

Pascha vs. Easter, Eggs, Bunnies & Baskets

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

Last year, on the day after western Christians celebrated the Resurrection of Christ [Easter], I made my annual pilgrimage to the card, gift & candy store for the 50% off sale of Easter goodies. I also looked for an appropriate card in Russian to send to our adult godchildren in California. [Vladimir and Olga came to the U.S. to study, met, fell in love, and wanted to marry as Russians "used to do" in the Church. Jim and I became their sponsors.]

To my surprise the foreign language "Easter" cards all used a form of the word, *Pascha*! Cards in Russian, Slovak, Spanish, Hungarian, Polish! Later I read that "Easter" is used only in English and German. And here I thought that only Orthodox Christians had the "inside track" on the correct term for this holy day!

Pascha is the Greek form of the Hebrew word, *Pesch* - "Passover" in English. We know that Passover is the Jewish feast commemorating the Israelites freedom and exodus from Egypt. After all, who doesn't have the image of Charlton Heston as Moses engraved in their mind? When I close my eyes I can see him standing on the rocky edge of the Red Sea, arms spread open in the form of a cross, and the sea parting. Thus the Israelites passed over from "death and slavery" in Egypt to "life and freedom" in the Promised Land.

For Orthodox Christians - and apparently for non-English and German Christians - *Pascha* best identifies our passover from sin's "death and slavery" to "life and freedom" through Christ's Resurrection. Christ not only fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, but became the "Passover" Himself. What Moses, the prefigure of Christ in the Old Testament, inaugurated for the people of Israel on the temporal level, Christ inaugurated for all people on the eternal level.

So where do the term "Easter" and the Easter Bunny come into play? We have spoken before of the pagan heritage or influence on holidays such as Halloween and May Day. Well, it occurs here as well. According to the Venerable Bede (673-735 AD), a monk who wrote about Anglo-Saxon mythology, Pascha Sunday was called "Easter" in connection with the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre/Ostara.

Eostre, the goddess of the spring, is venerated at the vernal equinox. It's no surprise that she and her accompanying symbolism were incorporated into the new religion's festival, since Christianity corresponded so well to the already familiar springtime themes of rebirth, new life, new hope, and light. Her existence is based on folklore and the traditional German festival Ostarun. Although Eostre was nearly always accompanied in legend and art with a hare, it was a magical hare ("the Cadbury bunny") who could actually lay eggs. It's easy to see the connection between this myth and the story of the Easter Bunny. [I always wondered why the Easter bunny, a mammal, brought eggs!] Since rabbits reproduce so rapidly, and are associated with fertility, the three became connected - rabbits, eggs and a goddess of Spring (a time of new life and fertility).

Eggs, though, have a worldwide association with rebirth, new life and fertility. The custom of egg-rolling came from Britain and gave rise to today's egg hunts. Most famous are the red eggs of Pascha which remind us of the blood of the risen Lord. In many Orthodox churches the red eggs are blessed by the priest and distributed at the Resurrection service. Before eating the eggs, people tap their eggs against one another's as they say "Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!" Cracking the egg represents breaking the seal of Christ's tomb. According to custom, the person who cracks the other's egg first will have the blessing.

St. Mary Magdalene, who is often depicted in icons holding a red egg, may have been aware that the Romans would know the meaning of the egg as something that brings forth life from a sealed chamber. After Christ was crucified and rose up to Heaven, Mary was in Rome. When she met with the Roman Emperor Tiberius, she gave him a red colored egg and announced "Christ is Risen!" She then went on to preach to Tiberius about Christ. It was an intelligent choice on her part because it was something the Romans would have understood.

The Christian Church realized that while some pagan customs could be eliminated, the new religion would be wise to give new significance and blessing to other established symbols, like the Christmas tree, and the Paschal egg. So while Christians are celebrating the birth or resurrection of Jesus, modern-day pagans are celebrating the return of light or the goddess of spring and fertility.

Thus, when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, let's call it Pascha! Since the "Easter Bunny" really has nothing to do with Pascha, but has everything to do with pagan gods, let's play it down. Hopefully the Easter Bunny does not visit our parishes. If you want to carry this even further, if your child gets an "Easter basket" or "Pascha basket," rather than fill it with lots of chocolate bunnies, cellophane grass that gets everywhere, and marshmallow chicks that are 100% sugar, consider filling it with some chocolate candies (I prefer sheep, eggs and crosses), an icon, a book about Pascha, a good book, or a small toy. For those who bring Pascha baskets of food to be blessed after the Resurrection service, consider including these chocolate delights among the other items.

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