

EASTER FACTS AND FICTION – WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

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Hope Church, Easter Sunday 4 April 2010

INTRODUCTION

Happy Easter! But what’s it all about? Do we know? Do we care?

Is it just a spring festival, an excuse for a long weekend off work...

Let’s do a test – four basic questions about Easter...

1. **Why now?** Is 4 April special? Easter is the first Sunday after first full moon after spring equinox (i.e. 21 March), so could be any time 22 March – 25 April
2. **Why called Easter?** Named after Eostre, Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring and fertility. Her festival is called Ostara, held in April, still celebrated by pagans, druids, wiccans – festival of new life, rebirth, fertility...
3. **Why the Easter bunny?** Eostre’s spirit was thought to inhabit her special animal, the hare. Hare associated in Eastern mythology with moon, wisdom, fertility...
4. **Why Easter eggs?** Eggs are another fertility symbol, originally the serpent’s egg to represent the cosmic egg from which the world was born. A story that Eostre found a wounded bird in Autumn and healed it by turning it into a hare – but the spell only partially worked so the bird-hare could still lay eggs. In gratitude to Eostre the animal presented her with its eggs, painted with magical symbols of power...

So is that what we celebrate this weekend?

If not, then what are we celebrating?

Are we just following an ancient spring fertility festival, or is there anything particularly Christian about Easter?

CHRISTIAN EASTER

Everyone knows that Jesus lived and died in Israel 2000 years ago.

BUT Christians say they believe that Jesus didn’t stay dead

They say he came back to life and is alive now

They say this is proof that :

Jesus was divine

His sacrificial death was accepted by God so we can be forgiven & reconciled

There is life after death

We can also survive death if we trust Jesus

But is this just wishful thinking?

Maybe the resurrection is just our equivalent of the spring rebirth myth?

If so, then we Christians are pathetic

wasting our time believing a myth or story

praying to a person who died 2000 years ago

trusting our eternal destiny to someone who no longer exists

focusing on a make-believe heaven

hoping it will all turn out OK

thinking that what we do here has eternal value beyond the grave...

Without the resurrection, Christianity is a sad cruel joke.

St Paul agrees – READ I Corinthians 15:13-19 :

preaching and faith is pointless (14), misleading (15), futile (17), pathetic (19)

BUT Paul is convinced that the resurrection is a real true historical fact – see verse 20 – “But IN FACT Christ has been raised from the dead...”

How did he know? How could he be so sure?

And can we be sure? Is there any evidence that the resurrection actually happened? Need to be like my hero Sherlock Holmes and examine the evidence.

EVIDENCE

Empty Tomb. The first piece of evidence is something that everyone in Jerusalem 2000 years ago knew to be true because they could all go and check it out for themselves – the tomb where Jesus was buried was empty 3 days later.

In fact the tomb wasn't empty – there were the clothes he was buried in – actually linen cloth wrapped round the body

Everything that was put in the tomb was still there – except the body!! So where did it go? What happened?

Perhaps Jesus wasn't dead?

But he had been executed by professional soldiers on pain of death – including spear in side to puncture heart

Or maybe the Romans or Jews moved body? But they could have produced it to answer rumours that Jesus had come back to life.

Or did disciples steal the body? The grave was guarded 24/7 soldiers. And they were tortured and martyred for their faith – someone would have cracked and denied it. And if the body of Jesus was somewhere else, it would have become a holy relic – but not.

So how did the tomb get empty? Where did the body go? And how?

Sightings. People saw Jesus alive. Read I Corinthians 15:3-8.

Individuals, 2 or 3, 10 or 11, 500 at one time – 11 recorded occasions over 6-week period.

Delusional? Mass hypnosis? Wishful thinking?

No – they were not expecting it – total shock and surprise, thought he was a ghost (but ate a meal with them!)

Not suggestive type of people – fishermen, civil servants, doctor, housewives...

Happened in many places over period of time in different circumstances – not typical for hallucinations.

So what were they seeing? A fantasy or something real?

Effect on church then and now. Experience of a living person, not remembering a dead great teacher and spiritual leader. Enjoying friendship with a living Lord each day.

The evidence for the resurrection is overwhelming. J B Phillips calls it "The best-attested fact in ancient history".

Sherlock Holmes: "When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." (*The Blinded Soldier*)

So the Christian Easter is celebrating a real historical event – HE IS RISEN!

SO WHAT??

If Jesus conquered death and came back to life on first Easter Sunday, there is one clear conclusion – HE IS ALIVE TODAY!

This means you can meet him here & now, talk to him, get to know him, share your life with him...

Christians aren't pathetic losers, a sad joke, believing in a mythical future, praying to a dead person, hoping to be saved in some imaginary heaven. If Jesus is alive then it's all true...

Easter is not just a random spring festival that's been Christianised, adopted and hijacked by the church from the pagans.

It's a celebration of a living person, the unique Son of God, who was dead but is now alive for ever.

But don't take my word for it – find out for yourself!