

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 44 · 2021 · Pages 137 - 144

Resurrection Month

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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RESURRECTION MONTH

Claudia L. Bushman

Abstract: *We tend to have big events and a full month celebrating Christmas, but here we are in a very Christian church that has come to almost ignore the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. The Last Supper and the events that followed it are the important events of the season. With some planning and creativity, we can immerse ourselves in a Resurrection Month by thinking about the gift of life and promise for the future that we have been given, reading the old scriptures, and reliving the life and times of our elder brother and great teacher.*

I welcome this opportunity to say something about our Easter commemorations. The title of my essay, however, does not include that E-word, one I try to avoid. Instead, for my purposes, I will use the title *Resurrection Month*, two words that more clearly describe what I want to talk about.

We live in New York City and have been incarcerated, shut down, closed off, whatever, since March 11, 2020. When the interruption occurred, I had been about to begin a month-long commemoration in our New York City Latter-day Saint ward of the spring holiday commonly known as Easter.

I had a long series of wonderful Easters while growing up in San Francisco. I loved the beautiful music, of going to church with all its gorgeous flowers, and our beautiful sisters in their smart hats. My own family's celebrations included the stylish outfits my mother created annually for her four daughters — suits and coats and dresses resulting from months of consideration and planning and my mother's spectacular skill. And there were her wonderful Easter-themed layer cakes with coconut dyed green to look like grass, bunches of flowers made of colored icing, little nests of jellybeans, little mirrors that became ponds with ducks swimming on them. The cakes were delicious to eat, too. Those were wonderful Easters.

These activities commemorated the coming of spring and were named after a fertility goddess for whom holiday events were celebrated each April back into antiquity. That Easter, now featuring bunnies, eggs, and chicks, was the first traditional celebration in the spring. The celebration of the Passover when many Jews commemorate their flight from Egypt with annual Seder feasts was later layered on the spring tradition. The third and most recent chronological event added to the above two was the Last Supper, the suffering and the crucifixion of Jesus that preceded the resurrection which built, according to the New Testament, on the traditional Passover meal. Jesus gave it a new meaning by using it to prepare his disciples for his death. He identified the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, soon to be sacrificed and shed.

For many of us, this Last Supper, celebrated by Jesus and his disciples, and the events that followed it, are the important events of the season. The early Christians are said to have celebrated this meal to commemorate Jesus's death and subsequent resurrection, although the records are scanty. All of this goes way back, and I may well have some of it wrong.

We now measure time from the birth of Jesus Christ — *anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord — but that dating system was not even devised until 525 by Dionysius Exiguus of Scythia Minor and was not widely used until after 800 when the Anglo-Saxon historian Saint, the venerable Bede, used the dating system in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which he completed in AD 731.

The venerable Bede, who first wrote specifically and historically of these events, notes in his *Reckoning of Time* that *Ēosturmōnaþ*, an old English word translated in Bede's time as "Paschal month," was named after the Anglo-Saxon goddess *Ēostre*, in whose honor April feasts were celebrated. Bede is the source for the etymology of the word *Easter*, which is a "moveable feast" computed from a lunar calendar and has a sliding date. It has come to be the first Sunday after the ecclesiastical full moon that occurs on or soonest after 21 March, a complicated computation. That event was celebrated in 2020 on April 12 and will be on April 4 in 2021. The date of Easter was fixed by means of the local Jewish calendar, which seems to mean that Easter entered Christianity during its earliest Jewish period.

In Latin and Greek, the Christian celebration was, and still is, called *Pascha*, a cognate to the Hebrew *Pesach*, the Jewish festival known as Passover, commemorating the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. (The label *Christian* was first applied to the Christians in Corinth in the mid-second century. Jewish Christians, the first to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, timed the observance in relation to Passover.)

Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, perhaps the chief tenet of the Christian faith. The event establishes Jesus as the Son of God and is cited as proof that God will righteously judge the world. For us who are believers, “death is swallowed up in victory.” The followers of Jesus will also be resurrected and receive eternal salvation. But here we are almost two thousand years later with an important event named for a fertility goddess. Here we are in a very Christian Church that has come to almost ignore the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Much of this is a matter of timing. Easter frequently gets in the way of General Conference or our visiting high council speaker. It’s also a function of program and expense. Music has been much downplayed in our congregations in recent years, as have floral displays. We have few images of the Savior in our buildings and none in our chapels.

But it’s also a matter of emphasis. We accord the Nativity a full month on our calendars. We have big events for Christmas. I love the Nativity, but which is more important and significant — the birth or the death of Jesus Christ? I think it is certainly the latter.

I say that this situation is an example of Mormon optimism. We like good, positive things; we downplay the negative. We believe in the resurrection, but we pay little attention to the crucifixion. We believe in immortality but not in death. We believe in the atonement but not in the transgression of Adam and Eve.

I disapprove of these limitations. I think we are missing out on an important part of our Christian worship.

One day in late 2019, I engaged our bishop and noted that I thought we should do better with the death and resurrection of Christ. He suggested that I write him a proposal, which I did. The next time I saw him, he said I could call a committee and organize some commemorative activities. He said to keep him in the loop and let him know how much it would cost.

That was back in November. I called a committee of fervent and imaginative Christians, and we met many times to discuss possibilities and make plans. The bishop came to most of our meetings. Easter came on April 12 in 2020, so we decided to have our opening event a major concert on March 21, not quite a whole month in advance, but a lot more than usual.

Of course, General Conference came in the middle on Palm Sunday, a week before the big day. And of course we share our building with two other large congregations, soon to be three, which means our access to the building is limited by time and date, and of course our people are very busy. But we had three Sunday meetings to work with. We had some evening and weekend possibilities. We could collaborate. We could do

things offsite. We took on assignments. We worked together. We tried to be practical. We did not want to do too much. After a couple of meetings, the bishop agreed to fund whatever we came up with. We suggested, discussed, downsized, scheduled, and rescheduled for a workable program. All of it would be available to everyone, but nobody but the committee was expected to do everything.

Alas, it was not to be. Just weeks before our first event, New York City went into lockdown, which it still mostly is.

But I am going to take you through our planned program to give myself a chance to relive it and maybe to encourage you to do more for our most important ecclesiastical events. I think we need to acknowledge the pain and sacrifice of our tradition as well as our triumphal moments.

So what would we have done? Our first best idea was to do a one-page calendar, including half of March and half of April, with boxed squares listing our events. We would give this calendar out at our first event and at all subsequent events. That would be our schedule, and we added supplemental information on the calendar back. There we had dates, times, and places for special services at some of the great New York churches which stage spectacular events: St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Trinity Church, Saint Patrick's Cathedral, St. John the Divine Cathedral, and Riverside Church. We also listed the smaller neighborhood churches near our chapel. We listed museums with special exhibitions and collections and added the Easter Parade, Macy's Flower Show, and public Seder dinners. We listed significant cemeteries.

I wrote up a little pledge that ward members might consider during the Paschal season:

During this month I will try to

- ___ Be a follower of Jesus Christ
- ___ Invite someone over to my house or to a Church event
- ___ Attend some event at another church
- ___ Read the accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection in the Gospels
- ___ Consider my own life and future events
- ___ Write my will and my own obituary, research an ancestor, or visit a cemetery

I wanted a serious concert for our opening event. Despite the huge amount of talent in our area, we have no standing ward choir. We would need to draft one. I thought we might do a stripped-down version of

parts II and III of George Friedrich Handel's *Messiah*. Many of our good singers have performed it at some time. There are copies in most ward music closets. The Nativity parts are the most familiar, but it really is an Easter piece. We could get some of our excellent soloists to do notable arias, and our pickup choir could prepare four or five choruses. We could do "Behold the Lamb of God," "Surely He hath Borne Our Griefs," "And With His Stripes we are Healed," "All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray" (although that's harder than some), and "Since by Man Came Death." We would finish up with "Worthy is the Lamb That Was Slain," if we could manage it, and the "Hallelujah!" chorus, out of its proper sequence. We'd hand out copies of this last piece and sing it two or three times so that the congregation could be part of things. We could have our young people read important scriptural passages interspersed with the music. Maybe we could get the kids to memorize their scriptures. That concert with nice refreshments would be a wonderful kickoff.

We had three Sundays for our services, and I asked three committee members to plan each with talks and music. We wanted the Primary children to sing twice and the choir to reprise things from the concert. I strongly believe in wide participation as well as repeating music. Familiarity brings affection.

Our second Sunday was a testimony meeting, but we could add some music and perhaps direct the testimonies to the theme. We couldn't use slides or films in sacrament meeting, but during the second hour we planned a slide presentation and discussion of the life of Jesus Christ in art and scripture. This was prepared by a young couple with lots of technical expertise and art knowledge.

Palm Sunday, the Sunday preceding Easter, and the Saturday preceding it were out, as it was General Conference. But we had Easter Sunday itself with our best speakers and good music.

Then we needed something for the whole family — a kids' event, still on theme. We settled on a historical reenactment, an evening in Jerusalem with food, activities, and program. We thought of replaying the Last Supper, but portraying Jesus is forbidden (although he certainly appears in Church films). We decided on an abstract portrayal of events that stopped before violence. We would give out little bags of money to buy food and little gifts from stalls. We would sample traditional foods. We would have speakers rush in to describe events going on offstage. We got the cultural hall space on a Friday evening by inviting in another ward that had rights to that time. The bishop agreed to pay a significant amount for food, projects, and even for a cardboard model of the Tomb that little kids could go in and out of. It would have been a great party!

Early on we had discussed how we could put on a ward Seder or invite our families to celebrate such an event in their homes. But people on our committee were uneasy about introducing Jesus Christ to a traditional Jewish commemoration of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, so we dismissed the idea. Thinking again, we might, in Seder fashion, adapt the idea of telling a biblical story with accompanying food, games, scriptures, music and ceremony. A Seder is a feast that includes drinking, reading, telling stories, eating special food, singing. We can do that. It's the celebration of a sacred story along with a dinner of traditional foods and songs, and child-friendly activities that have religious significance and can be adjusted for the audience. Seders vary widely, so I thought I could adapt the idea and the form. I could tell any story I wanted to tell, substituting foods and activities.

I didn't come to this conclusion until recently, and I haven't written up my idea of a Christian ceremony for the event, but I would make it the life of Jesus Christ with ten or twelve little scenes, such as the Nativity, young Jesus speaking with the learned men, raising Lazarus, the Sermon on the Mount, walking on the water, healing a leper, driving out the money changers, etc. We could sing some of our Jesus-centered hymns: "Master, the Tempest is Raging," "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," "I Stand All Amazed," "Come, Follow Me," as well as Christmas songs, "Away in a Manger," "What Child is This?"; folk songs, "Green Grow the Rushes"; Primary songs, "Jesus Once Was a Little Child," and so on and so on. We could introduce brief games. The Beatitudes would make a nice, quick puzzle. We might act out the money changers scene and some good miracles, maybe even The Last Supper itself.

Traditional food is important at a Seder. Again, we substituted imaginatively. At our event we could drink cider or grape juice instead of four cups of wine. We don't need matzo, horseradish, gefilte fish, or chicken soup. I would try the traditional Seder favorite, *charoset*, a mixture of apples, pears, cinnamon and walnuts. Everyone would like that. It's supposed to represent the mortar the Israelites used in brickmaking when they were in Egypt. We could choose from other foods that might be associated with the scriptures, the Middle East, or with Jesus himself. I didn't want this to be too hard or too expensive. My menu would include a fish entrée; I would use canned tuna, just to show how simple it could be. We could even have tuna sandwiches. I just could not get my head around a nice lamb roast for the occasion. At some Seders the Pascal Lamb is roasted.

Heavy loaves of good bread could be made in advance by mothers and children. Bitter greens are served at Seders, and such greens as arugula, watercress, and even romaine qualify, along with a dressing of wine vinegar and olive oil, so we could add a nice green salad. We could also have little sandwiches of the bread with honey, fig, and pomegranate jam. A platter of olives, grapes, and dates, and maybe Fig Newtons would be popular; I would do a platter of deviled eggs as well for a little more protein. Such a menu would be easy and inexpensive. I thought that adapting and substituting were the way to go. We could develop individual traditions of our own. I imagine similar dinners commemorating the history of the gold plates or the travels of the pioneers.

But back to our aborted New York commemoration this year. On the Saturday before our Easter event, we scheduled in some of our ward activities, like the ward's annual Primary Easter egg hunt in Central Park. We added a special ward temple sealing service in the afternoon and got permission to do a little special discussion with the group. We added, in the early evening, a Tenebrae Service in our chapel, the traditional three-hour Good Friday afternoon event commemorating when Jesus Christ was on the cross, where people gather to wait out his flickering life. A committee member put together Latter-day scriptures to be read, interspersed with music and meditation. This service would feature some large candles (LED lights, of course) that would be slowly extinguished one by one. With the Savior gone, we would exit in the dark.

That evening we would be back to attend in the chapel the live broadcast of Handel's *Messiah* by the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square. It wouldn't begin until 9:30 EST, and it does go on forever, but many of us would stay for the last Amens.

The next morning at 7:00, a limited number would gather on the roof of the apartment building next door to the chapel for a sunrise service. Reservations were required for this event, because of space limitations. The sun was scheduled to rise at 6:15, but 7:00 was as early as anyone would agree to come. Instrumental music and a cappella singing would take place. The chairman of that event asked me to speak at that service, and I was planning to say how the resurrected Jesus first appeared to a woman or two women who had not recognized Him and did not until He spoke. I was going to talk about ways that death and resurrection might change mortals. That sunrise service would be followed by a festive breakfast in the building's lounge.

Some might manage a short nap before our final sacrament service at noon. Our excellent ward organist would play wonderful arrangements

of all the favorite Easter hymns, taking each final verse up a half step as he likes to do. We would have sermons that would bring tears to the eyes and resolve to the minds of our congregants.

That Easter evening would conclude with attendance at an Easter music devotional in the chapel, produced by our local stake and the Young Single Adult stake that shares our building.

I think that's about enough good events to help us participate in and remember our preeminently important religious event. We hadn't gotten around to organizing field trips to museums, gardens, and cemeteries, which would have added richness to the occasion.

And one of the events I had favored got cut early — a workshop in which we would draft our obituaries and write our wills, things that should be done. We would have forms and examples and helpful experts and also a notary who could stamp our wills and make them official. But we can do that another time.

So, due to COVID-19, our grand program did not come off. But I still had the best "Easter" season I had ever had, thinking about the gift of life and promise for the future that we have been given, reading the old scriptures, reliving the life and times of our elder brother and great teacher, meeting with brothers and sisters that I love and respect, and listening to their ideas. I have gratitude for all that.

It may happen again; I have some new ideas to explore. Easter, as everyone knows, is in two days this year, on April 3 and 4. Saturday will be General Conference sessions, and I have no doubt there will be some excellent resurrection addresses. Sunday will of course be Easter, but there will be room for other things, as well.

I wish you all a blessed season!

Claudia L. Bushman holds degrees in literature and American Studies from Wellesley College, Brigham Young University, and Boston University and is retired from teaching history and American studies at Columbia University in the City of New York. She grew up in San Francisco and has lived in nine of the thirteen original states. Dr. Bushman is the author and editor of ten books and was the founding editor of *Exponent II*. Dr. Bushman is married to Richard Lyman Bushman and is the mother of six.