

MY LIFE

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SECTION C

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CHRISTIANITY'S HOLIEST DAY



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Exploring the mysteries of *Easter*



NICK THOMAS
ALONG THESE LINES

A few facts can clear up most of the confusion

As a child, I couldn't understand why Easter never fell on the same day each year like Thanksgiving, Christmas or Squirrel Appreciation Day (Jan. 21, in case you want to store some nuts for next year).

On top of that, there was all the hype about eggs and rabbits. Rabbits! Was that why Easter hopped all over the

spring calendar from year to year?

There's an old story that also illustrates the mystery of Christianity's holiest day.

A Sunday school teacher asked her class about the origin of Easter.

"It's opening day for the Yankees and Giants," said one boy.

"No," said a girl, "It's when

we get nice new clothes and go find eggs from the Easter Bunny."

"No, you're both wrong," added another boy. "After Jesus died on the cross, some of his friends buried him in a tomb called a sepulcher. And three days later he arose, opened the door of the tomb, and stepped out."

"Yes, yes," said the teacher, "go on!"

"And if he sees his shadow," added the boy, "we'll have six

more weeks of bad weather."

That tale would have only added to my Easter confusion as a child because I probably would have believed it. I was quite gullible.

How gullible? I remember, one year, some kid telling me that during Lent — the period leading up to Easter — we were morally obliged to lend money to friends who asked for it. So when the kid asked, I

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lent.

But as he later informed me, if you neglected to ask for your money back before Easter Sunday, you lost it.

I lost it. Was it just coincidence that Easter usually fell a few weeks on either side of April Fools' Day?

My parents were not much help, either. They told me Easter fell on different days because it was "the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon following the

Northern Hemisphere's vernal equinox."

That didn't make much sense to a 7-year-old, so perhaps they were pulling a fast one, too.

But it turned out my folks were correct, according to the Rev. Mark E. Waldo Jr., minister at St. Michael & All Angels' Episcopal Church in Millbrook.

"Unlike Christmas Day, which is associated with a particular date on the calendar, Easter is based on the lunar calendar," he explained. "Technically, Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the spring

equinox; never earlier than March 22 or later than April 25."

This year, Easter is relatively early (March 31), which means churches holding sunrise Easter Vigil services outdoors might begin in darkness. But that, Waldo said, can heighten the spiritual experience.

"Our service begins with the lighting of the Easter bonfire at 6 a.m.," he said. "The sun is due to rise around 6:35 a.m. It's probably the most beautiful service of the year."

The association of Easter with rabbits was another childhood mys-

tery — where was the religious connection? After all, the Bible makes no mention of rabbits as burnt offerings; there's no reference to a Passover Bunny; and multitudes aren't fed with five loaves and two hares.

Eventually I learned that the Easter Bunny predates Christian times and was part of spring festivals held by ancient civilizations to honor pagan gods. And since rabbits were known for their prodigious reproduction, they were natural symbols of rebirth and new life.

The other odd Easter concept was the connec-

tion between rabbits and eggs. Rabbits don't lay eggs, no matter how much you encourage them. Reptiles do, but clearly the idea of an Easter Snapping Turtle never caught on.

The rabbit-egg association dates back to Europe centuries ago when children believed a magical rabbit laid eggs for them in the grass. As for the tradition of coloring eggs, it's also ancient, possibly to symbolize the end of the Lenten season.

This brings to mind an old Martha Stewart TV segment where the lifestyle guru claimed that

feeding chickens with colored fruits or vegetables could produce colored eggs.

"Interesting," I remember thinking at the time, as I raced out the door to buy beet juice to test the theory on our own hens.

"Still gullible, huh?" mocked my wife, pointing out on my return that the show was broadcast on April 1.

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