

# Celebrating Easter for Fifty Days

BY MARK D. ROBERTS

**There is no scriptural requirement for us to celebrate Easter for fifty days, or even one day, for that matter. But there is also 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.**

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**L**et me invite you to celebrate Easter for fifty days this year. If you already swim in a stream of the Christian tradition that does this, then my invitation is unnecessary; but I hope you will find something of value below, perhaps a fresh perspective on why Christians do this or new inspiration for your Easter celebrations.

However, if you are like most Christians I know, the idea of a fifty-day Easter seems rather strange. I grew up in a church-going Protestant family. I never once heard that Easter could be more than a one-day experience. I did not feel any need to stretch out the holiday, either. As a young Christian, I had no idea that some believers structured their year according to a calendar based on the life of Jesus and the faith of the Church. I did not know about something called the liturgical year, the church year, or the Christian year. I knew of two major Christian holidays: Christmas and Easter. There were minor holidays recognized in my congregation, including Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Mother's Day, Independence Day, and Thanksgiving. I had some vague idea that my Catholic friends had to give something up during the season of Lent. That always seemed to me like one more good reason to remain a Protestant.

As a young adult, I sensed a call to ordained ministry in my Presbyterian denomination. In preparation for ordination, I took a course in church polity at Fuller Theological Seminary. There I learned, much to my surprise, that many Presbyterians were guided in their worship by the liturgical year. In fact, our official denominational guide to worship included it as standard fare for all congregations. My professor was enthusiastic about the richness and variety that come from structuring worship according to the seasons of the church year. I was not convinced, however. But I did learn for the first time that Easter was actually considered to be a fifty-day season rather than just a special Sunday in the spring. I considered this fact to be curious, but otherwise irrelevant to my life and worship.

Things changed in 1991 when I was called to be the senior pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Southern California. Soon after I arrived, my worship director, a godly man named Loren, explained to me that he ordered the worship of our church according to the liturgical year. Because of my seminary class in church polity, at least I knew what he was talking about. Included in Loren's vision for our church's worship was celebrating Easter for fifty days, beginning on Easter Sunday and ending the day before Pentecost. During this season of Easter, which Loren called Eastertide, the congregation would continue to use the greeting we used on Easter Sunday: "Christ is risen! / He is risen, indeed!" We would sing Easter hymns. Our worship would glorify God in light of the resurrection of Jesus. Loren said he preferred that some of my preaching during the season of Easter focus on resurrection themes, but he understood if I had other priorities.

As I imagined stretching out Easter for seven Sundays, I felt somewhat uncomfortable. It just seemed wrong to sing "Christ the Lord is risen today" on any Sunday other than on Easter Sunday, even though I knew that the "today" of this beloved hymn was just as true on the Sunday after Easter as it was on Easter Sunday itself. Nevertheless, in spite of my personal reservations I consented to Loren's plan. So, in the spring of 1992, I experienced my first seven-week Eastertide. I did not preach Easter sermons that year beyond Easter Sunday. But we did sing Easter hymns and use resurrection-themed Scripture readings in worship. I did greet the congregation with "Christ is risen!" and they responded "He is risen, indeed!" well into the month of May.

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.

In my remaining fifteen years at Irvine Presbyterian Church, we always extended the celebration of Easter beyond Easter Sunday itself. We did not feel bound to shape every service until Pentecost with strong Easter themes, however. We were free to vary the menu because, in a sense, every Christian gathering *on Sunday* celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. Besides, we did not feel bound by the church year, as if we had put on a liturgical straitjacket. The Christian calendar was more of a guide and inspiration. Yet, we regularly sang Easter hymns during Eastertide, even as our readings and prayers highlighted the resurrection and its implications. 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.

My experience and that of my church testifies to the value of a fifty-day celebration of Easter. This story may be enough to convince you to give it a try in your church or in your personal devotions. Or, perhaps my story intrigues you, but leaves you with questions, such as: What reasons are there for celebrating Easter for fifty days? What might we actually do during the fifty days of Easter? In the rest of this article, I will try to answer these questions.

### **SOME REASONS TO CELEBRATE EASTER FOR FIFTY DAYS**

Let me begin with what is *not* a reason for a fifty-day Easter. Scripture does not instruct us to celebrate Easter for fifty days. (In fact, we do not find a biblical imperative for any of our Christian feasts, fasts, or seasons, though, of course, Scrip-

ture narrates the stories we celebrate in these special times.) Moreover, we do not observe the first followers of Jesus choosing one Sunday of the year to remember the resurrection of Jesus. The fact that the earliest Jewish Christians gathered on Sunday, in addition to Saturday, was by itself a strong testimony to and remembrance of the

resurrection. In a sense, every Sunday was Easter for the first-century believers, as well as for Christians throughout the centuries.

If you look to Scripture as your primary guide for Christian faith and practice, then there is no requirement for you to celebrate Easter for fifty days, or even one day, for that matter. Conversely, there is also nothing in the Bible that would prohibit joyful remembrance of the resurrection for

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any length of time. In fact, there is much to commend this practice. Thus, with respect to Easter worship, Christians are free to follow the dictates of their consciences as we participate in the traditions of our churches. Or we can worship creatively on the basis of Scripture, informed by the traditions of other believers.

When it comes to church traditions, the last thirty years have inaugurated an unprecedented sharing of Christian practices from throughout history and throughout the world. As technology shrinks the world, it is not unusual for believers in one country to use worship resources developed on the other side of the world. Moreover, church leaders like Robert E. Webber have encouraged us to worship in ways that are both “ancient” and “future.”<sup>1</sup> Even in the United States, Christians have begun to realize that doing whatever is *new* is not necessarily *best* when it comes to worship. We have learned that our brothers and sisters from earlier centuries still have much to offer to us today, both in their teachings and in their practices.

Though we are not bound to celebrate Easter for fifty days just because millions of Christians throughout history have done so and because millions of Christians throughout the world continue to do so, we may be more inclined today to be open to the possibility that others have something to teach us. Our openness to learning from other believers may extend across formerly sacrosanct lines in the sand. Protestants are discovering riches in traditional Catholic practices, and vice versa. Some of us are even examining the treasures of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Thus, one reason for a fifty-day season of Easter is the fact that this practice is both ancient and widespread. (Eastern Orthodox Easter lasts for forty days, ending with the celebration of the ascension of Jesus. Roman Catholics and many Protestants throughout the world honor a fifty-day Easter.) The roots of the Christian custom grow back into Jewish soil. The first day of the Jewish Passover came seven weeks before the holiday of *Shavuoth*, which is also known as the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. (“Pentecost” comes from the Greek word meaning “fiftieth day.”) So, even as Jews connected Passover and Pentecost and gave special meaning to the days in between, so did some Christians when it came to Easter and Pentecost. A fifty-day celebration of Easter emerged in the first few centuries of the Church’s existence.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason for celebrating Easter on the seven Sundays of Eastertide points to the enriching potential of the liturgical calendar. Though at first I was skeptical of my seminary professor’s enthusiasm for the church year, I have come to agree with him. As a pastor and worship leader, I know how easy it is for the worship of a congregation to become stale. The themes of our worship can reflect the narrowness of our own faith rather than the breadth of biblical truth and the richness of Christian practice through the ages.

If we follow the contours of the Christian year, however, it is likely that our worship will be richer and truer than when we are left to our own devices. For example, in Advent, our worship will be saturated with hope, even if we tend not to be naturally hopeful people. Or, in the season of Christmas (Christmas Day and the following eleven days), we will reflect deeply upon the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. When it comes to the season of Easter, we will have the time and the encouragement to probe the depths of the resurrection.

In my experience, one-day Easter celebrations usually focus on the story of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus. Sermons try to instill awe and wonder, as well as to invite unbelieving visitors to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. I am not criticizing such practices. In fact, I have described Easter Sunday worship and preaching in the church where I was senior pastor for sixteen years. But, as important as it is to remember the Easter narratives, this only begins to scratch the surface.

To be sure, the resurrection supplies a powerful rationale for accepting the truth of the gospel. This truth often finds its way into Easter Sunday preaching and rightly so. But, it turns out to be much more than simply persuasive evidence for the truth of Christianity. Through the resurrection, God “has given us new birth into a living hope,” a hope that sustains us even in the midst of suffering (1 Peter 1:3-9). It was not just an event in the past, but also the preface to a glorious future, *our* glorious future (see 1 Corinthians 15) – something that reminds us embodied life matters. It reveals the victory of God through Jesus and offers the promise of our participation in that victory (Ephesians 1:17-23).<sup>3</sup>

From experience, I know that you simply cannot squeeze all of this into an Easter Sunday worship service. The implications of the resurrection lavishly overflow a one-day container. Thus, one of the most persuasive reasons for devoting fifty days to its celebration is the

fact that it deserves such extensive attention. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the God who raised Jesus from the dead deserves our attention. 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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**EASTERTIDE AND EPHESIANS: AN EXAMPLE**

Let me provide an example from the letter to the Ephesians, which I take to be written by the Apostle Paul. In the first chapter, Paul prays that the readers might know

the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

*Ephesians 1:19-21*

Notice that, in this text, the resurrection does not prove something about Jesus himself. Rather, it illustrates the "immeasurable greatness of [God's] power for us who believe" (1:19). It would serve us well to spend the time needed to understand this truth and experience it in our daily lives. In a time when so many of us feel powerless, it would be wonderful to rediscover the power of the resurrection. A fifty-day celebration of Easter encourages us to discover how the truth of Easter can touch our lives today.

Another feature of Paul's prayer is the close connection between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. They are portrayed here as two parts of one sweeping action of God. As a result of the resurrection-ascension, Jesus now reigns above all cosmic authorities. It would be hard to develop this theme in one Easter Sunday sermon and is worth examining during the whole of Eastertide. In fact, the ascension of Jesus is part and parcel of Eastertide traditions. In some streams it is celebrated on Ascension Day (the fortieth day after Easter, always a Thursday). In others, it is celebrated on the following Sunday.

In the next passage of Ephesians, the theme of resurrection appears once again, this time in a most unexpected manner. According to the first verses of Ephesians 2, we are dead through our trespasses and sins, and living in bondage to worldly and demonic powers, not to mention our sinful passions (2:1-3). Yet, the bad news of our present death introduces good news:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

*Ephesians 2:4-7*

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.

Ephesians 2 is rarely used for Easter Sunday preaching. I never used it during my tenure as a preaching pastor. Yet, if preachers and teachers had the time to exposit this text and spell out its amazing implications, to craft a worship service that begins with our death-like state and ends by celebrating our resurrection with Christ, they could provide a wonderful opportunity for renewed worship. A fifty-day season of Easter welcomes this kind of preaching and worship.

### **AN INVITATION TO CREATIVITY DURING EASTERTIDE**

What might we actually do during the fifty days of Easter? I assume that we have the freedom to be creative in the worship of Eastertide, based on biblical themes associated with resurrection. Certain days and seasons of the Christian year are already laden with traditions. Eastertide, on the contrary, is relatively unencumbered by beloved customs and set expectations for many Christians, though some possible practices are obvious. A fifty-day Easter would allow your church to sing a wider variety of Easter hymns than can be jammed into one Sunday. If you use the standard liturgical colors, Easter white and gold will represent hope, purity, light, and glory. You could certainly join millions of Christians throughout the world by celebrating the ascension of Jesus during the Easter season.

But, Eastertide invites us to be creative, both in personal devotions and corporate worship. Church teachers, musicians, evangelists, children’s workers, and artists can work together on questions like: How can we lead our people to worship God in light of the resurrection? How can we teach our people its broader and deeper implications? How can we craft worship services so that our people might know the power of the resurrection in their lives? How might they experience the reality of their 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?

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**NOTES**

1 See, for example, Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008). This is part of the Ancient-Future Series of writings by Webber that began with his influential *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

2 For more on the origins of Easter, see Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

3 For more on the meaning of the resurrection, I recommend two books by N. T. Wright. The first is his massive study, *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*, volume 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). If you are not ready for 740 scholarly pages, I would recommend Wright's much shorter volume, *The Challenge of Easter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

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