



EASTER

CULTURAL RESOURCE

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I. Introduction

Without question, Easter Sunday, also known as Resurrection Sunday, is the most sacred day for Christians. Each year on this most holy day, we celebrate that Jesus gave his life as the supreme feat of love on behalf of all humanity, and we also rejoice that death did not have the final say over the life, lessons, and legacy of Jesus.

Moving beyond the empty tomb that marked the very first Easter morning, Christians have affirmed the belief that Jesus lives in the hearts of his faithful followers and, in turn, we have life everlasting in him. God loves us! Easter is nothing less than proof of God's love for humanity. It marks the continual process of God reaching out to us in order to be part of our lives. The promise that is fulfilled by Jesus on that first Resurrection Sunday—that God will be with us always—empowers us to endure the worst and best of times. Because this bittersweet tension of life is all the more intense for African American Christians, Easter has always had a particularly significant role in the black Church tradition by signifying that we were serving a God of resurrection.

II. The History Section

In order to better understand black people's contemporary appreciation of Easter, it is important to turn our attention towards the African role in designating Easter as a special day within the Christian tradition. Born and raised in Roman-occupied North Africa, St. Victor I was Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 189 to 199. As a pioneering historian of the early Church, Eusebius asserts that the accession of Pope St. Victor I occurred in the tenth year of Commodus's imperial reign.

According to Jerome, "Even though the church in Rome historically celebrated the Mass in Greek, it was Pope St. Victor I who originated the use of a Latin liturgy; this did not officially

become a widespread practice throughout the Catholic Church until the late fourth century.” Along with Pope St. Victor I, there were three other popes born and raised in Roman North Africa or who had mixed African-European heritage.¹

Despite the numerous contributions made by Pope St. Victor I, he is probably best known for his role in the Easter controversy. Initially, he attempted unsuccessfully to require that all Christians celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus on Sunday rather than in accordance with the exact calculation of Passover on the Jewish calendar. As unbelievable as it might seem, the first major schism between eastern and western Christianity started as a result of this debate over the celebration of Easter. As head of the Catholic Church, Pope St. Victor I ordered the bishops of the province of Asia to abandon their local customs and to accept the practice of always celebrating Easter on Sunday. Those who refused to comply with the Pope’s orders were condemned as practicing heresy and were excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote to Pope St. Victor I to remind him that, even though previous popes upheld the Sunday observance of Easter, they never went to the extreme of severing relations with fellow churches and communion with bishops because they followed another custom. Taking this counsel under consideration, Pope St. Victor I eventually reconsidered his actions and lifted the threat of excommunication against the eastern churches. After leading the Roman Catholic Church for a decade, Pope St. Victor I was finally able to gain the observance of Easter on Sunday by all Christians in the imperial capital and beyond.²

III. Easter and the Sabbath

Whereas Easter is most obviously the time of the year that Christians commemorate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, there is a particular charge and calling for Christians to embrace the true gift of Easter all the days of our lives. In many ways, Easter’s role in the lives of Christians is centered upon its power to help us rethink the very nature of Sabbath in Christian tradition. The Gospel of Luke recognizes the significance of the faithful, ordering their time in accordance with God’s redeeming work in the world; in the Luke-Acts tradition, the Greek word for Sabbath, *sabbaton*, appears well over twenty times. New Testament scholar Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder adds, “The Sabbath must serve not only as a period of physical rest but as a time of spiritual work and worship. This worship must also include addressing the political and social needs of humankind. Jesus is the fulfillment, the completion of this holistic ideology.”³

In the tradition of Hellenistic literary histories, Luke’s gospel, particularly chapter twenty-four concerning the empty tomb scene, depends on scenes of recognition, ignorance, and memory. On this point, Craig T. Mahan contends that the Gospel of Luke’s final chapter offers us “a dramatic conclusion to the gospel and [resolves] the epistemological tension stated in Luke’s preface, moving the characters (and the audience) from ignorance to knowledge of Jesus’ identity and mission.”⁴

To a great extent, the twin concerns of being hidden and revealed are the two major themes we encounter in the Gospel of Luke. Just as Jesus’ disciples express different reactions to his revealing God’s resurrecting power and discussing the nature of the Empire of God in the

rhetorical form of parables, so too can we add that Jesus discloses the joy of the Resurrection concealed in the Jubilee legislation of the law we first read in the Old Testament.

In a like manner, Luke delineates the conflicts between Jesus and Satan (see Luke 10, 11, and 22), Jesus and Death (Luke 9:27; 23), and oppression (especially Luke 2) in order to dramatize Christ's victory over all three. Therefore, Easter is the first day of the Christian Calendar year because Jesus Christ, our Liberator, who overcame sin, death, and the devil, is risen.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Our first Easter song is "Victory Is Mine." 1 Corinthians 15:57 could serve as its reference scripture since, as in this song, Paul argues in the scripture that our ultimate victory is not found in worldly weaponry, but in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Victory Is Mine

Chorus 1

Victory is mine,
victory is mine,
victory today is mine.
I told Satan to get thee behind,
victory today is mine.

Verse

When I rose this morning,
I didn't have no doubt,
I knew that the Lord would bring me out.

I fell on my knees,
said, "Lord help me please"
got up singing and shouting the victory.

Chorus 1

Chorus 2

Joy is mine,
joy is mine,
I know that joy is mine.

I told Satan to get thee behind,
I know that joy is mine.

Chorus 3

Happiness is mine,
happiness is mine,
happiness today is mine.

I told Satan to get thee behind,
happiness today is mine.⁵

The second song is “My Lord! What a Morning.” This spiritual proclaims that Jesus will return, just as he left, in his physical bodily form, on a cloud, and “wake the nations underground”—the dead—in supreme victory over the bitter cruelty of the grave (Acts 1:1-11).

My Lord What a Morning

My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall
You'll hear the trumpet sound,
To wake the nations underground,
Look in my God's right hand
When the stars begin to fall,
When the stars begin to fall.

My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall
You'll hear the sinner moan,
To wake the nations underground,
Look in my God's right hand
When the stars begin to fall,
When the stars begin to fall.

My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
My Lord what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall
You'll hear the Christians shout,
To wake the nations underground,
Look in my God's right hand
When the stars begin to fall,
When the stars begin to fall.⁶

Another well known Easter song is “He Arose from the Dead.” The legendary Texas blues musician Blind Lemon Jefferson wrote this song in 1927 under the pseudonym Deacon L. J. Bates. Although he is not as well regarded for his gospel song renditions as his blues recordings, all of Jefferson’s work sold well immediately, making him one of the best-selling “race records” artists of the time for his era. His high, eerie voice that lent itself to his having a somewhat “lonesome” howl, the desperate nature of his lyrics, and his complex guitar work were all considered to be non-commercial and, thus, not ready for mass appeal. Yet, it was these various elements of Jefferson’s signature sound that came together into his particularly raw and hard-hitting brand of the blues. Jefferson’s performance of this song is especially meaningful for the

ways it demonstrates the razor-thin line of demarcation that exists between the spirituals and the blues in the African American musical tradition.

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgEG1OV6F1w>

V. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text

Historical Lesson

Although we often think about the Easter holiday as a spectacular festival with all of our senses being dazzled by glorious floral arrangements, children reciting Easter poems, and decorations with resplendent colors marking the arrival of springtime, there is another sadder side to Easter in the black Christian experience in America. On Easter Sunday 1873, one of the largest and bloodiest racist attacks in United States history took place in Colfax, Louisiana. After a disputed election in which they had almost surely won a majority of the votes, local black Republican candidates had attempted a peaceful occupation of the Grant Parish courthouse.

Instead of waiting for the official results of the election, Christopher Columbus Nash, the Democratic candidate for sheriff and a former Confederate officer, led an enraged white mob in their assault on the courthouse. The white attackers were armed with rifles and even a small cannon as they laid siege to the outnumbered and outgunned freedmen and the U.S. Colored Troops—African American members of the state militia—gathered at the courthouse. Known as the Colfax Massacre, this attack was one of the most heinous racial attacks in this nation’s history. In the wake of the Civil War, the horrific events at Colfax sparked national outrage for a country still in the throes of overcoming its recent history of chattel slavery and inhumane treatment of black people. While none of the white Republican officeholders were attacked, no less than 150 African American men were slain by a well-armed throng of three hundred white supremacists who had no intention of ever allowing black people to advance towards full and equal citizenship. The ensuing bloodbath by the angry white mob was so vicious that most of the freedmen were slaughtered long after they surrendered. Later that night, nearly fifty black men were killed after having been imprisoned and tortured for several hours.⁷

To make matters worse, when the Colfax Massacre took place, the U.S. federal government had both the means and the mandate to protect those innocent black lives and prosecute the racist murderers yet failed to do so. On the heels of the Fifteenth Amendment’s guarantee that African American men had the right to vote, the first Enforcement Act was signed into law two months later with the intention of preventing both private citizens and government officials from willfully prohibiting or deliberately discouraging anyone qualified to vote in a state or local election from exercising their rights.

After all, what was the use of removing the word “white” or “slave” from the state constitutions of former Confederate states when their respective governments continued to disfranchise black women, men, and children by other means? In response to uproar caused by the Colfax Massacre, James R. Beckwith, the federal District Attorney, indicted and eventually convinced a southern jury to convict three of the murderers. All the charges were subsequently overturned on appeal; this was a landmark moment in African American history.

What does any of this have to do with Easter? Why not talk about sunrise worship service, all the beautiful lilies that decorate our sanctuaries, and Easter egg hunts that are the great thrill of little black children? Well, there are three reasons why such a terrible event as the Colfax Massacre should be recalled this Easter holiday. First, we must remember the brutal inhumanity of the white supremacists that slaughtered and terrorized hundreds of black men and their families in their efforts to demolish the civil and human rights of African Americans; such stories should never fade from our collective memory as American citizens. In our efforts to overcome the painful aspects of our past, we can never simply ignore that history as if it never happened, because that disrespects the sacrifice of those who struggled and died for the benefit of us all. Next, there is the *travesty* of the Colfax Massacre. Of all the days on which such a horrible episode could possibly occur, the white supremacists purposefully chose to wage this battle on Easter Sunday. Many of those hateful and belligerent white men probably regarded themselves as good, God-fearing Christians even as they took the innocent lives of black people who prayed to the God of Heaven on that Easter morning that today would be better than yesterday. Those black church folks never expected that very same Easter, April 13, 1873, was going to be the day that changed their lives forever.

This leads us finally to the *triumph* of the Colfax Massacre. Despite the horror and hate that prompted the white supremacists to commit such evil, hope was never lost! Indeed, those of us who are disciples of Jesus and children of God recognize that even in the history of such a painful episode as the Colfax Massacre, grace, justice and love always win! The concrete expression of God's victory is that there was an interracial ceremony on the 135th anniversary of the Colfax Massacre in 2008, to memorialize the event and pay long overdue homage to the fallen victims.⁸ Those who do not believe that grace, justice, and love always win need to know that more two thousand years ago, a bloodthirsty and politically motivated mob conspired with a vicious and callous imperial government to execute Jesus, our beloved ancestor and blessed savior, in the most wretched way imaginable; and yet for all of their treachery they ended up with an empty tomb!

VI. Making it a Memorable Learning Moment

- Have a public recitation of Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise," as one of the oratorical pieces for your Easter program.
http://www.metacafe.com/watch/1488148/maya_angelou_still_i_rise/
- During your service show a video clip from the movie, The Color Purple, where Shug Avery, Swain, and a blues band leave the juke joint that is located deep in the woods in order to walk boldly into the nearby church singing "God is trying to tell you something."
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7ZT5sajkys>
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQ8XkY6Too0&NR=1>
- As the congregation is singing, "Victory Is Mine" or "My Lord! What a Morning," the choir director could lead the people in marching around sanctuary or even the church building to symbolize the eternal triumph of Jesus.

VII. Stories and Illustrations

This year, many Americans will be facing a different reality as they prepare themselves for the Easter holiday. Typically, many of us only get excited about buying new clothes in anticipation of the glory and splendor associated with Easter festivities. In fact, in too many instances, buying springtime clothing for Easter is tantamount to bringing toys to kids for Christmas. While the activity holds no religious significance in and of itself, it has become embedded within the culture to the point where going shopping for one's Easter outfit as a youngster trumps any other defining memory about this most special holiday on the Christian calendar.

It is easily argued that second only to Christmas, Easter is the biggest shopping period each year for many African American consumers. There is obviously a long cultural history attached to people of African descent being beautiful, creative, and stylish in matters of form and fashion despite the abuses of slavery and segregation so it is not surprising that African Americans have the desire to "dress to impress" on special occasions. Having said all that, there has to be a clear distinction made between folks presenting themselves in the best manner possible before God as opposed to turning Easter worship service into a sanctified fashion show.

What happens when many black women, men, and children are being confronted with truly staggering economic times the likes of which we have not seen in roughly two generations and have to reevaluate their commitment to the rising tide of materialism as opposed to our devotion to our risen messiah, Jesus Christ? Whereas Christians often walk around during the Christmas holidays proclaiming that Jesus is "the reason for the season," we have all too often lost sight of the fact that **the death and resurrection of Jesus actually makes Easter the season with a reason!**

Now is the perfect time for African Americans to reconsider what Easter truly means to those of us who are both black and Christian in this world. We can reconnect Easter more seriously to the season of Lent that immediately precedes it. Within the Christian calendar, Lent refers to the forty day liturgical cycle of praying and fasting that prepares Christians for Easter. However, in preparing ourselves for Easter and the celebration of Christ's resurrection, hopefully we will not ignore the truly committed spirit of sober reflection and self-sacrifice that is to be modeled in our daily Christian witness. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was meant to liberate humanity from the stranglehold of sin and death. It certainly was not supposed to be an excuse to go on a shopping safari at our local department stores.

If nothing else, Easter is a time in which we are called upon to be more thoughtful about our lifestyles and more aware of how the Resurrection set us on a path in which sin does not have to reign supreme in our lives. Our prayer is that we stay focused on Easter as the *crowning achievement* rather than the *conclusion* of the Lenten season of prayer, fasting, and sacrifice so that we do not miss the deeper meaning of Easter.

VIII. Books to Enhance Your Understanding of Easter

- Van Sertima, Ivan, Ed. African Presence in Early Europe. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1985.
- Blount, Brian K., et al. True to Our Native Land An African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008.

- Costen, Melva Wilson. African American Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993.
- White, James F. Introduction to Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980.

Works Cited

- Sullivan, Teresa A., et al. The Fragile Middle Class: Americans in Debt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Buy Nothing Days. Online location: <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd> accessed 15 January 2009. A popular cultural phenomena where there are certain days, such as Black Friday, where some Americans choose to buy nothing in order to protest the consumer culture here in the United States.

Notes

1. The names of the other three African popes were Melchiades, Gelasius I, and Adrian. According to the records of the Liber Pontificalis, much like Pope St. Victor I, all three were from the Roman Province of Africa (the territory currently identified as being modern-day Tunisia and Libya). It has been noted that the conquest of North Africa by Muslims during the seventh century largely eliminated the prospect for another pope of African descent since that time. For more details, see Van Sertima, Ivan, Ed. African Presence in Early Europe. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1985.
2. Brown, Cinque. "African Influence on Easter (Ancient & Modern)." African American Literature Book Club. Online location: www.aalbc.com/reviews/african.htm accessed 18 January 2009
3. Blount, Brian K., et al. True to Our Native Land an African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008. p. 164
4. McMahan, Craig T. "More than Meets the "T": Recognition Scenes in the Odyssey and Luke 24." Perspectives in Religious Studies. 35.1 (Spring, 2008): 95.
5. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #261
6. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #195
7. Foner, Eric. Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877. The New American Nation series. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988. p. 437; Lemann, Nicholas. New York, NY: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 2007. pp.18-20
8. "Military Report on Colfax Riot, 1875" or "The Use of the Army in Certain of the Southern States." Cong. Rec. 29 May 1875. Online location: The U.S. Genweb project. <http://files.usgwarchives.org/la/natchitoches/history/shooting.txt> accessed 19 January 2009; Hogue, James K. "The Battle of Colfax: Paramilitarism and Counterrevolution in Louisiana." 27 June 2006. War Historian.Org. Online location: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/grant/peopleevents/e_colfax.html accessed 18 January 2009. For recent works that address the Colfax Massacre, see Goldman, Robert Michael. Reconstruction and Black Suffrage: Losing the Vote in Reese and Cruikshank. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001; Keith, LeeAnna. The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction. New York, NY: Oxford University Press,

2008; and Lane, Charles. The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction. New York, NY: Macmillan, 2009.