

Easter: Jesus Lives Again!

Easter was celebrated at the Glassport Memorial Stadium in Pennsylvania in a most unusual and bizarre way a few years ago. Reportedly, a church celebrated Easter by whipping an Easter bunny during a drama about Jesus' crucifixion. Chicken eggs were also broken as performers attempted to teach the audience about Jesus' death. The youth pastor stated that the performance "wasn't meant to be offensive." But parents were offended, and one child cried as the bunny was being whipped. His mother reported later, "He was crying and asking me why the bunny was being whipped."¹

In April 2004, the city council of St. Paul, Minnesota removed Easter bunny decorations from the lobby of the city council because they were afraid some non-

Christians might be offended at the sight of a toy rabbit, some pastel-colored eggs, and a sign with the words "Happy Easter."² "As government, we have a different responsibility about advancing the cause of religion, which we are not going to do," said council president, Kathy Lantry.³ What is Easter about?

1. The Associated Press. April 8, 2004.

2. FoxNews (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,189238,00.html>); Mainstream Iowan Blog (<http://mainstreamiowan.blogspot.com/2006/04/st-paul-minnesota-and-easter-bunny.html>)

3. Wikinews.org (http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Council_pres_removes_Easter_bunny_from_St_Paul_MN_city_hall)

What Is Easter? What do Easter bunnies and pastel-colored eggs have to do with Jesus Christ? Why did the city council members of St. Paul think that baby rabbits, baby chickens and colored chicken eggs are symbols of the Christian faith? Why did the youth pastor include those symbols in her Easter drama? Are bunnies and chicken eggs symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Some are quick to say that the Roman Catholic Church



Pastel Colored Easter Eggs

invented the Easter eggs and bunnies. One person has asked, "Have you ever wondered where the celebration of the Christian holiday commemorating the resurrection of Christ acquired its unusual name and odd symbols of colored eggs and rabbits?" She offered the answer, "The answer lies in the

ingenious way that the Christian church absorbed pagan practices. After discovering that people were more reluctant to give up their holidays and festivals than their gods, they simply incorporated pagan practices into Christian festivals. As recounted by the Venerable Bede, an early Christian writer, clever clerics copied pagan practices and by doing so, made Christianity more palatable to pagan folk reluctant to give up their festivals for somber Christian practices."⁴ She is both correct and wrong. The Roman Catholic Church did

4. Ostara's Hare." About: Alternative Religions (altreligion.about.com).

adopt some pagan festivals, but baby rabbits and colored eggs do not capture the meaning of Easter.

If bunnies, pastel-colored eggs, green grass, chocolate eggs, little chickens, and ribbons do not represent Easter, then what is Easter all about? The answer cannot be found in the chambers of the city council of St. Paul, Minnesota. It is clear that they did not understand the Christian faith.

Events Before The Trial. The answer is found in an event that occurred two thousand years ago - the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' death occurred on a Friday afternoon in March/April A.D. 33. The historic gospels tell us that the Jewish leaders wanted to have Him put to death because they did not like His teachings, His works of power, and His claim that He was God.

For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. (NASB) John 5:18

Soon after Jesus ministry began, His popularity among the Jewish people increased. He quickly became more popular than John the Baptist. Eventually, the jealous and angry religious leaders desperately wanted Him eliminated. (John 7:1, 19-20, 25; 11:53).

Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. (NASB) John 11:47-48

Their hatred continued to increase as Jesus grew increasingly more popular. Yet, they were afraid to seize Him during the day because He was so popular with the people.

The chief priests and the scribes were seeking how they might put Him to death; for they were afraid of the people. (NASB) Luke 22:2

The tensions reached a peak after about three years. Finally one evening they discovered how to secretly capture Jesus. Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' close disciples, offered to betray Jesus. Judas was like a special Christmas gift to them! They must have rejoiced. The Jewish leaders planned to capture Jesus at night in the dark, in an isolated place when the crowds were not present. Judas agreed and he was given thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 27:3-10). Sometime later after Jesus and His disciples shared the Passover meal, Judas found Jesus in the isolated Garden of Gethsemane and there betrayed Him with a kiss of friendship (John 18:1-11). That was the signal to the soldiers.

Then the soldiers asked Jesus if He was "Jesus the Nazarene." After He said that He was, the soldiers collapsed to the ground.

He said to them, "I am He." . . . when He said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. (NASB) John 18:5-6

After they picked themselves up, Peter cut-off a servant's ear. Jesus responded by telling Peter to put his sword away and healing the servant's ear (Matt. 26:47-56). Then Jesus explained that He (Jesus) was in control of the situation and allowed the soldiers to take Him to the Jewish leaders.

Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (NASB) Matt. 26:53

Why did Jesus allow this to occur?

The Trials. The soldiers took Jesus to a trial that would be conducted by seventy Jewish religious leaders - the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was composed mainly of Pharisees and Sadducees. The trial was a mockery. The charges and sentence had already been determined before Jesus arrived. The Jewish religious leaders were just waiting for the victim to arrive. Many false witnesses (Matt. 26:60) were brought before the Sanhedrin court in search of two people who would say the same condemning thing about Jesus (Matt. 26:60-65; Mark 14:57-59). Finally, Jesus gave

them what they were failing to obtain from their false witnesses. He gave them His own testimony that He was God (compare Matt. 26:63-64 with John 10:33, 36).

The high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, “Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” But He kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” And Jesus said, “I am . . . (NASB) Mark 14:60-62

Then Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea. The religious leaders added a false accusation saying that He had encouraged the people not to pay taxes to Caesar (compare Luke 20:22-25 with Luke 23:2). They never gave the real reason that they wanted Him dead. They also accused Jesus of declaring Himself to be a king (Luke 23:1-2). The accusations were designed to characterize Jesus as a political rebel

who was a potential problem for Rome. But Pilate did not find Jesus worthy of death and declared that Jesus was without fault (Luke 23:2). Then the religious leaders insisted that He deserved death. Under pressure, Pilate sent Jesus to King Herod who later returned Him to Pilate because he, Herod, found Jesus to be innocent too!

Pilate finally declared Jesus to be innocent because neither King Herod (Luke 23:15) or himself found Jesus to be deserving of death.

Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and

the people, and said to them, “You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. (NASB) Luke 23:13-14

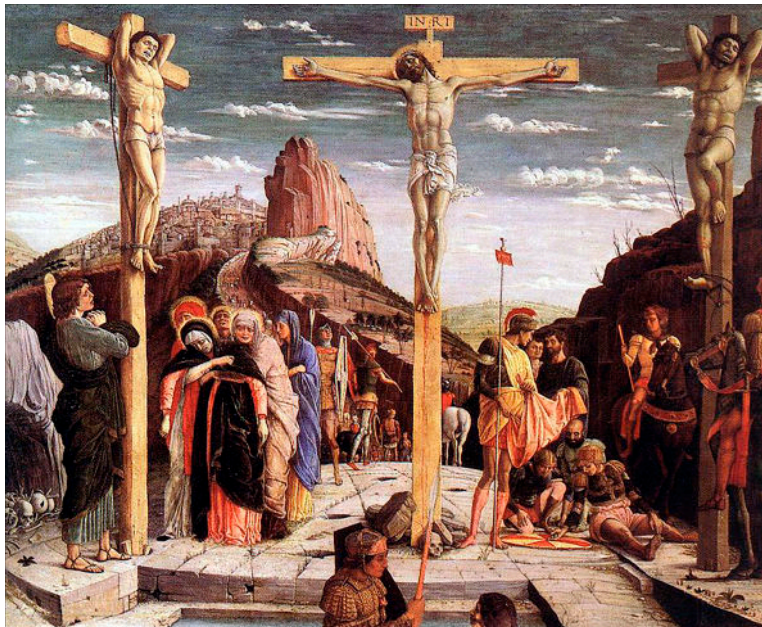
Jesus was not guilty of the public accusations brought against Him. The real objections of the Jewish religious leaders to Jesus were not given. Pilate, the wise old politician, decided to let the people vote for the release of a notorious thief called Barabbas or Jesus. He had concluded that the crowd would release Jesus. What could the members of

the Sanhedrin do then? But the Jewish religious leaders were politically savvy too! These influential men motivated the crowd standing before Pilate to shout for the release of Barabbas and when they did, Pilate had no choice but to crucify Jesus Christ.

The Cross. Jesus was ordered to carry the weapon of His own death - the cross. Eventually, He stumbled and fell to the ground. Simon of Cyrene was

ordered to carry the wooden cross. Jesus could no longer carry the cross because He had been beaten, whipped, mocked, and abused. A crown of thorns had been mashed down onto His head. His back and sides with deep cuts were bleeding. Jesus was now extremely weakened.

Finally, the soldiers nailed His hands and feet to the cross and dropped the cross into a hole so that He was upright. A sign was placed on the cross that said He was King of the Jews (John 19:21). He was hung on the cross sometime in the morning hours. We are not sure exactly when. His mother along with some other women and Jesus’ disciple



Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

John stood nearby (John 19:25). The soldiers gambled for His clothes (Mark 15:24). In **Pilate's historic report to the emperor** in Rome, he wrote that Jesus' hands and feet were nailed to a cross, the soldiers gambled for His clothes, and eventually He died by crucifixion.⁵ **Other historical records** confirm that Jesus died in this manner.⁶ **Pilate also wrote** that Jesus had healed the blind, the lame, those who could not speak, and had raised the dead.⁷

After Jesus was hanging from the nails for some time, a thief on an adjacent cross rebuked Him (Luke 23:39) and challenged Him to get down off the cross, but another thief asked for mercy (Luke 23:40-43). Jesus promised the latter that he would enter paradise. In all of His agony and suffering Jesus showed mercy.

The soldiers and religious leaders also shouted insults and abuses (Matt. 27:41-43). Then at about noon or 12:00 PM (1200 hours) darkness covered the land until 3:00 PM (1500 hours). At 3:00 PM, Jesus shouted loudly,

And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT."
Having said this, He breathed His last. (NASB) Luke 23:46

The gospel of John adds these words from Jesus,

... He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. (NASB) John 19:30

He had accomplished His mission - His purpose. He came to die for our sins so that He could forgive our sins and allow those who believe in Him to live with Him eternally.

When the Roman soldiers who were standing nearby saw and heard these things, they were surprised,

Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent." (NASB) Luke 23:47

5. Justin Martyr, First Apology 35 refers to the Acts of Pontius Pilate

6. Cornelius Tacitus, Annals 15.44; Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 18.3.3

7. Justin Martyr, First Apology 48 refers to the Acts of Pontius Pilate

Yes, Jesus was innocent. He had spoken only the truth. The charges were false. He had given honor to the unbelieving Caesar. He had encouraged people to pay their taxes to Caesar. He was also King of the Jews. The magi from the east who had visited Jesus at His birth knew more than the members of the Sanhedrin.

Matthew adds some other events that occurred at Jesus' death.

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (NASB) Matt. 27:51-53

These were supernatural events that must have disturbed many. The afternoon darkness that covered the land was an event that was observed throughout the Middle East. **Several secular writers record** that this event did occur and they attempted to explain why it happened, but they were unsuccessful.⁸ The Jews knew about solar eclipses and full moons. But the cause of the darkness remained a mystery, because the Passover was always scheduled to occur during a full moon. When a full moon occurs, a solar eclipse cannot occur.

Sometime later one of the soldiers thrust a spear into His side and out gushed blood and water (John 19:34). Jesus died just as He had predicted. He voluntarily gave up His life.

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. (NASB) John 10:17

His Burial. Since the Sabbath day was about to start at 6:00 PM (1800 hours), the Jewish leaders asked that Jesus' body and those of the thieves be removed from the crosses. Therefore, the soldiers broke the legs of the thieves to speed up their deaths but they did not break Jesus' legs since He was already dead. **The Jewish Talmud** supports the gospel

8. The Extant Writings of Julius Africanus 18; Origen Against Celsus; Phlegon. De. opif. mund. II21

accounts with these words,

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu [Jesus] was hanged.⁹

Jesus was buried Friday afternoon just before the Jewish Sabbath began (John 19:31). Jesus' body, not His spirit, was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38-42). Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had visited Jesus in John 3, along with some of the women helped to prepare the body and place it in the tomb (John 19:38-42). After they had wrapped the body in linen with spices, they left. A group of Roman soldiers placed a huge stone at the entrance to the tomb, placed a Roman seal on it, and remained on guard to prevent anyone from entering (Matt. 27:62-66).

H i s Resurrection. Jesus had predicted that He would return **to life in three days**.

For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." (NASB) Mark 9:31

In counting the number of days, Jewish custom considered any portion of a day as a full day. So Jesus died on a Friday, was dead on Saturday, and was still dead in the early Sunday morning. **He was dead three days according to the Jewish custom of the time.**

In the early Sunday morning as predicted, Jesus returned to life. It is clear from the gospel records that no one expected Him to return to life - not His disciples nor the

women who buried Him (Matt 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18). They were men and women of little faith.

One of the Pharisees, maybe a member of the Sanhedrin who later became a Christian, recorded these facts for us.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some

have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. (NASB) 1 Cor. 15:3-8



Ascension of Christ to Heaven

This man Saul of Tarsus had been searching for and killing any Jew who believed in Jesus and claimed to be a Christian. Imagine this former Pharisee writing the words above.

Jesus remained on the earth for forty days teaching His disciples and spending time with them (Acts 1:3). He visited with His disciples frequently and most likely His mother though the gospels do not record that.

Conclusion. After forty days Jesus gave His disciples directions and told them to tell others about the good news of His death and resurrection (Matt. 28:19-20). The good news is that Jesus died so that our sins can be forgiven (Rom. 4:25). He returned to life as proof that He was God (Rom. 1:4) and that He could forgive our sins (Rom. 4:23-25) **when we believe in Him** and are willing to let Him take control of our lives. The former Pharisee, Saul who was

⁹. Talmud, Babylonia Sanhedrin 43A

renamed Paul, wrote these words,

. . . that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord,
and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the
dead, you will be saved; (NASB) Rom. 10:9-10

Jesus told His disciples that He would return again some day. This is the next major event in our future (Acts 1:6-7). Then He left and returned to heaven.

Jesus' death and resurrection was the fulfillment of many ancient prophecies. Here is a summary of those prophecies.

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene,
a man attested to you by God with miracles and
wonders and signs which God performed through Him
in your midst, just as you yourselves know - this Man,
delivered over by the predetermined plan and fore-
knowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of
godless men and put Him to death. But God raised
Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death,
since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.
(NASB) Acts 2:22-24

Easter is not bunnies and colored chicken eggs. Easter is the celebration of Jesus' return to life. Jesus is alive! Is He your risen Lord and Savior?