

EASTER CUSTOMS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

by JO FREDELL HIGGINS

The wonder of the resurrection greets every Christian again this spring. The splendor of Jesus' rising from the dead completes the life circle for him and for all humanity. The circle of his earthly life illuminates the life cycle of each one of us. And all the earthly symbols of Easter help us appreciate this mystery. Following are some of the symbols and customs traditionally used around the world to celebrate Easter.

EASTER EGGS

An egg is a beginning, and Easter is a feast of beginnings. In ancient Egypt and India the great work of the gods Geb and Nut was the production of a mighty egg—the germ from which the whole universe was born. Out of this egg came the fabulous Bennu bird, or phoenix, symbol of the sun. It is said of this bird that it dies by setting fire to its own nest, and then rises to life again out of the ashes.

The earliest mention of Easter eggs and the Easter rabbit is in a late-sixteenth-century German book: "Do not worry if the bunny escapes you; should we miss his eggs, then we shall cook the nest." The custom of putting eggs in nests or baskets came to this country with the German settlers who arrived in the 1770s. Nests made of hats, or bonnets, or fancy paper boxes were put in secluded spots because the rabbit who came on Easter was believed to be quite shy. Today the Easter egg is transformed into chocolate and sugar and wrapped in tin foil and coloured cardboard.

During April try some of these Easter egg activities in your religion classes.

- Tint half of a broken egg shell yellow. Cut a strip of six petals from crepe paper, and paste it around the bottom of the egg, curling the petals with your thumb. Paste the egg to a place card and fill it with jelly beans. Use the eggs as placecards at a paralyturgy to which parents are invited.
- Decorate an Easter-egg tree by coloring blown-out eggs.
- Make bookmarks by cutting out 2" figures, such as felt eggs or bunnies, and gluing them to a hair clip.
- Individual Easter baskets can be made from paper cups with handles of

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twisted pipe cleaners or use plastic berry containers that have been decorated with strips of construction paper and filled with Easter grass.

- Make felt beanbags in Easter shapes.
- Do stained glass windows with 1" squares of tissue paper.
- Join the Easter parade with millinery originals. Fashion Easter bonnets from old hat frames or make them of construction paper.

HOT CROSS BUNS

In England the most notable Good Friday custom is the baking of hot cross buns. The custom is said to have originated in 1361 at St. Alban's Abbey, when one of the monks baked them as gifts for the poor. Street vendors sold them with the familiar chant, "Hot cross buns, hot cross buns, one a penny, two a penny, hot cross buns. Smoking hot, piping hot, just come out of the baker's shop." If you have access to a school or parish kitchen, why not bake your own hot cross buns this year? Plan to deliver some of them to neighbors close by the school.

DOGWOOD TREES

In the southern states there is a Good Friday legend about the dogwood tree, usually in flower at this time of year. It is said that the dogwood was once a great tree like the oak, and that its wood was so strong it was used for the making of Christ's cross.

The tree was heartbroken at being used for this purpose, so as Jesus hung upon it, he said to the tree, "Because of your regret and pity for my suffering, never again shall the dogwood tree grow large enough to be used as a cross. Henceforth it shall be slender and bent and twisted, and its blossoms shall be in the form of a cross—two long and two short petals. And in the center of the outer edge of each petal there will be nail prints, brown with rust and stained with red, and in the center of the flower will be a crown of thorns. All who see it will remember." Share this lovely story with your class. If there are dogwoods in your area take a walk to look at them and together praise God for them.

WATER AND PLANTS

The whole mystery of Easter centers around the symbol of water. From the spring rains to the baptismal font, from the waters of chaos in which the world began, to the water of eternal life which Jesus gives to those who thirst, water symbolizes life. Resisting it, one sinks. Giving in to it, one floats. Relate the water symbol to the new life of spring. Every kind of spring flower can be brought to the classroom—primrose, daffodil, narcissus, anemone, jonquil, lily. Just like putting on our new, fresh garments, as ancient peoples did at their spring festivals, flowers can announce our joy that winter is past.

Bring seeds, a flower bud and a blooming flower of the same species to your class. Discuss the difference between the seed's beginnings and its evolution into a thing of beauty. Have buds for children to take home so they can watch them open. What part does water play in the growth of seeds? What happens to a plant when there is no water? What happens to you when you turn away from Jesus? You can also make a "Bloom Where You Are Planted" banner or collage. Read Psalm 150 with the children.

Another variation of this plant-and-water theme is to have a potted, blooming flower, a plastic one and a cut flower. Ask, "What are the differences among the three?" "One has roots," a child may answer. Expand on the idea that we all need to be rooted in something, in someone. Jesus can be our soil, our strength.

EASTER LETTERS

In Sweden children in odd disguises go around on Easter Eve with a special kind of greeting. This is the *Pask brev*, or Easter letter, which takes the form of a folded paper adorned with drawings and the words *Glad Pask* (Happy Easter). The most popular subject for the drawings is a witch flying on a broomstick. (This is because the witches of Sweden are traditionally supposed to fly to Blackula or some other meeting place at Easter, there to hold conference with the devil.) The children push these letters through the mail slots in their friends' houses, and then they let off fire crackers and

other fireworks in the street.

Invite your students to write "Happy Easter" letters to their parents and/or other family members. If you have time allow them also to write Easter notes to school personnel, expressing thanks for all the things they do in the school and parish.

LIGHTS AND FIRES

Since Jesus is the light of the world, use Easter time to teach that message. Have a good light bulb, a burned-out one, and a defective filament on a table. Why does one work and the other not? Can you tell just by looking which one won't work? Outward appearance is the same, but something inside isn't right. Show the filament and explain how one broken part affects the entire bulb. It is the same way with us. You cannot look at someone and tell what they are really like inside. Do they shine? You can tell that by their actions. "You will know we are Christians by our love."

The paschal candle represents the light of Christ upon earth after his resurrection. Five grains of blessed incense are set in the stem of the candle to represent the five wounds of the crucified Christ. Before he lights the candle, the priest or deacon sings of the mystery of the light which comes out of darkness.

In Germany people traditionally burn bonfires on Easter Eve. These are lit in churchyards and on hilltops, where the young people gather round, dancing and singing joyfully. Some light straw wheels from their flames and set them rolling down the hill towards the fields. It is thought that such fields will become especially fruitful in the following year. In Bavaria this ceremony is called "burning the Easter man."

Discuss with your students the blessing of the new fire performed during the Easter Vigil liturgy on Holy Saturday. This ceremony is one of the most dramatic during the Vigil. Some parishes even light the fire outside. Ask the children to discover how this blessing will be done in their parishes. □

Jo Fredell Higgins, educator and artist, has recently returned from Belfast, Ireland, where she lived for a year while writing a book about Irish families.

Photos: Patrick McInerney

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