



Easter

Many Christians consider Easter the most spiritually important day in their annual ritual calendar, because it is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, which is central to the Christian message. However, have you ever stopped to think about the name of the day? Why is it called Easter? Why not Resurrection Day, or if two words are one too many, some other single word that points more directly to the day's event? Why "Easter"? What does the word mean, and where did it come from?

Historic Easter postcard, 1900.

The explanation is a winding road, with several detours leading to the eventual answer. It is an interesting journey that involves the Jewish observance of Passover and how it developed, early Christian controversies about how to commemorate the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and changing symbolism and cultural practices as Christianity spread throughout Europe and into the Americas. The early part of the story is seriously religious but eventually involves bunnies, eggs, and Easter parades. As Shakespeare asked, “What’s in a name?” The answer is, a lot.

PASSOVER

The first part of the answer, a surprise to many, is that a huge number of Christians do *not* call the day Easter. Growing up as a Protestant in the United States, I remember wondering why my Greek Orthodox friends called it Pascha. “Pascha” is the Greek version of the Hebrew word “Pesach,” meaning protection, more commonly translated as “Passover.” And lo and behold, except for English- and German-speaking people, almost all other European Christians refer to the resurrection day by using terms that derive from the Greek or Hebrew:

Spanish—*Pascua*

Italian—*Pasqua*

French—*Pâques*

Portuguese—*Páscoa*

Romanian—*Paști* or *Paște*

Danish and Norwegian—*Påske*

Swedish—*Påsk*

Dutch—*Pasen*

Icelandic—*Páska*

In essence, the special day that many of us call Easter, many other Christians call Passover. The first step in understanding Easter is to review how

it is rooted in Passover, which itself was derived from preexisting spring rites.

To summarize briefly, Passover is the annual Jewish observance, celebrated in the spring, that remembers the exodus, the deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in ancient Egypt more than three thousand years ago. “Passover” refers to an event recounted in the biblical book of Exodus. As told there, Moses sent a message from God to the Egyptian pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go, and when the pharaoh refused, God unleashed many plagues upon the people of Egypt. The tenth plague was an angel of death sent to kill, in one night, the firstborn child of every family in Egypt and every firstborn animal. Moses instructed the Hebrew people to sacrifice a lamb and to smear the lamb’s blood above the door of every Hebrew home, so that the angel of death might “pass over” that home and spare the child. Passover thus remembers the protection of firstborn Hebrew children and the larger story of the escape of the Hebrew people from Egypt, the well-known tale that also includes Moses parting the Red Sea.

Just as some Christian rites grew out of preceding seasonal observances, the same is true of the Jewish Passover. However, the exact details are murky; there are enough scholarly theories about the prehistoric roots of Passover to make anyone dizzy. This is understandable, since the further back one goes, the more limited the evidence, and thus it is necessary to speculatively reconstruct the story from fragmentary data. One academic who reviewed the wide range of theories about what preceded Passover concluded that “there is hardly any consensus among scholars. It seems that the only points of convergence are its annual character, spring as the season in which it was performed and its antiquity, although even for them there are opposing positions.”¹ Three themes are highlighted in this statement: an annual observance, spring, and antiquity. This means there is at least a general scholarly consensus that the Hebrew people participated in some kind of annual spring ritual even before their departure from Egypt, but the

central meaning of the spring ritual in those earlier years could not have been about the Passover story, because it had not happened yet.

We don't know exactly what the earlier spring observance was like. Spring was the season, so that may suggest some possible answers, but not the ones that immediately occur to many Americans. Keep in mind that spring in the Mediterranean region we now call Israel or Palestine means something quite different from the images that arise for most Europeans and North Americans. In my case, living in the American Midwest, spring means that I have survived another hard winter, and I celebrate the melting snow, the chance to wear a lighter jacket, the sounds of birds returning from their southern migrations, and the appearance of green grass, spring flowers, and budding trees as signs of new life. The early Hebrew people lived in a region that had no such dramatic change of seasons. Spring for them was in the first month of the Hebrew year, Nisan, which is around March or April in today's commonly accepted calendars. Because the region did not have a hard, cold winter, harvests of various crops occurred year-round, and spring would have celebrated the first of several harvests. The first harvest may have been of barley or similar crops. The point is that in the Mediterranean region, spring was not the emergence of life from the dead of winter, but it was the beginning of a new year.

In an example of one of the many theories surrounding Passover, Theodor Herzl Gaster has argued that when the particular meanings of the exodus story are removed, "The rites and ceremonies of Passover as described in the Bible find parallels in many parts of the world and fall into a pattern characteristic of primitive seasonal rituals." He especially emphasized the common meal, a ritual feast perhaps associated with a harvest where participants recommit themselves to one another and to the divine; such meals can be found in early cultures across the globe. The purpose of the meal "was to establish ties of kinship, revitalize the family or clan, and, by the assurance of divine protection, promote the increase of livestock and crops for the coming year."²

Whatever the details, some kind of a spring observance already existed as an established tradition before the time of the exodus. After the departure from Egypt, Judaism transformed the specific meanings of the spring ritual to focus on remembrance of the dramatic events of the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. They did so believing that the observance was a direct commandment from God. The major narrative of the flight from Egypt is found in the biblical book of Exodus, especially chapters 1 to 15. As described there, when God gave instructions to Moses and Aaron about the slaughter of lambs and spreading blood on the doorposts, God said, “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.” Also, “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (Exodus 12:14). When the Israelites were brought out of the land of Egypt, Moses then repeated these instructions to the people: “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten” (Exodus 13:3). The instruction echoes throughout additional passages in Hebrew scripture: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes” (Deuteronomy 16:12). Judaism therefore took a preexisting spring ritual tradition and, reinforcing it with such scriptural passages, gave it new meaning.

Closely associated with Passover was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In some biblical accounts and external sources they are the same, but in others they are considered as two related festivals, mentioned side by side.³ Whether one or two festivals, they seem to have arisen from earlier agricultural or nomadic rituals involving a meal, and they eventually provided two of the central Passover symbols, lamb and unleavened bread. After the exodus, lamb represented the sacrificed animal whose blood saved the Hebrew children. Unleavened bread, or matzoh, represented the haste with which the Hebrew people had to leave Egypt: they fled before their leavened bread had a chance

to rise, leaving matzoh as the only bread available to them for their journey. The spring seasonal observance became a seven-day Passover celebration, and a meal featuring lamb, matzoh, and a recounting of the holy acts of God that freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt became its centerpiece.

When a Holy Temple existed in Jerusalem, it was supposed to be the only place where sacrifices could be offered properly (Deuteronomy 12), and thus, if possible Jews were supposed to travel to Jerusalem for their Passover activities. However, after the Second Temple was destroyed by Romans in 70 CE, the Passover celebration gradually dispersed and became centered in the home. What resulted and exists to this day has been described as “the outstanding home festival in Jewish life.”⁴ It also is sometimes called the Feast of Freedom and the Spring Festival (Chag Ha-Aviv).

As currently practiced, Passover (Pesach) is a seven- or eight-day festival. A summary is somewhat complicated, because many details vary depending upon whether a person is Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform and living inside or outside Israel. The first day or two and the last day or two are full-fledged holidays in which people take time off from work and evenings feature festive meals in the home. Participants often return to jobs and other aspects of normal daily life in the middle or intermediate days. No leavened bread (chametz) is to be consumed during the seven or eight days, and one of the rituals of preparation in the days before Passover is to remove any chametz from the home. The more observant a Jewish family, the more thorough the housecleaning, which can involve scrubbing kitchens (including the insides of appliances) and replacing shelf liners, all to clean or remove anything that has even touched leavened bread in the past year. In many homes, on the evening before Passover a ritual search for unleavened bread becomes a family activity. Pieces of chametz are hidden throughout the home and family members search to remove them with a candle and a feather, or in modern days, a flashlight and a broom. Sometimes the chametz that has been collected is ritually burned the next morning.

ואחר כך יקח המצוה השלישית התחתונה יבצענה
 לשנים דתו עליה לאטונא ויאכל ביהר בלא ברבה
 אלא כך אמר בו עשה חלל בזמן שביית המקדש
 קדם תה בורד מנה ומדוד ביהר ויאכל במה שג
 מצות על מדודים יאכלהו



Passover Seder service. Woodcut from a medieval Haggadah.

Yet the centerpiece ritual of Passover, best known these days even to those outside the Jewish community, is the Seder, the family banquet held on the first night of Passover. More than just a sumptuous meal with lit candles and four cups of wine, it is a highly structured ceremony following instructions in a book called the Haggadah, collected and written sometime in the late 100s CE. The ritual involves fourteen or fifteen steps, including songs, poetry, prayers, ritual washing, and a recounting of the exodus story. Several steps involve eating specific foods and explaining their symbolic

meaning, for example, salt water to remember the tears of Jewish slaves, and of course, matzoh. Many aspects of Passover have changed or evolved over time, but from seasonal beginnings to today there is a continuity in the common meal, with symbolic food, a remembrance of holy history, and a recommitment to God, family, and community.

CHRISTIAN PASSOVER

Then came Jesus of Nazareth and the emergence of Christianity, rooted in Judaism. If anyone needs to be reminded, Jesus was a Jew. He had Jewish parents. He read Jewish scripture, learned from Jewish teachers, spent almost all of his time with other Jews, shared most Jewish beliefs, and participated in Jewish practices, including Passover. Almost all of his initial followers were Jews. When a community of Christian believers emerged during and after the lifetime of Jesus, Roman leaders tended to see them as a sect within Judaism. When Christianity expanded further and became recognized as a separate religion, to a great extent it was a continuation of Jewish beliefs and practices, with some important new wrinkles. That is why, after all, when Christians eventually codified their book of sacred writing, they included the entire Jewish Bible (calling it the Old Testament) as well as some new additions (the New Testament).

In the four gospel narratives telling of the life and teachings of Jesus, Passover is the context at more than one crucial point. The only biblical story about Jesus as a boy tells of the family traveling to Jerusalem. When his parents lost track of him, they found Jesus “in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” Why had the family come to Jerusalem? “They went up as usual for the festival” of Passover (Luke 2:41–46). Later, when Jesus began his public ministry, one of the most dramatic incidents was when he drove money changers out of the temple, and Passover once again was the occasion. According to the scriptural narrative: “The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the

temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.” He overturned their tables, poured out their coins and told them to “stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” The Gospel of John concludes the narrative of that episode by noting, “When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing” (John 2:13–23). It is clear that Passover was a central feature of Jewish life in that era, regularly drawing people, including Jesus, to Jerusalem.

However, the central connection with Passover was the series of events leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. All four of the gospels in the New Testament describe Passover observances in Jerusalem as the general setting, although they differ from each other on some significant details.

Scholars have called the three gospels named for Matthew, Mark, and Luke “synoptic gospels” (meaning “seen together”) because they tell very similar stories and probably relied on crossover sources. These three gospels offer parallel descriptions of a last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples, followed by the events leading to his crucifixion, all in the context of Passover in Jerusalem. For example, from Luke:

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.” They asked him, “Where do you want us to make preparations for it?” “Listen,” he said to them, “when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters and say to the owner of the house, ‘The teacher asks you, “Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”’ He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there.” So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. (Luke 22:7–13)

When Jesus and his disciples gathered at the table for the meal, Jesus said, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” and

then took the wine and bread and offered words such as “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:14–20). Obviously, such words became the basis for the Christian ritual of Holy Communion. According to these three similar gospels, the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples was a Passover meal.

The chronology here is that the lamb was sacrificed in the temple on the day of preparation, the day before Passover. However, unlike the common understanding today that days start and end at midnight, Jewish days were and are measured from sundown to sundown, and thus evening is the beginning of a new day. So the lamb that was sacrificed prior to sundown (the day of preparation) was then consumed on the first day of Passover (that same evening), and this was the last supper of Jesus with his disciples. That means that the events that followed—in other words the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus—would have happened within the seven days of Passover. Read Matthew 26–27, Mark 14–15, and Luke 22–23, and they all tell essentially the same story.

The Gospel of John is different. One thing that surprises many Christians, if they look closely, is that John’s narrative includes no Last Supper, at least not as traditionally understood. That is because this gospel says that Jesus was crucified earlier, on the day of preparation, the day before Passover began (John 19:31). When Joseph of Arimathea, a follower of Jesus, made burial arrangements, the concluding sentence is, “And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there” (John 19:42). Apparently it was important for the Gospel of John that Jesus be crucified at exactly the same time that the Passover lamb would be sacrificed, on the day of preparation prior to the first day of Passover, to make the point that Jesus was the new sacrificial lamb, offered up for the good of others. Thus, by John’s chronology, Jesus could not have had a Passover meal with his disciples because Jesus was crucified before Passover technically began. The Gospel of John does mention a meal with disciples, but because

of the timing it is not a Passover meal, and the meal does not include any of the familiar words such as “take and eat” or “do this in remembrance of me.”

Details like this are what prompt arguments among Christians about how to interpret the Bible. Some see the Christian Bible as historically accurate in all its passages; others see some portions of the Bible as symbolic spiritual affirmations not intended as literal history; and additional views cover a wide spectrum in between and beyond. Settling such controversies is far beyond the scope of this book. The point here is that whatever the variations between the four gospel narratives, they all portray the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as occurring at least in the general time period of the Jewish Passover in Jerusalem. That is why the annual Christian observance happens in the same approximate time of the year as Passover.

In addition to timing, there is a second and even more important reason that many Christians refer to their annual observance as Pascha or Passover: the symbolism of the sacrificial lamb. If the blood of the sacrificed Passover lamb was what saved the Hebrew children, early Christians saw this as an ideal symbol to communicate the importance of Jesus. The Gospel of John states that John the Baptist called Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The first letter of Peter declared that “you were ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (I Peter 1:18–19). For Christians, Jesus was the new sacrificial Passover lamb who saved humanity.

Christianity eventually developed an annual ritual calendar with many special days: Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Easter, Pentecost, All Saints’ Day, and so on. Out of all of these annual special days, Easter, or Pascha, was the first to develop. However, it took a while, and it involved controversy. Some Christians believed that the annual observance should be tied exactly to the Jewish Passover, and thus the memorial of the death of Jesus should occur on the night from the fourteenth to the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, the beginning of Passover. Those Christians were called

Quartodecimans (or Fourteeners), because of the date. Others thought that a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus should take place on the Sunday following Passover, because the gospels all seem to indicate that the resurrection of Jesus took place on the first day of the week, in other words, Sunday. Note that the disagreement is not just about the date; they disagreed about what should be emphasized most. All Christians gave attention to both the crucifixion and the resurrection, and the two are tied together, but which was most central to the Christian message? Crucifixion, Jesus dying for the sins of humanity? Or resurrection, the triumph of Jesus over death? (If you think about it, when you put them together, there is a bit of emotional whiplash involved in trying to emphasize crucifixion and resurrection at the same time.) Those who emphasized the crucifixion preferred the Passover date, and those who emphasized resurrection preferred Sunday. When Constantine became the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity, he was disturbed that Christians were arguing so much among themselves, including over the date of Easter/Pascha. So he called together Christian leaders from throughout the empire to hash out their differences. The Council of Nicaea in 325 became the first of seven major Ecumenical Councils in early Christianity. Among many influential decisions made at Nicaea, one mandated Sunday as the proper day for Easter.⁵

There are two questions people often ask about the dates of Easter, and both involve calendars. I admit that whenever I try to understand some of the variations among calendars, my head hurts. In this case the two questions raise two different calendar issues, which makes things even worse. The first question is, Why is Christmas on a specific date but Easter moves around? In the case of Christmas, Jesus and the religion of Christianity were born into the Roman empire, which had begun operating on the Julian calendar, a solar calendar with seven-day weeks and twelve months. A solar calendar is based on the earth's relation to the sun at different times of the year. Most of us still operate on a very similar calendar today. Christians

eventually decided they wanted to celebrate the birth of Jesus on a specific month and day, December 25, based on the Julian solar calendar, and that date continues to be used today. No problem.

However, when it comes to Easter, the link with Passover causes some complication. The Jewish calendar existed before the Julian calendar, and it is a lunisolar calendar, one that is similar to a solar calendar in many ways but that also takes some account of the phases of the moon. (The Islamic calendar, by the way, is different even from that, because it is a totally lunar calendar.) For Christians, even after they decided to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday every year, they still wanted their observance to be at least close to Passover. For Jews, Passover is celebrated on the first full moon following the vernal (or spring) equinox. That very description indicates the combination of a solar calendar and a lunar calendar. The reference to the vernal equinox is part of a solar calendar, and the reference to a full moon is part of a lunar calendar. Dates from a lunisolar calendar do not fit neatly into a solar calendar; when they are translated into a solar calendar, they vary from year to year. The Council of Nicaea added another factor: Sunday. For Christians, Easter is on *the first Sunday following* the first full moon following the spring equinox. Passover might begin on any day of the week, but Easter must always be on Sunday, so Passover and Easter may be closer to each other in some years than in others. This probably is more of an explanation than most of us need, but the result is that Easter may fall on dates anywhere from March 22 to April 25.

The other frequent question is this: Why do most Catholic and Protestant Christians celebrate Easter/Pascha on one date, but Eastern Orthodox Christians (such as Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Syrian Orthodox) observe a different date? In this case, at least everyone is dealing with a solar calendar. The difference here is between the Julian calendar and the Gregorian calendar. Jesus was born under the Julian calendar, which had been introduced under Julius Caesar in 46 BC (or BCE). The calendar worked well

for many years, and all Christians operated under it until the late 1500s. The Julian calendar had a tiny problem, however; measured by the movement of the sun, it was off about eleven minutes per year. As years went by, those minutes added up. After 134 years it was off by a whole day, and the discrepancy kept growing. In 1582 a new calendar was decreed by Pope Gregory XIII (thus the name Gregorian calendar) that made adjustments to fix the problem. The new calendar gained acceptance gradually; in some cases it took hundreds of years. One of the last countries to adopt it was Greece, in 1923. Today most countries, and most Catholic and Protestant churches, operate under the Gregorian calendar. Yet many Orthodox churches do not, even in countries where their governments do. For them, using the Julian calendar is part of an overall attempt to maintain the holy traditions of the church. Over time, some Orthodox churches have compromised on the date of Christmas, observing it at the same time as western Christians (Catholic and Protestant), using the Gregorian calendar. However, when it comes to Easter, almost all Eastern Orthodox churches hold to some version of the Julian calendar and celebrate Easter on a variable date later than the date celebrated by western Christians. The difference is not in the basic way they calculate Easter; that is almost the same, with slight technical variations. The main difference is that one group of Christians is using the Gregorian calendar and the other is using the Julian calendar to determine each year's date for Easter.

Now do you understand why my head hurts?

Before leaving this discussion of the Jewish and the Christian Passover, let me add one other aside about modern practices. I am aware of a number of Christian churches that in recent years have invited a rabbi or other Jewish representative to lead members of their congregation in a Seder meal, as a way to understand the Last Supper from a new perspective and to foster positive Jewish-Christian relations. I have participated in several and they were very meaningful experiences. However, we should note that the ritual meal

called the Seder that is practiced in Jewish communities today is somewhat different from what might have happened in the time of Jesus and his disciples, in at least two ways already suggested here. In the time of Jesus, the Passover meal was centered in Jerusalem and did not necessarily revolve around the family. The wonderful family-focused celebration that we know today developed later, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. In addition, today's Seder ("seder" is a Hebrew word that means order) is in most instances a reading and acting out of the Haggadah, a Jewish text that most scholars agree could not have been written earlier than the late 100s CE, about 150 years after the lifetime of Jesus. Many of the elements included in the Haggadah might have been common practice long before then, but this *particular* ritual, its specific order and details, was regularized in this text, which has been influential ever since. For that reason, some people would call the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples a Passover meal, but they would reserve the term "Seder" to refer only to meals taking place after the writing of the Haggadah. I fully understand that for many people these may be minor technicalities. Even if today's Seder is not exactly like the meal in the time of Jesus, it undoubtedly is similar. Participating in a Jewish Seder today can enhance a Christian's understanding of the heritage that surrounded Jesus, even if some modern details are different.

EASTER?

After all this consideration of Passover and early Christianity, the question with which we began still remains. Unlike so many others, why do English- and German-speaking people use the term "Easter" to refer to the annual celebration of Jesus's resurrection? For most of my life it never even occurred to me to ask what the word meant. Now, talking with people who apparently were more curious than I was and who had bothered to ask, the most frequent answer is that the word derives from the name of a pre-Christian spring fertility goddess. Is that true? The answer is maybe.

The claim about a goddess is based almost totally on writings by two men famous enough that their names are widely recognized. The first is Bede, often called the Venerable Bede, a British monk and eminent scholar who lived from about 673 to 735, in a transitional time when England had become at least nominally Christian but had a history and continuing remnants of previous religions. Bede entered a monastery at the age of seven and basically lived there his whole life. He was the author of over sixty books, and he had access to what was considered at the time a remarkably extensive monastic library, holding an estimated 200 books. Best known for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, he was the first major historian to make use of the Anno Domini (AD) numbering of years. Thereafter it became increasingly common for Christians to designate years as BC or AD, with the life of Jesus as the center point for numbering the years. Bede did not invent this system of numbering, but he was the first major historian to use it, and his influence may deserve credit for launching it into what has become widespread use today.

The claim that the word “Easter” comes from a pre-Christian goddess named Eostre is based on two sentences that appear in Bede’s book *The Reckoning of Time*. In a very short section, about two pages long, Bede listed the Old English names for months in the culture’s previous lunar calendar, and he included the following statement: “Eosturmonath has a name which is now translated ‘Pascal month,’ and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Pascal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.”⁶

That is it. Two sentences. In other words, Bede wrote that the month in which English Christians were celebrating the resurrection of Jesus had been called Eosturmonath in Old English, referring to a goddess named Eostre. And even though Christians had begun affirming the Christian meaning of the celebration, they continued to use the name of the goddess to designate the season.

These two sentences have given rise to controversy ever since Bede wrote them. Some skeptics doubt the claim, suggesting that Bede made it up. Undoubtedly some of the skepticism comes from Christians who do not want to see the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus tainted by any association with a pre-Christian religion or goddess. Yet their skepticism may have some justification, because virtually no corroborating evidence has been found, in narratives by other writers of the time or in archaeological objects, to support the existence of an annual feast for a goddess named Eostre—no art, no carvings, no religious objects. Bede's two sentences seem to be the only evidence, and later claims about the goddess almost always rely on Bede's testimony. On the other hand, those who argue in support of Bede's assertion ask why he would want to fabricate something like this. He was a Christian advocate who wanted to displace other religions. What would be his motivation for making up a non-Christian goddess?

If some Christians have been nervous or skeptical about Eostre, other observers have gone too far in the other direction and assumed that Bede said more than he did. The two sentences provide the name of a goddess and mention feasts for her. Bede provides no description of the goddess; he does not even say she was a fertility goddess, although that might be inferred from the spring season. Bede says nothing about any association with eggs, or hares as an animal totem, or any other details sometimes asserted by recent authors. Anything beyond Bede's two simple sentences are later speculative additions.

More than a thousand years later, another influential author reignited interest in this goddess: Jacob Grimm. The Brothers Grimm (Jacob, 1785–1863, and Wilhelm, 1786–1859), best known for their fairy tales, were extremely close, working together and living together for most of their lives. For much of the time they worked in the same room, at facing desks, and when Wilhelm married in 1825, his wife simply moved into the house where both brothers continued to live. Both were scholars, folklorists, interested in

history and language, and both were nationalists who hoped that their folktales would enhance appreciation of a German heritage. They published eight books together; Jacob wrote twenty-one additional books on his own, and Wilhelm fourteen.⁷

In 1835 Jacob Grimm published *Deutsche Mythologie*, translated into English as *Teutonic Mythology*, in which he noted and defended Bede's assertion about a spring goddess. Using a process of "linguistic reconstruction," he went further and claimed that Eostre was basically the same as the Germanic goddess Ostara. The evidence Grimm used to support the idea was language, finding what he regarded as similar names for goddesses of the dawn in earlier Indo-European languages and cultures and concluding that they all *seem* to refer to the same goddess. Critics allege that this is all very speculative and that Grimm was embellishing Bede's claim to make up a German equivalent, Ostara. A key part of Grimm's case did indeed rely on Bede. Grimm argued that if even Christians continued to use the name in relation to their central festival, it must be an indication that there was a deeply rooted belief in such a goddess. In Grimm's words, "This Ostara, like Eostre, must in heathen religion have denoted a higher being, whose worship was so firmly rooted, that the Christian teachers tolerated the name, and applied it to one of their own grandest anniversaries."⁸

This idea of tracing linguistic roots is interesting, and even if it is not direct evidence of a goddess, it can point to some general themes. "Easter" has the same root as the word "east," the direction, and some linguists have traced it back thousands of years to meanings of "shine" or "dawn." It is not hard to put all of this together. The sun rises in the east. Sunrise is the beginning of a new day, new light, new life. Then apply this to a year instead of to a single day. The lengthening days, the increasing light, the dawn of a new year and the beginning of new life, all of these themes point to spring. Thus it may be enough to say that the word "Easter," like "east," linguistically carries the meaning of dawn, spring, and new life.

Or Easter may point to a specific spring goddess in Old England.

Or maybe both.

In any case, English- and German-speaking Christians have been comfortable appropriating this circle of words and symbols to point to the new life or resurrection of Jesus. Notice, however, that the geographical context shifted as the story moved from the Mediterranean setting of Israel or Palestine north to the England of Bede or the Germany of the Grimm brothers. Bede and the Grimms lived in the land of cold, hard winters where everything seemed to die, only to awaken in the spring. In that setting, spring meant something more dramatic in the north than just a new year. It meant life arising out of death, which could provide even more powerful symbols for the resurrection.

For Christians, Easter's central observance was worship, remembering and celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. It also expanded to become an entire season, with Lent as a forty-day season of preparation, beginning with Ash Wednesday, and a whole week of special days immediately preceding Easter, called Holy Week by western Christians and Great Week by Eastern Orthodox Christians. Palm Sunday and Good Friday stood out in that week, in remembrance of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his suffering and death on the cross on Good Friday. Not just Easter itself but the whole cycle surrounding it was the first portion of what eventually became a Christian ritual calendar with special days and seasons throughout the year.

Throughout its evolution, other cultural elements surrounded or accompanied the worship experiences of Easter. From the earliest beginnings Easter was a spring event, and so, understandably, those additional cultural elements tended to be related to that season. This is very similar to the evolution of Christmas. When Christianity moved from the Mediterranean into central and northern Europe, the December 25 celebration of the birth of Jesus encountered all kinds of preexisting midwinter parties, and elements of



Resurrection of Christ, by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (known as Sodoma), sixteenth century.

those often were incorporated into Christmas festivities. The same is true here. When Easter observances were introduced into new cultures, previously established spring symbols and practices frequently became associated with the religious holiday. That is how Easter became associated with images in addition to the cross, such as the Easter bunny, or colored eggs, or Easter parades. They are representations of spring, sometimes with ancient roots, amplified in modern popular culture, now fused with the Christian holiday.

RABBITS AND EGGS

So, what do rabbits and eggs have to do with Easter? The simple answer is that both are spring symbols representing fertility. Of course, there is more to say about each.

Consider the rabbit. The discussion here refers to both the Easter hare, usually found in Europe, and the Easter rabbit, more common in the United States. For most of my life, I have referred to rabbits and hares interchangeably, assuming they are the same. They are not. Let's digress briefly into a little zoology lesson, because it is interesting, but also because the American preference for rabbit is symbolically significant.

If you see pictures of a hare and a rabbit, they certainly look similar, and they are of the same order of mammals, *Lagomorpha*. However, they are completely different species, with differences both in appearance and in behavior. Hares tend to be larger than rabbits, with longer hind legs, longer ears, and black markings. Because of their powerful back legs, hares tend to run (or hop) faster, up to 45 miles per hour. Hares make nests above ground, in the grass. Rabbits burrow underground, creating secure dens or tunnels. (One exception is the cottontail rabbit, which makes above-ground nests similar to hares.) Baby hares are called leverets and are born with hair and with their eyes open; within an hour they can move on their own and require very little attention from their mothers. Baby rabbits are called kittens, and the adult males and females are called bucks and does. The word "bunny" is

a synonym for rabbit, but most people use the term to refer to young or baby rabbits. The kittens, or bunnies, are born without hair and with their eyes closed, blind and dependent on their mothers. Thus, it is a good thing that rabbits have underground dens, because the blind, dependent bunnies need more protection than the independent leverets do. Because of their physical differences, hares are more prepared to run, while rabbits hide. Hares spend most of their lives by themselves, pairing up only to mate. Rabbits are more social and live in colonies. Rabbits can be domesticated as pets. Hares are almost always wild. In terms of overall impressions, hares may appear odd and wiry, perhaps even a bit frightening, while rabbits are seen as cuddly and cute. We will return to that contrast shortly.

For all the differences, both represent fertility, because they breed and mature rapidly. The statistics for rabbits are especially dramatic. Their gestation period is only one month long, and mothers bear four to eight litters per year, although hypothetically it could be twelve, because a mother can become pregnant again within hours of giving birth. There could be up to fourteen babies in a litter, although the average is about six. Babies become sexually mature in only six months, already able to reproduce. The resulting numbers can be astounding. To get a sense of the quantities, consider a comparison with cats. Some animal shelters encourage pet owners to spay or neuter their cats, because one mother and her offspring, repeatedly multiplied, could theoretically produce more than 40,000 cats in seven years. These are numbers that do not take into account mortality and other factors; they are theoretical numbers about the highest reproduction mathematically possible. Dr. Dana Krempels of the University of Miami applied the same kind of computation to rabbits, and she concluded that one mother and her offspring could produce almost 95 billion, yes *billion*, rabbits over the same seven-year period. As she says, the number of cats “pales in comparison to what a rabbit can produce!”⁹ Do I need to say it? That is why hares and rabbits are symbols of fertility.

Hares and rabbits appear often in ancient art and mythology all over the globe. Because some markings and shadows on the moon resemble the shape of a hare or a rabbit, cultures as diverse as those in China, India, Mesoamerica, and Europe have stories about moon rabbits or hares. For complicated reasons, rabbits have sometimes been associated with luck, both good and bad (which explains the rabbit's foot on a key chain as a token of good luck). Yet their most common symbolism has been of fertility, sexuality, and sensuality. A prominent example from Greek antiquity is Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, for whom the hare was a sacred animal. In modern America, think of the Playboy bunny and Playboy's use of a stylized rabbit's head and ears as a corporate symbol.

How the hare began to be included in Easter observances is unclear, but writings from as early as the 1600s describe a tradition of an Easter hare bringing eggs to children. On the Saturday night before Easter, German children would prepare nests in which the Easter hare might leave colored eggs; nests were assembled in a child's cap, or in grass or straw. Children were told that the Easter hare left eggs for good children but not for bad, somewhat like practices related to Saint Nicholas. When German immigrants settled in Pennsylvania they brought the tradition of the Easter hare with them, and they proudly claimed credit for it. In the words of folklorist Alfred Lewis Shoemaker, "The Easter rabbit is perhaps the greatest contribution the Pennsylvania Dutch have made to American life."¹⁰ (Note that the Pennsylvania Dutch are not really Dutch but German. The confusion comes from the word "Deutsch," which means German in the German language. When filtered into the English language people began saying Dutch, which is in actuality an entirely different nationality.)

One additional reason that the Germans can take credit for the Easter rabbit in America is that there were not a lot of competing Easter traditions in colonial times. Many other Christian groups in the American colonies gave little attention to Easter and its accompanying cultural trappings;

Puritans, the same group that disapproved of Christmas, were the reason. As described earlier, Puritans in England and in American New England wanted to purge Christianity of what they saw as Roman Catholic additions that were not justified by scripture. They also believed that the celebrations had become too rowdy. Thus, they opposed “Festival Days, vulgarly called Holy Days,” including Christmas, Easter, and Lent.¹¹ For Puritans, the weekly celebration of Sunday, the Lord’s day, was enough. This disapproval of Easter and Christmas lingered for a century or more among English-speaking Christians who had been influenced by these Puritan views, including Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and some Baptists and Methodists. The Germans, however, unfettered by Puritan disapproval, were free to bring their Easter traditions to the new land. By the mid-1800s Easter observances, including aspects imported by the Germans and others, began to be adopted even by the reluctant Christian denominations. In 1868, for instance, the *New-York Daily Tribune* reported that “the Easter Festival, once allowed to pass almost unnoticed by our Knickerbocker and Puritan ancestors, is yearly more and more observed and was celebrated with greater interest than has hitherto been manifested.”¹²

What is especially interesting is that when the Easter hare tradition crossed the ocean to the Americas, the name gradually changed from “Osterhase” or “Oschter Haws” (Easter hare) to the Easter rabbit. For a while, Americans used the terms interchangeably; eventually, the word “hare” dropped out almost completely, with common references today in the United States alternating between Easter bunnies and Easter rabbits. Whether the shift occurred intentionally or not, the zoological differences described above make it appropriate symbolically if children are to be the focus of the tradition. Hares are more wild and powerful, while rabbits, especially bunnies, can be adorable and cuddly. If the goal was to shift from a primary emphasis on fertility and sexuality to something more suitable for children, the bunny is an ideal symbol.



Kindergarten students from Tilden School with Easter display of eggs, rabbit, and Easter lily, 1938.

In fact, many influences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unrelated to Easter have helped the rabbit take on “a relatively new identity as a suitable childhood companion and child-friendly animal.” Consider these examples from classic children’s stories, folktales, and cartoons:

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901)

Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922)

Thornton W. Burgess, *The Adventures of Peter Cottontail* (1941)

Robert Lawson, *Rabbit Hill* (1944)

Richard Adams, *Watership Down* (1972)

Rabbit, companion in A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and Disney adaptations

Joel Chandler Harris, Br'er Rabbit in the Uncle Remus stories

Thumper, Disney movie *Bambi*

Bugs Bunny cartoons

Trix cereal rabbit

As noted by Tanya Gulevich, these rabbits are “cozy, clever, or magical,” and “the Easter Bunny shares in these qualities.” It is likely that “these imagined character traits inspire children’s continuing affection for these fictional rabbits and their mythological companion, the Easter Bunny.”¹³

What about eggs? Like rabbits, they represent springtime and fertility, but the egg has additional possibilities that relate even more to religious meanings. Especially in the case of Easter, they are symbols of new life, which is what resurrection is all about.

Some academic and popular discussions do their best to trace the Easter egg to specific earlier traditions from which Christians might have borrowed, such as Egyptian or Persian precedents. It is more helpful, I think, to keep in mind that there are certain symbols that have self-evident possibilities for religious meaning. They are called “general symbols” because they have been used by many religions throughout the ages, around the world. One obvious example of a general symbol is water. Water easily can represent cleansing, the washing away of impurities, maybe even healing, and a chance to start over. Water also is essential for life; most plants and animals would die without it. So is it any wonder that religions almost everywhere have used water to express religious meanings? Examples include baptism in Christianity, sacred rivers like the Ganges in Hinduism, stories of a great flood in several religions, and ritual washings as preparation for all kinds of

religious ceremonies. Another significant example of a general symbol is the circle. Because a circle has no beginning and no end, it can represent infinity or eternity. It can represent unity or the whole, in contrast to something that is divided into parts. It can also signify rotations, such as the circle of the seasons, or the circle of life. Again, is it any wonder that the circle appears repeatedly as a symbol in many religions?

I would argue that the egg is like water or a circle; it is yet another example of a general symbol. It is spherical, with a shape similar to the circle just mentioned, and it has a hard surface that to all outward appearances looks lifeless or inanimate, like a stone. Miracle of miracles, it cracks open and a living being emerges! What could be more amazing than that?

Therefore, creation or emergence narratives from around the world often include an egg. Ancient Egyptian stories tell how the entire universe hatched out of an egg, and the egg plays a similar role in Hindu myths from India. In fact, the image of the world, or life, emerging from an egg seems almost universal, appearing in tales from Greece, Indonesia, China, Africa, Central and South America, and other places. In addition to representing creation itself, the egg also naturally signifies new life in the spring, fertility, and sometimes magical powers.¹⁴ By the way, a hard-boiled egg is included in the Jewish Seder meal considered earlier, and although the egg's meaning has been interpreted in a variety of ways, the interpretations almost always include a theme of the beginning of life, for individuals and for the Jewish people. The widespread appearance of the egg is summarized by folklorist Venetia Newell: "All over the world, wherever eggs are laid, they represent life and fertility and are symbolic of creation and resurrection."¹⁵

In that context, the question is not how eggs came to be associated with Easter. Rather the question is, how could the obvious symbolism of an egg *not* become associated with the resurrection of Jesus, sooner or later?

It is difficult to identify when eggs first became identified with Easter, but evidence of Easter egg practices dates back at least to the Middle Ages.

One example is a record in 1290 from the reign of King Edward I of England for the purchase of 450 eggs in the Easter season, to be colored or covered with gold leaf and distributed to members of his royal household. There is evidence of similar activity in Poland, Austria, and tsarist Russia in the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Decorated eggs became part of Easter observances as Christianity spread throughout Europe, into the Americas, and beyond, with variations from culture to culture.

In some parts of eastern Europe, especially among Eastern Orthodox Christians, Easter eggs are red. To explain the origin of the red egg, one common Eastern Orthodox tale (which has many variations) centers on Mary Magdalene, identified by the Gospel of Luke as one of the women who discovered the empty tomb after the resurrection of Jesus. It is said that she later obtained an audience with the Roman emperor Tiberius, to protest that Pontius Pilate had executed an innocent man. While it was the custom for people approaching the emperor to bring a valuable gift, Mary Magdalene brought a simple white egg and proclaimed, “Christ is risen!” As the story goes, the emperor replied that “rising from the dead is as impossible as a white egg turning red,” and when he spoke those words, the egg turned red in Mary’s hand. Some icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition show Mary Magdalene holding a red egg. An alternate story says that the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, brought a basket of eggs to the soldiers guarding Jesus and asked that they treat him well. While she was pleading for her son, her tears fell on the eggs and they turned red. In these stories, red eggs represent Christ’s blood and sacrifice or, when cracked open, the empty tomb. At the conclusion of some Orthodox Easter services, red hard-boiled eggs are distributed to all, and congregants move to a meal breaking their Easter fast. Each participant knocks his or her egg against the egg of another as a sort of game, seeing which egg cracks first, breaking them open as a part of breaking their fast. Whether in homes or in churches, baskets holding eggs all dyed a deep, bright red present a striking sight.

Also notable are the eggs beautifully decorated by folk artists from the Ukraine and Poland. Most of us have seen examples of these eggs, with their very exquisite patterns, and we wonder how such fine, delicate decorations are possible. The term for these eggs is “pysanky” (Ukrainian) or “pisanki” (Polish), meaning “to write.” Pysanky artists trace fine lines or designs of hot wax onto an egg and then lower the egg into a dye bath. The wax protects portions of the egg while the rest of the egg absorbs the color. This process can be repeated over and over again for multicolored patterns, and afterward the design is protected by a coat of varnish. The eggs are not hard-boiled, and when everything is dry, perhaps a day later, the artist pierces a tiny hole in each end of the egg and blows out the white and the yoke, leaving an empty shell. The designs on these eggs vary widely, from explicit Christian symbols to geometric patterns to birds, flowers, or any image the artist might choose.

However, it is the legendary Fabergé eggs that represent the height of elaborate egg decoration. This series of eggs was produced in tsarist Russia between 1885 and 1916. At that time, given the prominence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian culture, Easter was a major celebration of the year, both religiously and culturally, just as the Christmas holiday seems to dominate in the United States today. It had been a long-standing tradition for Christians to bring hand-colored eggs to the Easter worship service, where the eggs were blessed, subsequently to become gifts for family and friends. Russian royalty had built on this tradition, exchanging jeweled eggs, but Czar Alexander III wanted to do even more. He commissioned the court jeweler, Peter Carl Fabergé, to craft an exceptionally elaborate egg as a surprise for his wife, Czarina Maria Feodorovna, apparently for the Easter of their twentieth anniversary in 1885. Called the Hen Egg, it seemed outwardly to be a white enamel egg, but when opened a yolk of gold appeared inside. Within the yolk was a gold hen, and the hen in turn opened to reveal a miniature diamond replica of the imperial crown and a tiny ruby pendant. The empress was so delighted that Alexander commissioned a new



Woman painting Ukrainian Easter eggs, 1968.

egg annually, a tradition continued by his son Nicholas II (who ordered two eggs annually, one for his wife and one for his mother) until the Russian Revolution in 1917. Each egg took a year or more to make, even with a team of craftsmen working on each. While the designs were diverse, each egg had to have a surprise inside, such as a miniature jeweled coronation carriage, or a swan, or an elephant.

Fifty imperial Easter eggs were made, and forty-three survive. In March 2014, news broke about a scrap metal dealer from the American Midwest who bought an egg-shaped object at a flea market for \$14,000, speculating that the value of the gold would be worth that much. It was not, but he then realized that the egg might be an important work of art. It has now been confirmed as the previously lost Third Imperial Easter Egg, featuring a small watch on a tripod pedestal, surrounded by gold, sapphires, and diamonds. Recently sold to a private collector, its value is estimated at \$33 million.¹⁷

In the American experience today, the practice of parents and children dying hard-boiled eggs is a far cry from those elegant examples, but it is a fond childhood memory for many. The colors usually are pastels, for unknown reasons. One guess is that they reflect the colors of spring flowers. In addition to dying hard-boiled eggs and later eating them, the major related domestic activity in the United States is the Easter egg hunt, which takes place in the family living room or backyard, or on a church lawn, or is organized by a civic group in a public space.

Another Easter game is egg rolling, where eggs are placed at a starting line on the top of a hill and pushed, in a race to see which egg reaches the bottom first. On flat terrain, children might push the egg with a spoon. Some attempts to give this event a Christian meaning have suggested that the rolling egg represents the rock rolled away from the empty tomb of the resurrected Jesus, but for most people it is simply a children's game. The most widely publicized egg roll is the annual event held first on the United States Capitol grounds and later on the White House lawn. Begun as an informal

activity before the Civil War, it has become an annual entertainment for thousands of children. (From the early years it was understood that no adult could attend the White House Egg Roll unless accompanied by a child.)

As we trace the cultural trappings of holidays in the United States and their expressions in modern popular culture, a common theme especially for Christmas, Halloween, and Easter is that they have become domesticated, made family friendly and, especially, safe and appealing for children. Historian Gary Cross claims that “after the Civil War, Americans reinvented Easter as a day commemorating youth and family” as part of a broader pattern of “infantilizing” many holidays.¹⁸ Thus, our modern consideration of the Easter rabbit ends up mostly celebrating a lovable, magical Easter bunny appropriate for children. And the Easter egg tradition consists largely of family traditions of dying eggs and staging egg hunts for children, with the addition of Easter baskets and plastic eggs with candy, toys, or money inside, again for children.

This relates to a second theme, commercialization. In the words of Steve Olenski, a marketing blogger for *Forbes* magazine, “Let’s face it. Easter is not exactly the proverbial hotbed of marketing and advertising when it comes to generating revenue. Despite all the confections and eggs and marshmallow-infused goodies, it’s not even the best holiday for candy, with that honor falling to Halloween, of course.”¹⁹ Yet it is still a holiday with spending in the billions.

Surveys conducted by the National Retail Federation in 2014 indicated that US citizens would spend almost \$16 billion on Easter, in the following categories: \$5 billion for groceries or a meal out, \$2.6 billion for attire, \$2.4 billion for gifts, \$2.2 billion for candy, and \$1.1 billion each for flowers and decorations. Eighty-seven percent of American parents say that they prepare Easter baskets for their children. Eighty-one percent of Americans share or give candy for Easter. Jelly beans are especially popular at Easter, with 16 billion jelly beans produced for the holiday, but still, almost three-fourths of Easter candy is chocolate.²⁰

Despite all of the attention given to Easter baskets, eggs, and candy, these statistics reveal that the two largest segments of Easter-related spending are food and clothing. The greatest expenditure, food, highlights the special importance of family meals, a topic discussed further in the Thanksgiving chapter. The gathering of family and friends for an Easter meal can be a centerpiece of the holiday, even for those who do not emphasize its religious importance. The ubiquitous Easter meal is a reminder that the cultural and commercial activity of the season involves persons with numerous, even contrasting motivations.

One Christian-based polling organization asked Americans about their personal view of Easter, and a majority saw it as a religious occasion. Replying to a free-response question, 67 percent gave answers such as “a Christian holiday, a celebration of God or Jesus, a celebration of Passover, a holy day, or a special time for church or worship attendance.” Two percent volunteered that it was the most important holiday of their faith. That still leaves 33 percent who did not see Easter as religious, including 8 percent who did not celebrate Easter at all or who said it meant nothing to them. Nonreligious responses included viewing Easter as a time for getting family and friends together, a time for dying and hiding eggs, a time for children, and more, descriptions that those with religious responses might share as well.²¹ Like Christmas, Easter is a religious holiday for some and a cultural holiday for others, and for many it is both.

The other consumer statistic, money spent on clothing, points to an area where the commercialization of the American Easter actually has receded. There was a time when the widespread American cultural expectation was for everyone to appear in a new Easter outfit when they arrived at church or the family dinner. Some Christian interpreters suggest that the tradition of new clothes arose from baptisms on Easter Sunday in the early church, where the newly baptized donned new white robes. Whether the tradition goes that far back or not, it is reasonable that persons who had survived

winter would need new clothing for the spring, and making or obtaining that clothing could become associated with a spring festival like Easter. Various pieces of evidence suggest that Europeans associated Easter with new clothes prior to settlement in the American colonies. For example, an often-quoted old Irish aphorism stated, “For Christmas, food and drink; for Easter, new clothes.” And Shakespeare, in *Romeo and Juliet*, has one character criticize another for wearing his new doublet before Easter.

In the United States the tradition’s most prominent example became the Easter parade, which arose somewhat spontaneously in the 1870s and 1880s when parishioners from prominent New York City churches strolled Fifth Avenue following Easter morning worship services to show off their elegant fashions, especially ladies’ hats, their “Easter bonnets.” Irving Berlin enshrined the practice in his famous song “Easter Parade” (1933), which was followed by a movie with the same name, starring Fred Astaire and Judy Garland (1948). At its height in the late 1940s, the New York City Easter parade drew crowds estimated at over a million people, inspiring other parades in cities like Atlantic City, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. The parades still occur annually, although they are substantially diminished and are now more of a carnival featuring outlandish hats, instead of the fashion show of earlier years.

By the 1890s, the expectation of new clothes for Easter was being encouraged by explicit marketing appeals from merchants via newspaper and magazine advertisements, store windows, and other promotions. In 1894 one trade journal commented that “Easter is pre-eminently the festival of the dry goods trade. . . . Much of the success of the year’s business hangs upon the demand experienced during the weeks just preceding Easter.”²² The expectations continued until recent decades, and many adults today, nationwide, remember the special Easter clothes of childhood. However, as Peter Steinfeld of the *New York Times* has written, echoing the impression of almost everyone, “The whole association between Easter and clothes isn’t what it



Easter parade: crowds in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City on Easter Sunday, 1904.

used to be.”²³ He suggests that the new spring fashions remain but are not as focused on Easter. Even more important, I would suggest, is that in today's American culture clothing is increasingly casual at work and at worship, influencing even Easter Sunday. If new Easter clothes drove sales in previous generations, that spending is greatly diminished now. When is the last time you saw an Easter bonnet?

So, Easter is a holiday with three layers, or four, depending on how you count. The first layer is a spring seasonal observance, and if Bede and Grimm are right about an early fertility goddess, the very name Easter is a reminder of that layer. The second layer, a religious overlay, has two parts. Judaism transformed an earlier spring ritual into Passover, remembering the exodus



Clothing in Easter window display, Dayton's, Minneapolis, 1957.

from Egypt, and Christianity built upon that, seeing the death and resurrection of Jesus as a new kind of Passover.

The third layer, modern popular culture, raised ancient spring symbols like rabbits and eggs to enhanced prominence, added an emphasis on family and children, and found itself susceptible to the same kind of commercial marketing that has accompanied other holidays. However, when compared to Halloween, Christmas, and even Valentine's Day, one could argue that the commercialization of Easter has been more restrained, and has perhaps even receded, in light of the declining emphasis on Easter clothing. Perhaps the significant Jewish and Christian religious messages of this season have inhibited a full commercial onslaught, recognizing that for a major segment of the American population, an Easter recommitment to faith and family remains paramount.