would rise on the third day have been fulfilled.

So what is Easter and how should we think of it? Simple, Easter Sunday is the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what Easter is. How should we think of it? While I was writing an earlier part of this sermon, our Saturday mail delivery came to our rural mail box and in it was an Easter card from our mail carrier. In it she had written this: "To me this is the most precious of all holy days." All that I can add to that is that if we had to rank all the Holy Days in terms of importance, I would have to say that Easter is the most important of all the Holy Days. What would we have for a religion if the last thing that happened to Jesus was the Crucifixion? The answer is probably nothing. I have read, not in the Bible, that there were several people before Jesus who put themselves forward as the Messiah, and that when they were killed, as most of them were, all their followings just sort of evaporated because there was nothing left to hold them together and no substance behind them.

Why did Christianity not just survive, but thrive, when all the other messianic cults died out? There is only one reason: the Resurrection. It is the Resurrection that makes all the other Holy Days have the importance they have. Who remembers the birthdays, or even the names, of any of those pretenders to the Messiahship. Without the Resurrection, Good Friday would not be a Holy Day; it would just be a footnote in Roman history – the record might have read: three criminals crucified, two thieves and a Jewish rabble rouser that the Jews wanted killed. The disciples would have all gone home and St.s Peter and Andrew would have gone back to fishing. We probably would have never learned their names, or even heard of them.

Once we have the Resurrection, all the other days become important: the Annunciation, the Conception, Christmas as the birthday of Jesus, the Epiphany, Jesus' Baptism, the Fast and temptation, His Ministry, the Transfiguration, His Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, and then Good Friday and His Crucifixion. All of these receive their full and true meaning only from the Resurrection because the Resurrection is the confirmation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He did what He came to do, which was to take away the sins of the world and open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. God showed us that the Kingdom of Heaven had been opened when the great Veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment Jesus died. It would take a while before the disciples and those they taught understood that after the veil had been torn, anyone could walk into the Holy of Holies without dying, and that anyone could expect to enter the Kingdom of Heaven if he believed that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all creation and that God raised Him from the dead.

St. Paul said as much in Romans 10:8-10 where he says: ⁸"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

St Paul says he preaches Christ Crucified, but then says that there are only two things we have to do to be saved: 1) Believe and be willing to confess with your mouth, meaning say it out loud, that Jesus is Lord; and 2) believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. To put it bluntly, belief in the Resurrection is absolutely essential if we hope to be saved.

To say I preach Christ Crucified is shorthand for saying, "I preach Christ Crucified and Risen. We could not have the Resurrection without having had Jesus to die in some way. To have had Him crucified was perhaps the way that got the most attention in Roman-controlled Judea of 2000 years ago, especially when we had the testimony of an expert, the Roman centurion, who oversaw the Crucifixion, to testify that He was indeed dead.

The Resurrection is then in some way more important than the Cross, even though the Cross is the symbol of our Faith. Wonder why that is? Because the Cross was the symbol of Power, of the world's power, and in rising from the dead, Jesus Christ conquered it. Also, a grave is just a hole, either in the ground or in a rock wall. It is kind of hard to come up with a symbol a person can wear or put on a steeple that is of an empty hole in the ground; but the Cross, the instrument of death that was conquered is a very good symbol. Those crosses we put on steeples, that sit upon our altars, that we wear around our necks and women wear in their earlobes do not signify Death. No, they signify the fact that Jesus Christ has conquered death and that the door to everlasting life is open to all who will believe in Him. The conquered Cross tells us that the grave is really meaningless. The Cross on the steeple says to the community, "Come here and worship and learn of the true life that lasts forever."

It is the Resurrection that gives meaning to all our days and all that we do as Christians. It is for that reason that in my opinion, that event on that Sunday morning so many years ago was the most important event on the most important day in the history of mankind. It is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that gives us the reason to live and worship and hope for His coming again. And so, as I get to do on every Easter Sunday, I say:

Alleluia! He is risen. Jesus Christ is risen today; Alleluia! Amen!