

The Meaning of Easter

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

The American holiday calendar commemorates religious, patriotic, and secular events. The year starts with New Year's Day, an event that celebrates a change of numbers with the dropping of the ball in Times Square, and a milestone in life as each one of us marches toward our final destiny; then it moves on in February to the commemoration of our great presidents; then into late March or early April to celebrate Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; then on to the Fourth of July, the most patriotic holiday of the year; then to Labor Day in September, a secular holiday celebrating labor unions. On October 31, there is Halloween, not a national holiday, but a relic of Druid paganism that the public schools have adopted as some sort of ghoulish festival of the black arts. From there we go to Thanksgiving Day, a combined religious-secular holiday, in which we thank God for his bounty and blessings. And finally we end the year in a blaze of light and music with Christmas, celebrating the birth of the most important person in history, Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the religious holidays memorialize the life of Jesus, which is honored differently by Protestants and Catholics. Actually, there are three calendars intertwined in the American calendar: the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. The Protestant calendar reflects a simpler form of Christianity practiced by the Puritan Calvinists who settled in New England beginning in 1620. The Catholic calendar reflects the more elaborate religious festivals celebrated worldwide by Catholics: Ash Wednesday, Shrove Tuesday, Palm Sunday, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas. The Jewish calendar, quietly subsidiary to the two Christian calendars, celebrates religious holidays only. You cannot secularize the cycle of Jewish holy days. They remain distinctively religious events.

But there is one holiday in which the three calendars converge: Easter. The Jewish holiday of Passover is an important part of the life of Jesus Christ, whose momentous Last Supper was a celebration of Passover. From there the Son of God went to His crucifixion, and from there He was laid in a tomb where he was Resurrected. At Easter, we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and His Ascension to Heaven.

But Easter has been so thoroughly secularized that most Americans see and enjoy it as a celebration of spring in Hollywood technicolor images. Here, show business merges with religion. Thus, we hear Judy Garland sing of her Easter Bonnet with the blue ribbon on it, and see television pictures of the Easter Parade in New York, with everyone decked out in their new modish clothes, with throngs of worshippers crowding St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. And there are the Easter bunnies and Easter eggs for the little ones. Indeed, it is a joyous time all over the United States and among Christians the world over.

But it is also the most important day in Christendom, for without the Resurrection there could be no Christian religion that offers salvation, forgiveness of sin, and life after

death. There could be no Christianity without the Son of God, for it was the miracle of the Resurrection and Ascension that affirmed the divinity of Christ.

Of the Passover, the Last Supper, where the drama of Easter begins, we read in Mark 14:1-2:

After two days was the feast of the passover, and of unleavened bread: and the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take him by craft, and put him to death. But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar of the people.

And his disciples went forth, and came into the city, and found as he had said unto them: and they made ready the passover. And in the evening he cometh with the twelve....

And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body.

And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it. And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.

After Judas's betrayal, Jesus is then arrested and taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who answers the cry of the rabble to crucify him. We read in Matthew 27:27-33 what happened next:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers. And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe.

And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand; and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying Hail King of the Jews! And they spit on him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him and let him away to crucify him.

The drama continues in Luke 23: 26-27:

And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus. And there followed him a great company of people and women, which also bewailed and lamented him.

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:33-34)

When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed. (Matthew 27:57-60)

Then we read of the miracle of the Resurrection:

And very early in the morning, the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed. (Mark 16:2-8)

This is not fiction. It is not a myth. Back in the 1980s, while on a tour of Israel, our guide took us to the actual tomb in Jerusalem or a tomb similar to the one described in Scripture. It is a cave hewn out of the rock with a stone surface inside where the body must have lain. To secure the tomb, there is a great round stone, like a wheel, that is rolled in a groove at the entrance of the tomb. No one from the inside could roll that stone away.

We are then told of the Ascension:

So then, after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following them. Amen. (Mark 16:19-20)

Thus ends the drama of Easter. However, it was difficult to designate a date for the celebration of the Resurrection until 325 A.D., when the First Council of Nicaea, convened by Roman Emperor Constantine, adopted the Gregorian Calendar to regulate the ceremonial cycle of the Roman Catholic and, later, Protestant churches. The Council decided to keep Easter on a Sunday and constructed several special tables to compute the date.

Thus, Easter falls on the first Sunday following the first ecclesiastical full moon that occurs on or after the day of the vernal equinox, which is fixed as March 21st. Thus, Easter can never occur before March 22nd or later than April 25th. The Eastern

churches, using a modified Gregorian Calendar, date Easter according to the astronomical Full Moon for the meridian of Jerusalem. In any case, in the year 2004, Easter is celebrated on April 11th, and in 2005, on March 27th.

It should be noted that the secular calendar that the world uses for commerce and politics is dated from the birth of Jesus Christ and revolves around the important events in Christ's life. We tend to take the Christian calendar for granted because of its universal secular use, but its significance should never be underestimated. It provides and maintains the historical and ecclesiastical record of Christian civilization, the world's dominant civilization.

One of the reasons why the Jewish people have been able to maintain their peculiar identity over so many thousands of years is not only because of the Hebrew language and alphabet and their Scripture but because of their maintenance of the Jewish calendar, which in the year 2004 records 5765 years of continued Jewish existence. In other words, Jesus was born in the Jewish year of 3761. That, indeed, was a long time to wait for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus was a Jew, and his first followers were Jews. They were convinced that He was the Messiah prophesied in Scripture. And He went on to conquer the non-Jewish world so that every human being could be saved from sin and be brought into covenant with Almighty God.