

Easter is a Season

This is a (mostly) true story. For the forty days of Lent, one congregation focused on preparing for the central event of the Christian year at Easter. Members took up new spiritual disciplines, they fasted, and they prayed. When Easter morning arrived, the church was resplendent in white lilies; the choir sang better than it ever had before; and everyone shouted, "Alleluia! He is risen!"

The next Sunday, the church was back to normal. No more lilies, no more white paraments, no more Alleluias. At the announcements time, the pastor stood up and said, "Well, now that Easter is over ..."

The good news is that Easter isn't over the week after Easter Sunday! In fact, Easter is not just one day; it is a season that lasts fifty whole days — until Pentecost. In the ancient church, the Great Fifty Days was a time set aside for learning about and celebrating what it means to live as a baptized Christian. The fancy name for this teaching was *mystagogy*. Preachers like Augustine and Ambrose took this time to preach on the Christian life, now that there was a new group of folks who had been baptized on Easter morning.

Today, the Easter season may still provide a good opportunity to focus on what it means to walk the Christian Way in the world. For those who preach from the lectionary, it also offers the chance to explore the postresurrection appearances of Jesus and wrestle with the question of what resurrection really means for our faith. In either case, the Great Fifty Days focuses our attention on our identity as those who have died and been raised with Christ in our baptism.

How can we recover the understanding of Easter as a season this year? By incorporating some of these ideas for worship:

- * Keep those white paraments up until Pentecost. Doing so will provide a visual reminder that this is not Ordinary Time but part of a longer season in which we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- * Consider learning the new musical Alleluia and using it throughout the Easter season. You may use it as a part of the Call to Worship, as a response to the declaration of forgiveness, or as a response to the Gospel reading.
- * During this time, clergy may wish to take up the ancient practice of *mystagogy*: preaching on the practice of the Christian life in the context of baptism.
- * It is particularly appropriate to celebrate the Lord's Supper during this season and to remember the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, with whom Jesus took bread, blessed, and broke it, "and their eyes were opened."

Ideas for celebrating the Great Fifty Days at home:

For preschool and elementary-aged children, Tomie dePaola has published a wonderful reusable sticker calendar, "The Garden of the Good Shepherd," to help celebrate the season of Easter. Each day has a sticker to place on the calendar, a Scripture passage to read, and a brief reflection on a major symbol of the Christian faith (such as the shepherd and the sheep, the wolf and the lamb, and the banquet table). This calendar can be used at home or, with some adaptation, in the context of a Sunday school class. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000. ISBN 1-56854-362-x. \$19.95.)

In the lovely little volume *Lent and Easter: Prayer at Home*, Roman Catholic priest Mark Boyer presents suggestions for individual, family, or small group prayer for the seasons of Lent and Easter. Each section has several short chapters (for a total of fifty-nine) focused on specific themes appropriate to the liturgical season. Each chapter includes a Scripture verse, a brief reflection, a question for meditation, a prayer (taken from the Psalms), and questions to prompt memories. Boyer suggests that the reader use the meditation and memory questions for personal journal keeping; they would also be suitable for discussion around a family dinner table or in a small group. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2002. ISBN 0-87793-971-3. \$8.95.)

Consider adopting a simplified version of morning or evening prayer, as outlined in the *Book of Common Worship* (pp. 491–543) for the Easter season. Who knows? Once you get in the habit, you may even continue the practice once Pentecost has passed!

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