

## Sermon on Revelation 21, Easter 2006.04.16

*The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

Dear Congregation,

There is hardly any other time of the year for which people have invented so many different rituals than Easter. We all know about the Easter eggs and the Easter Bunny. But do we know where this comes from?

In many different religions and until today in almost all Christian denomination eggs represent life. From a seemingly dead thing like an egg, a bird comes out, and that has become an illustration for what happens at Easter: Life comes from death.

The Catholic Church counted the eggs among the meat which you were not allowed to eat in the time of lent, the seven weeks before Easter. Since most of the people were farmers anyway and had chicken and hens, they could not avoid ending up with many eggs laid in those seven weeks. To preserve them, they boiled them or laid them in saltwater. Those eggs were either given away as a present when Easter arrived, they were eaten after they had been blessed with other things for the Easter breakfast by the priest in the church or they were used to pay back a debt, because they represented some kind of value which has been saved during these weeks before Easter.

But that was not as harmless as it sounds. In the Heidelberg Dissertation of the year 1682 the Lutheran Physician Johannes Richier, titled “De ovis paschalibus” – On Easter eggs – he is providing documentation of many cases where people have eaten too many eggs and therefore had become severely sick with stomach and bowel problems. Some eggs were not properly preserved and people had died after they have eaten quite many of the contaminated eggs. One man tried to swallow a whole egg, but, as Richier writes “...the egg was too big and his throat too small, therefore he suffocated and died.”

But the solution came in form of the ‘Easter Bunny’, which was a Lutheran invention. The Lutheran did not like the blessing and later decorating of eggs in the Catholic tradition and were, as we had heard concerned about the over consumption of eggs and were critical that saving eggs would be understood as a good deed, which in the Lutheran faith does not make you a better person, since you are a sinner anyway and therefore needs to be condemned. Since we, as Lutherans are smart people we came up with something very intelligent: The Easter Bunny – what a brilliant idea!

The Easter Bunny lays and hides eggs which the kids are seeking outside. This became family fun in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is also recorded of the family of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the famous German poet and intellectual, in 1783, but they were seeking the eggs on Maundy Thursday, not on Easter Sunday. But the whole idea was invented in the cities, because the kids from the rural parts could not so easily be fooled; they knew for a fact that it was something else and for sure no eggs which came out of the other end of the Bunny. Together with Easter greetings the idea of the bunny spread national and later worldwide and became a big business like Christmas since 1932. So, the most of us grew up with that in our childhood.

There are many more things. I could easily go on for hours to inform you about all the stuff people do at Easter, from having big bonfires, to rolling burning wheels down the hill, playing Easter games, rolling eggs, egg-race, Easter laughter, Easter bread, baked goods in form of lambs, roosters, cuckoo, stork, ducks, pelican and even wolves. There are hundreds of different customs which differ greatly from region to region.

What do we do with all this? Since I am not an anthropologist but a Pastor, my question is not what those ritual and customs mean and where they come from, but this has to do with Easter? And I think I have a pretty good answer: Easter is a celebration where we try to find analogies for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All those rituals and customs have something to do with the life, the return of life and the joy about this. As

people we try to come up with all those little things which from the days of childhood shall help us to comprehend the obviously difficult to comprehend idea that someone comes to life again, which was dead. We use eggs and also the Easter Bunny – remember, that's the healthy choice over Easter eggs, as symbols of life. Life is stronger than death, life has victory over death, and life is enjoyable, because we do not need to fear death at all!

See, I understand that we need to make this a little bit easier for us to grasp. And most people also in our times do not bother much to read the biblical stories and certainly the whole thing with the empty tomb, the re-appearances of Jesus among his friends and all this does not make it very easy for modern time people, who want to understand and reason why this happened or, like the DaVinci Code why this did not happen. So some do not care, some do enjoy the rituals solely without any link to religion or Christianity and most people, even Christians have a hard time to accept the fact of a living dead person.

In the middle of all this I find myself caught as a theologian who wants to make sense of the scriptures and who wants to make sure that people understand that this is the most important event, not just a story which happened since we roam this planet. And may be, against the law of logic, I should tell you what you would be missing beyond the eggs and bunnies and decorations and certain food items

How would it be if Easter had never happened?

First of all, I wouldn't have had to write this sermon, because we would not be here this morning. There would be no Easter celebration, no chanting of the old Eastern tradition "Christ is risen" – "He is risen indeed". There would not only be no Easter celebration with all the songs we know and the people gathering for that happy occasion, there would not even be church where we could get together and no congregation, because the Christian movement which started in Jerusalem is based on this good news, that death is conquered and that someone who was believed to be dead is alive. - There would be no consolation of those who mourn, because I would not know what to say to them. There were perhaps some celebration of the life which has ended, but all we could say anything which gives people hope beyond the grave. An honest sermon at a Funeral would go like: So and so was kind and loving person, but now he's dead. And that all there is: We all end up in a casket, that's it!

We probably could still be religious and believe in a higher being, like many non-Christian religions do, but there would always be a problem to deal with our own insufficiencies, if there would not have been one, who died for our sins, who was brought to life again and who by his resurrection has made perfectly clear that we share the same hope of an everlasting life in God's presence.

We might be finding ourselves in the situation that we were not sure if we ever could please God and do things good enough to be allowed into the presence of God during our earthly life.

If there has been no Easter morning on which the women came to the cemetery to find out that Jesus has risen from the grave, there would probably be a sacrifice to be done on this altar, we would have to slaughter something or bring something to this temple to calm God's anger and to make sure that we are still worthy in the eyes of God or to avoid that we fall victim to the wrath of God. There would be a lot of insecurity included in the way we believed, because there were no final word on sin and death and heaven and hope.

See most of us take Easter for granted. We are so used to coming to church, to have a family lunch, to get together, having an egg-hunt, the usual stuff we do at Easter and very much enjoy; and I have no problem with that, because I enjoy that myself. But we need to understand that Easter is at the very core of all we believe as Christians.

After we considered what we would miss without the Easter events 2000 years ago, like we just did it may become clearer to us what a miraculous, life-changing event Easter really is. It is not just some celebration we do or do not do once a year. It is not just a family-fun-thing with egg-hunt and too much tasty food. It is a

reminder that we do not have to be afraid of death. That's what Easter wants to make us certain of: There is no death anymore.

I like to read the most famous passage from the last book of the bible, the Revelation, where it says:

*4 and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' 6 Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.*

Are we truly glad, that there does not have to be anymore sacrifice, any concern about whether we get to be in heaven? Are we thankful that whatever goes on in our lives in the end the love will prevail and all the bad stuff which we have encountered is over? Isn't that good news, that all pain, all suffering, all crying will be over at some point and there will just be a life in perfect harmony, perfected by God, made whole through his care, when we drink the water of life, of which we through this day, Easter, get a foretaste?

On Maundy Thursday we have been thinking about the fact that Jesus Christ is constantly knocking at the door of our hearts and the only thing we are asked to do is let him in.

On Good Friday we have been talking about the cross as a turning point in terms of being made righteous in the eyes of God through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Today the train of thought continues to this glorious climax of God's love which goes beyond the seventy so on years, if things go well, and which lasts not only for the rest of your life but and for an eternity to come!

I conclude my sermon with something a kid from the Before-and-After-School Program said this week on Wednesday after we talked about Easter and the encounter with two disciples with the resurrected Christ on their way to Emmaus – which we have been listening too earlier. We talked about the meaning of the Resurrection and he said it all in four words: "Jesus is the light."

I think that is the closest at the biblical meaning of the resurrection, and therefore I take a candle, light it and put it in this grave. Maybe this could start a new decoration trend which truly has more to do with the real Easter story than any egg and bunny. Amen.

***And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.***