



## **CULTURAL RESOURCE**

**Sunday, March 23, 2008**

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**Lection - Rev. 1:17-18** (New Revised Standard Version)

### **I. Introduction**

#### **Easter Season and Calendar**

Easter, the annual Christian festival commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the most important observance of the Christian year. In the northern hemisphere, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal (spring) equinox. Thus, for Western churches the earliest possible date of Easter is March 22 and the latest possible date is April 25. In Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity, Easter is celebrated on a Sunday between April 4 and May 8, usually following the date of Western Easter by a week or more. In some years the dates of Western Easter and Orthodox Easter coincide.<sup>1</sup>

Easter is the central point in a lengthy season of religious observances. It is preceded by Lent, a 40-day period of penitence and prayer observed by many Christians. Among Western churches, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday, the last day of Holy Week, which immediately precedes Easter Sunday. The Easter Season lasts until Trinity Sunday which is the eighth Sunday after Easter.<sup>2</sup>

On Good Friday, Christ was crucified and our African American spirituals call us to witness:

**Were You There When They Crucified My Lord**

Were you there, when they crucified my Lord  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord  
Oh sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord.

Other lines:

Were you there when they speared him in his side...

Were you there, when the blood came streamin' down

Were you there, when they nailed him to the tree...

Were you there when he hung his head and died...

**I Know It Was the Blood**

I Know it was the blood  
I know it was the blood, I know it was the blood  
I know it was the blood for me  
One day when I was lost, He died on yonders cross  
Oh I know it was the blood for me

Alternate lines:

They whipped him all night long...  
They speared him in the side...  
He never said a mumbling word...  
He hung his head and died...

**Not a Word**

They Crucified my Lord  
And He never said a mumbling word  
Not a word, not a word, not a word

They nailed Him to the tree...  
He hung his head and died...  
They speared him in the side...

On Easter Sunday, we celebrate the Resurrection, light springs from the darkness, Christ rises from the tomb, and death gives way to new life. Easter Sunday is a joyous occasion because on this day Christians celebrate Christ's victory over death. To those who believe

in Christ, Easter also symbolizes their own participation in life after death, as expressed in the lyrics of this African American church song:

### **Ain' No Grave Can Hold My Body Down**

Ain' no grave can hold my body down  
Ain' no grave can hold my body down  
When that first trumpet sound  
I'll be getting up, walking round  
Ain no grave can hold my body down

## **II. Life Continues Beyond the Grave**

Singer/composer Ysaye Maria Barnwell, in her moving song When I Die, touches upon a core belief in the rich African American culture in the continuance of the spirit beyond the grave—and reassures us that it is all right to meet death because it is not the end...

### **When I Die**

When I die, you can bury me up on a mountain top.  
When I die, you can bury me up on a mountain top.  
But when I die, let my spirit breathe.  
Let it soar like an eagle to its highest peak -  
when I die.

When I die, you can bury me down deep in the ground.  
When I die, you can bury me down deep in the ground.  
But, when I die, let these bones take root.  
Like a tree that's been planted, let them come up bearing fruit  
when I die.

When I die, you can toss me out on the winds of time.  
When I die, you can toss me out on the winds of time.  
But when I die, let these ashes roam-  
Blow here, blow there - I know that they will find their true home -  
when I die.<sup>3</sup>

One who is blessed to grow up in a farming culture witnesses more clearly the cycles of life that come with being a life force on a living planet. Our African ancestors believed physical death was not the end. It was thought that one's spirit moved into and lived in a realm beyond the earthly plane when the physical body perished, but continued to sustain and strengthen others in this life. This African Nilotic proverb reflects this belief  
**“Youths look at the future, the elderly at the past, our ancestors live in the present.”<sup>4</sup>**

As in African beliefs wherein the spirit cycles back again and again, we see this pattern in the cycles of nature; those things that are living, die in the fall and winter, and rise again

in the spring. In a culture of farmers and gardeners, to hear the story of resurrection of one who died and rose again—is to be rocked in the environment around you that whispers that which dies does not stay dead.

### **Low In the Grave He Lay**

Low in the grave he lay  
Jesus my Savior  
Wait till the coming day  
Jesus my Lord

Up from the grave He arose  
With a mighty triumph over His foes  
He arose a victor from the dark domain  
And He lives forever with the saints to reign  
He arose, He arose, Hallelujah, Christ arose!

### **III. Memories: Easter Saturday and the Children’s Program**

As children in rural African American Christian communities, we were made to feel that our very existence was a vital part of the celebration of the Easter season. Our celebration of Easter came by way of the cross. The story came in the songs we sang about the cross as we prepared for our part in the Easter season. The crucifixion was an integrated part of a series of events that we began to prepare for within our families and in school weeks before Easter weekend. Easter Saturday was the time of the Easter Children’s program. It was the time when you first wore your one new spring outfit that had to last for the program and Easter Sunday church services the next day. My mother hand made new dresses for each of her daughters and bought my brothers clothes and new shoes and socks for us all. We were a cash poor family and my mother did not believe in taking things out of the store on ‘time,” she used the layaway policy which meant our selected new things stayed in the store until they were paid for.

My earliest memories of the Children’s Easter program were those I participated in that were held at Blue Spring Baptist Church. This congregation, located in Dougherty County, Georgia, had founded the school I attended for my first seven years. Our teacher, Mamie Daniels, the one teacher for seven grades in a one room school house, organized the Children’s Easter program. She selected the poems and taught them to us during rehearsals. This was when memory was highly prized and expected. Everyone got a poem from the two word texts of “Jesus Rose!” “Happy Easter!” which was for 3 and 4 year olds, to longer poems by students to match their memory capacity skills. There was always a good crowd. It seemed that the entire community gathered at the church to support the children’s celebration of Easter. If someone stumbled, the gathered community waited... and supported with applause for each child who came forward. We opened with a processional with candles singing what was my favorite Easter song, He Arose. It was upbeat, and we sang it with spirit:

### **He Arose**

He arose (He arose) He arose (He arose), He arose from the dead (He arose) 3X  
And the Lord will bear His spirit home

Other lines:

They crucified my savior and they nailed him to the cross...

And Joseph begged his body and laid him in the tomb...

The Angel came from heaven and rolled the stone away...

#### **IV. Additional Historical Notes on Easter**

Christianity started as a religious movement within first century Judaism, and it retains the first century Jewish belief of resurrection of the dead. Most Christian churches continue to uphold this belief: that there will be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of time, as prophesied by Paul when he said, "he hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world...(Acts 17:31 KJV), and "...there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust (Acts 24:15 KJV)." Most Christian churches also teach that it is only a result of the atoning work of Christ, by grace through faith, that people are spared eternal punishment for their sins.

Belief in the resurrection of the dead, and Jesus Christ's role as judge of the dead, is codified in the Apostles' Creed which is the fundamental creed of Christian baptismal Faith. **The Book of Revelation also makes many references to the Day of Judgment when the dead will be raised, as is indicated in the lection text selected for Easter 2008 for this lectionary.**

##### **A. The Spring Festival<sup>5</sup>**

To this day, as with Christmas, our highest Christian ritual season celebrations contain practices gained from ancient traditions. Many sources state that the word Easter comes from an older word, "*Eostre*." Eostre is the name of the Teutonic (Saxon-German) goddess of spring, who was honored during spring time when fertility was restored to the earth. There is a fable(in some sources attributed to Jacob Grimm, the eighteenth century writer and linguist) that has the spring goddess coming down from the sky accompanied by a magical bunny rabbit carrying a basket of painted eggs decorated in bright colors and pretty designs. In many cultures the hare or rabbit was seen as a symbol of fertility.<sup>6</sup>

Eggs as symbols of new life and fertility have also been an element in many ancient cultures. The Ancient Egyptians, Persians, and Romans, all used eggs during their spring festivals. In Medieval Europe, many Christian communities were forbidden eggs and meat during Lent. Eggs laid during that time were often boiled or otherwise preserved. On Easter Sunday, eggs were thus a mainstay of Easter meals, and a prized Easter gift for children and servants. The hare or rabbit was brought to America by German immigrants. German immigrants in Pennsylvania brought with them the tradition of baking in the shape of rabbits, a forerunner of the chocolate bunny and chocolate eggs. Orthodox Christians painted eggs red to symbolize the blood of Christ. Hollow eggs (created by

piercing the shell with a needle and blowing out the contents) were decorated with pictures of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and other religious figures in Armenia.

German Christians gave green eggs as gifts on Holy Thursday, and hung hollow eggs on trees. Austrians placed tiny plants around eggs and then boiled them. When the plants were removed, white patterns were created. The most elaborate Easter egg traditions appear to have emerged in Eastern Europe. In Poland and the Ukraine, eggs were often painted silver and gold. *Pysanky* (to design or write) eggs were created by carefully applying wax in patterns to an egg.<sup>7</sup> The egg was then dyed, wax would be reapplied in spots to preserve the color, and the egg was boiled again in other shades of dye. The result was a multi-color striped or patterned egg.

These practices live on today in Easter egg hunts and egg rolls. The most famous egg roll takes place on the White House lawn every year on Easter Monday. This tradition began on the grounds of the Capitol on Easter Monday, 1817 by Dolly Madison who heard about it being celebrated in Egypt for their spring festival on the grounds of the Pyramids. When Congress cancelled the event because of damage to the Capital grounds, it was moved to the White House lawn during President Rutherford B. Hayes' Administration in 1878. For many years, this Easter Monday celebration was restricted to White families. In response, the National Zoo Easter Egg Roll was organized for African American and other non-White families who were not allowed to participate in the White House Easter Egg Roll.<sup>8</sup>

## **B. Easter Parades**

After their baptisms, early Christians wore white robes throughout Easter week to indicate their new lives. Those who had already been baptized wore new clothes instead to symbolize their sharing a new life with Christ. In Medieval Europe, churchgoers would take a walk after Easter Mass, led by someone bearing a crucifix or holding the Easter candle. Today these walks endure as Easter Parades. People show off their spring finery, including lovely hats decorated for spring. This practice of new clothes for Easter has been like many other holy season practices, thoroughly commercialized.<sup>9</sup>

## **Notes**

1) "Easter Sunday." Encarta Encyclopedia. Microsoft Corp. 1993-2007. Online location: [www.encyclopedia.msn.com](http://www.encyclopedia.msn.com) accessed 19 February, 2007

2) Ibid.

3) Barnwell, Ysaye Maria. "When I Die." Online location: [www.ymbarnwell.com](http://www.ymbarnwell.com) accessed 18 February 2007

4) "Cycles: African Life Through Art." Indianapolis Museum of Art. Online location: <http://www.ima-art.org/cycles/> accessed 20 February, 2007

5) Bede, the Monk of Jarrow (c.672-735), was a biblical scholar who is considered to be the first English historian. Bede and Faith Wallis. Bede, the Reckoning of Time. Translated texts for historians, v. 29. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.

6) "Easter egg." Wikipedia. Reference.com online location: [http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Easter\\_egg](http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Easter_egg) accessed 18 February 2007

7) "Pysanka." Wikipedia. Reference.com online location: <http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Pysanka> accessed 18 February 2007

8) "Easter\_egg." Wikipedia.

9) "Easter Symbols and Traditions: A brief history of the spring holiday's celebrations." Online location: [www.infoplease.com/spot/easterintro1.html](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/easterintro1.html) accessed 18 February 2007