

Do you find Easter more complicated “to celebrate” than Christmas? I do. Do the symbols, strange stories, and liturgical action in the church stir deep and complex feelings or just put you off? Sometimes without fully realizing it we try to avoid all the “drama” by turning Easter into pastel greeting cards, spring flowers, chocolate bunnies, and plastic eggs. This makes it light and fun, which I love too, but getting rid of the Jesus stuff gets rid of Easter because *Easter is Jesus*. It is his story, not a concept.

There are many questions we might ask about Easter, but instead let’s consider what Easter asks us. It asks, who are we, really? To answer this, we need to strike a balance between being too serious and not serious enough. We need to integrate the awful reality of Holy Week and the wonder of Easter Sunday to reveal our true identity and how to find it when it is lost.

The Questions Easter Asks

Easter asks us to consider that Jesus could have fled into the hills and disappeared at any moment. Why did he choose to keep moving toward Jerusalem and his death? He wanted to give his life to show us how to transcend the life we feel confined in.

Our confinement is like living in a door-less room with four walls made from paradoxes. We are born to die. We crave meaning, but since *we* make it we mistrust it. We crave company but it absorbs us and we return to aloneness. We also seek freedom until we realize that we have it. We then flee rather than taking responsibility for our actions. The four walls confine us but above are the stars.

We can rise above our existential limits to be with God above, as well as beside and within us in the room. When our wholeness includes the Creator’s creativity we can create justice and help God re-create us with grace. If we can experience the pain Jesus felt in his aloneness, absolute freedom, temporary loss of meaning on the cross, and death during Holy Week and integrate those feelings with the limitless horizon of Easter morning, then the creative process we were born with will flourish rather than being left behind, woefully underdeveloped. This is why it is important “to story” Easter with our families.

The stakes are high. If we allow our existential limits (Easter Week) and our openness (Easter) to separate, then the creative process will dissipate and no longer flow. Our deep identity will become a dry, empty valley of bones between two barren hills. This is because structure and openness are an unstable mixture and need each other for us to flow with God’s creative energy.

But how does Easter talk about our deep identity? It is hard to hear because its way of speaking is odd. We need to listen carefully. God talk is not like science talk. It has its own goal and rules to reach that goal, which is to reveal who we truly are. Let me tell you a story about how to hear what Easter has to say.

A young child, only 3½ years old and his father were talking about God, death, and being too literal about God-talk. The late John M. Hull recorded this conversation and others in *God-Talk with Young Children* (1991). As often happens in such conversations, it began far from theology, but the God-talk soon emerged.

CHILD Was that man’s name Mr. Bird?

PARENT Yes.

CHILD Was he a bird? (Laughs)

PARENT Was he like a bird?

CHILD No.

PARENT Why not?

CHILD Birds have feathers. (Laughs)

PARENT And the man didn’t have feathers did he? He had clothes.
(Both laugh.)

CHILD And birds have wings.

PARENT Yes.

CHILD Birds die.

PARENT So do people.

CHILD (Silence)

PARENT What does “die” mean?

CHILD You go to be with God.

PARENT Where is God?

CHILD Up in the sky.

PARENT But up in the sky there are clouds.

CHILD (Laughs) No but I mean when you go up and up and up past the clouds and you go (speaking in a little high thin voice) up and up and up and then you come (whispering) to a teeny cottage and in that cottage there's God.

The child knew perfectly well that there was something strange about locating God up in the sky, so he showed that the word "sky" was symbolic by piling up the words he had at his disposal to say what he meant. When he realized that this strategy was insufficient, he changed the tone of his voice to add another symbolic layer to point beyond language toward the mystery of God's presence.

You can feel the playfulness in this conversation, which enabled the child to experiment with his big idea about God. This stimulated the whole child's knowing of the spirit by contemplation, his knowing of the body by the senses, and his knowing of his mind by reasoning with words. The quick wit and genuine delight in playing with God-talk on both sides of the generational gap enabled the father and son to create existential meaning together.

It may seem unusual to be so playful when talking about God and death, but this encouraged the flow of the creative process to make existential meaning. The laughter confirmed their engagement with the creative process and their delight in making meaning together.

This sort of conversation is indispensable for children's maturation and for hearing what Easter has to say. Let's talk about maturation first. When God-talk with children does not engage the creative process through play, children's use of religious language begins to fall behind the use of language in other areas of their development. Sometimes without intending to, we shut down the development of children's religious language skills. The resulting lag in development is not just a matter of vocabulary. It is *the use of religious language to make existential meaning* that falls behind rather than remembering theological words or passages from the Bible.

Learning Christian language through face-to-face conversations, like that of John Hull and his son, teaches Christian language *while learning how to use it*. Christian language is the language of love, so it needs to be learned with love, which involves our whole being.

What Easter has to say is that our deep identity involves us totally. We have sought wholeness as human beings since our species traveled in small hands to stay alive. Cave paintings and other artifacts show how we used mime, dance, and gestures to communicate this yearning as we developed language and language developed us.

Like our ancestors we also have a personal pre-linguistic time as infants. During that time we become adept at using the knowing of the spirit by contemplation to absorb God and the world around us in an undifferentiated way. We also use the knowing of the body by the senses to notice patterns in the world and within us. The knowing of our minds by reason and words is built on this non-verbal foundation. The Hebrew sages put our yearning for wholeness into the poetry of Genesis, which included the Creator as part of it. The affinity between the Creator and God's image within us completes the wholeness of who we are.

This brings us to Easter's answer to its own question. Who are we, *really*? We are creative creatures who create with others. Our wholeness includes our deep identity and God, but this affinity is always in danger of falling apart or being obscured. A surprising example of how we can regain who we truly are comes from Christmas, as we have already alluded to. Let's approach Easter's question and answer by talking again about Ebenezer Scrooge. This is because Dickens was very artful in his description of how Scrooge was redeemed by the wonder his meditation on the past, present, and future aroused.

Dickens expressed the experience of wonder that Scrooge had experienced when he showed up at Fred's Christmas feast after going to church and greeting people in the streets with his newfound generosity and love. He exclaimed, "Wonderful party, wonderful games, wonderful unanimity, wonder-full happiness!" Scrooge's nighttime reflections on his life and death had aroused his wonder, which in turn opened the flow of the creative process, which resulted in his re-creation.

Marley, who had learned a thing or two about our need for redemption in his death wanderings, was the hero of the story, dragging his chains. He may have been dead as a “door-nail,” these seven years, but he is the one who moved Scrooge to reexamine his life and death, which aroused his wonder, which had been suppressed. His true identity had been locked in the narrowness of his rigid taking rather than giving.

Redemption is real rather than “an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato.” But it takes some reflection about who we really are to reveal our wholeness and depth once again. Redemption helps us walk gracefully again with balance after falling into rigidity or chaos. Notice how the old Scrooge and the new Scrooge walked through the city. The difference is striking! The “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner” becomes someone who “knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.” Easter is about how we can move from self-centered grasping to open handed generosity.

As Scrooge traveled with the Ghost of Christmas Past, he thought, “I should have liked, I do confess, to have had the lightest licence of a child and yet to have been man enough to know its value.” Scrooge had begun to miss the creative wholeness he had known as a child with God. In the reexamination of his life and death, he realized that becoming like a child *really can lead* to the maturity beyond the norm Jesus referred to when he spoke about becoming like a child to enter God’s kingdom.

As his book drew to a close, Dickens observed, “Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter at the outset . . . and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway . . . His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him.”

When Tiny Tim observed, “God bless Us, Every One,” he was uttering an Easter as well as a Christmas blessing. Scrooge’s redemption had been brought about directly by Marley’s ghost, a holy spirit working for redemption. And indirectly by Tiny Tim, the humble but very strong Christ figure, whose eloquence and power was in his manner.

Scrooge is a familiar and vivid example of how we can go astray and yet recover our wholeness. His spirit-knowing and body-knowing had withered from lack of use and his knowing of the mind by reason had shriveled up within the narrow limits of speaking and thinking only about buying and selling without regard for others or even his own deep self. Scrooge had lost touch with his child-like identity as a creator. To help avoid this loss in our own families, let’s turn now to “storying” Easter at home.

“Storying” Easter

The material for “storying” Easter comes in a box with a purple cross on it. The purple cross emphasizes the dark and serious time of preparing for Easter. The white cross of Easter can’t be fully understood without passing through the dark time of the color purple.

Inside the box is a cloth underlay made of felt and the plaques to put on it, but this time the strip is unrolled toward those around the table instead of from the leader’s right to left as in Creation and Christmas. The plaques picture seven faces of Christ. The underlay is a purple and white “scroll” that unrolls toward the group to show the six purple Sundays for Lent and a white one for Easter. When the scroll is rolled up, the light of Easter is inside the dark time of preparing. Like with the other stories of God, you need to consider carefully where to keep the box. Like the other materials, this one is available from Godly Play Resources, which is part of the non-profit Godly Play Foundation.

You can read more about the larger, classical version of this presentation in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 4: Revised and Expanded*. It is used in Godly Play rooms in churches, schools, and other settings around the world and is called “The Faces of Easter.” If your children participate in a Godly Play program, this presentation will recall what is done in the Godly Play room, but it is different enough to be interesting as well as familiar.

A problem with unrolling the scroll toward those gathered is that the rolled-up part can obscure the plaques. To avoid this, keep the roll close to you and hold on to it. Pull the next section out toward those watching and listening. It is as if the story of Lent and Easter is growing out from Jesus’

What to Do and What to Say

The First Sunday in Lent

MOVEMENTS

Pick up the box, which has already been placed on the table. Look at it with curiosity, then ceremoniously put it back on the table. Look at the people gathered and quietly say with energy and focus:

WORDS

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. This is the time when we prepare to enter the mystery of Easter.

Move the box to one side and remove the lid. Put the box inside the lid. Take out the underlay and place it on the table in front of you.

This is the time of the color purple. It is the color of kings and queens, a serious and sometimes sad color. It is the color of getting ready.

Place one hand on the roll of the underlay and pull out the first section toward those gathered. Take the first plaque out of the box and hold it with two hands. Show it to the others. Trace the curves of the faces as you speak.

Today we remember how the baby was born.



birth and the storyteller's life. Each Sunday the previous plaques are placed on the underlay and briefly mentioned to build toward the one for the day.

A good time and place to present this material is each Sunday in Lent and on Easter at the family table, but your family needs to decide what is best. A parent, aunt or uncle, grandparent, child, or other leader needs to be informally but clearly in charge. The leader's firm manner and sense of humor allows everyone to relax and participate in the movements and words. The leader also makes sure that everyone feels free to speak and no one overly dominates the wondering. When the family stories begin to lose their energy during the wondering, the leader says "Amen," and puts the material away to conclude the celebration while the participants are still interested.

Place the first plaque on the underlay, pause, and then lean toward those gathered, smiling.

Now, I wonder if anyone in this family was ever born? I wonder what that great day was like?

Participate in the storytelling, but keep alert to helping support everyone's participation. When everyone has had a chance to speak, you say:

Our family is part of this story.
Thanks be to God!

Put everything back into the box without hurrying. When everything is returned, replace the lid to complete the celebration.

Amen.

Conversation may continue as people leave the table.

The Second Sunday in Lent

Pick up the box, look at it with curiosity, then ceremoniously place it back on the table. Look at the people gathered and quietly say, speaking with energy and focus:

Today is the second Sunday in Lent.
This is the time when we prepare to enter the mystery of Easter.

Move the box to one side. Place it in the lid, then take out the underlay and place it on the table in front of you.

This is the time of the color purple, the color of kings and queens. It is a serious and sometimes sad color. It is the color of getting ready.

Place one hand on the roll of the underlay and pull out the first section toward the other people.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the baby was born.

Place the first plaque on the underlay.

Pull out the second section and pick up the second plaque. Hold it with two hands while you talk about it and trace the figures.

Today we remember how the baby grew. When he was about twelve years old, he and his family went to Jerusalem for one of the high holy days. When it was time to go home, his parents could not find him. They looked everywhere. Finally, they looked in the Temple and there he was! He was talking to the Temple priests.

Place the second plaque on the underlay, look at those gathered. Lean towards them and ask with invitation and curiosity:

Now, I wonder if anyone in this family was ever lost?

Support the responses, then when they begin to quiet, continue by saying:

I wonder if there was anyone who was ever found?

Participate in the "storying," but your first responsibility is to support the participation of the others. When everyone has had a chance to speak who wishes to, you say:

Our family is part of this story.
Thanks be to God!

Return the plaques to the box in reverse order, roll up the underlay, and put it away. Replace the lid to complete the celebration. Say:

Amen.

Additional conversation may begin as people leave the table.

The Third Sunday in Lent

Pick up the box and look at it with curiosity and wonder. Place it ceremoniously back on the table.

Say quietly but with energy and focus:

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. This is the time when we prepare to enter the mystery of Easter.

Move the box to one side and place it in the lid. Take out the underlay and place it on the table in front of you.

This is the time of the color purple. It is the color of kings and queens. It is a serious and sometimes sad color. It is the color of getting ready.

Pull out the sections of the underlay as needed. Hold the plaques for a moment as you reflect on them, then place them on the underlay.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the baby was born.

On the second Sunday, we remembered how the child was lost and found.

Hold the third plaque while you trace how it shows Jesus' baptism. Say:

Today we remember how Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan.

Pause for a moment to let the image and the words sink in.

Now, I wonder if anyone in this family was ever baptized? I wonder what that was like?

Your attitude about the wondering is important. Support those gathered by inviting them to speak if they wish. It is good to contribute to the stories, but don't overly dominate the conversation. As the wondering draws to a close, say:

Our family is part of this story. Thanks be to God!

Put everything back into the box without hurrying. When everything is replaced, put the lid on the box. The celebration is complete. Say:

Conversation may continue as people leave the table.

Amen.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Pick up the box and look at it with curiosity and wonder, then place it ceremoniously back on the table. Look at the people who are gathered, and say:

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent. This is the time when we prepare to enter the mystery of Easter.

Move the box to one side. Take off the lid. Place the box in the lid. Take out the underlay and place it in front of you.

This is the time of the color purple. It is the color of kings and queens. It is a serious and sometimes sad color. It is the color of getting ready.

Pull out each section as needed and place the appropriate plaque on it.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the baby was born.

On the second Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the child was lost and found.

On the third Sunday in Lent, we remembered how Jesus was baptized.

Hold the current plaque with both hands with the picture toward those gathered.

Trace the figures as you say:

Today we remember how Jesus went into the desert to discover who he was and what his work was going to be.

Now, I wonder if anyone in our family has ever wondered who they are or what their work is going to be?

Lay the plaque on the underlay.

Participate in, but primarily guide the storytelling and listening. When everyone has had a chance to speak, bring this part of the celebration to an end by saying:

Our family is part of this story.
Thanks be to God!

Put everything back into the box without hurrying. When everything is back inside, replace the lid and the celebration is complete. Soy:

Amen.

Conversation may continue as people leave the table.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pick up the box with curiosity and delight. After wondering silently about it, put it back on the table.

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. This is the time when we prepare to enter the mystery of Easter.

Move the box to one side and put the box in the lid. Take out the underlay and place it in front of you.

This is the time of the color purple, the color of kings and queens. It is a serious and sometimes sad color. It is the color of getting ready.

Place one hand on the roll and pull out the sections as needed. Place the appropriate plaque on each one.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the baby was born.

On the second Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the child was lost and found.

On the third Sunday in Lent, we remembered how Jesus was baptized.

On the fourth Sunday in Lent, we remembered how Jesus went into the desert to discover who he was and what his work was going to be.

Hold the plaque of the day with two hands, as you show it to the others.

You then say:

Place the plaque on the underlay.

Be supportive of the wondering. If no wondering takes place, wait in an expectant way. Each year this part of "storying" will become more natural. It is always good to remember that just because people don't say anything out loud, it doesn't mean that they aren't wondering to themselves.

After everyone has spoken, who would like to speak, finish this part of the celebration by saying:

Put everything back into the box and replace the lid. This shows that the celebration is complete. Say:

Conversation may continue as people leave the table.

Today we remember how Jesus began his work. But what was his work? He came close to people to heal them and he told parables to help them enter God's kingdom.

Now, I wonder if anyone in our family ever came close to God or wondered what God's kingdom is like?

Our family is part of this story.
Thanks be to God!

Amen.

The Sixth Sunday in Lent

Pick up the box and look at it with curiosity and wonder. Place the box back on the table with ceremony. Look at the people gathered. Speak slowly and quietly, but with energy and focus, as you say:

Move the box to one side and remove the lid. Put the box inside the lid. Take out the underlay and place it on the table in front of you.

Today is the sixth Sunday in Lent. This is the time when we prepare to enter the mystery of Easter.

This is the time of the color purple, the color of kings and queens. It is a serious and sometimes sad color. It is the color of getting ready.

Pull out the sections of the underlay and place the appropriate plaque on each one.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we remembered how the baby was born.

On the second Sunday, we remembered how the child was lost and found.

On the third Sunday, we remembered how Jesus was baptized.

On the fourth Sunday, we remembered how Jesus went into the desert to discover who he was and what his work was going to be.

On the fifth Sunday, we remembered how Jesus began his work. He came close to people to heal them and told parables to help them enter God's

Hold the plaque with two hands as you show it to the others.

Today we remember how Jesus finally knew that he had to go to Jerusalem to become a parable. On Thursday in Holy Week, he shared the bread and wine for the last time with the Twelve.

Place the plaque on the underlay.

Pause for a moment. Take a deep breath and then say:

Now, I wonder if anyone in this family ever discovered something new when sharing the Holy Bread and the Holy Wine?

Guide the wondering. When the energy in the conversation begins to wind down, end this part of the process by saying:

Our family is part of this story.
Thanks be to God!

Put everything back into the box and put the lid on it. Don't hurry. Do this with meditative intention. When everything is put away, the celebration is complete. Say:

Amen.

Conversation may continue as people leave the table.

Easter Sunday

Pick up the box, which has already been placed on the table. Look at it with curiosity and deep interest, then ceremoniously place it back on the table and say:

The time for getting ready is over.
Today is the day we have been waiting for! Lent is done and Easter's begun.

Move the box to one side and remove the lid. Place the box in the lid. Take out the underlay and place it on the table in front of you.

The time of the color purple is over and the pure white of Easter light now appears.

Unroll the underlay, placing each plaque on the appropriate section, moving smoothly and quickly.

We remember
how the baby was born;
how the child was lost and found;
how Jesus was baptized;
how he went into the desert to discover who he was and what his work was going to be; how his work was coming close to people and telling parables; how he knew he had to become a parable; and how on that Thursday night he shared the bread and wine for the last time with the disciples.

Pull out the white section of the underlay. Show the crucified Christ to those gathered while you hold the plaque with two hands.

Jesus died on the cross for us and that is very sad . . .

Turn the plaque over to show the resurrected Christ on the other side, presenting the Bread and Wine.

. . . but somehow he is still with us, especially in the Bread and the Wine.
When you see this,

Show the crucified Christ.

you know this is there, too.

And when you see this,

Continue showing the risen Lord.

you know that this is also there.

Show the crucified Christ.

And you cannot pull them apart.

Turn the plaque sideways toward the family and pull on the wood with your fingers to show the faces cannot be separated.

That is the mystery of Easter.

Pause and reflect on the two faces.

Turn the plaque over and over, then place it on the white section of the

underlay with the Risen Christ, face up.

Now, I wonder if anyone in this family ever entered the mystery of Easter? I wonder what you found?

The wondering questions are designed to stimulate thinking. Let them do their work. Wait with patience for the wondering out loud to begin. If it does not, that's okay. This is a lot for people to process. When everyone has spoken who wishes to speak, say:

Our family is part of this story.
Thanks be to God!

Put everything back in the box without hurrying. Don't rush as you return the plaques to the box and name each one. Replace the lid.

(If you include the ringing of bells, which will be explained in a moment, do that now before the "Amen.")

The "storying" is now complete, so say: Amen.

Conversation may continue as people leave the table.

Each time the "storying" is completed, you have a choice. You might leave the box on the table, so family members can wonder more with the material when they choose during Lent and Easter. You can also put the box away, where you keep your special Easter things, during the week until the next time you share the celebration.

There is nothing in the celebration of Easter quite like the Advent wreath of Christmas, but there is the custom of ringing bells. They are sometimes rung in church on Easter morning. This is why you might want to have a basket of bells on the table for Easter Sunday. The family can playfully ring in the joy of Easter as the celebration is drawing to a close. After the bells are rung, the leader says, "Amen."

As with Christmas, it is important to join others in church to celebrate Easter. There are jokes about people only going to church at Christmas and Easter, but there is no better time to go, and it is no joke. If you can go to church on other Sundays, then go, but if you can't, then make a special effort to worship in a community larger than your family on Christmas and Easter

Conclusion

So who are we, *really*? Easter speaks to us in its own unique way about our authenticity, which is related to our wholeness and deep identity as creators. The wholeness we seek involves our knowing of the spirit by contemplation, our knowing of the body by the senses, and our knowing of our mind by reason and words. Our wholeness also includes the Creator, whose creativity is found in us through God's image. Easter invites us to live our authentic identity as creators in the image of God and return to it when it

is lost, which is a continuing danger. This is why it is important “to story” Easter with our family.

We have now looked at ways to celebrate Creation, Christmas, and Easter in the home. The next chapter is about “storying” Pentecost. It is generally the least known of the three great liturgical celebrations of the church, but the deep logic that links our participation in God’s creation with the liturgies of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost is worth reflecting on as the book moves forward.