

An Excerpt from Surprised by Hope by N.T. Wright

For a start, consider Easter Day itself. It's a great step forward that many churches now hold Easter vigils, as the Orthodox Church has always done, but in many cases they are still too tame by half. Easter is about the wild delight of God's creative power . . . . . we ought to shout Alleluias instead of murmuring them; we should light every candle in the building instead of only some; we should give every man, woman, child, cat, dog and mouse in the place a candle to hold; we should have a real bonfire; and we should splash water about as we renew our baptismal vows. Every step back from that is a step toward an ethereal or esoteric Easter experience, and the thing about Easter is that it is neither ethereal nor esoteric. It's about the real Jesus coming out of the real tomb and getting God's real new creation under way.

But my biggest problem starts on Easter Monday. I regard it as absurd and unjustifiable that we should spend forty days keeping Lent, pondering what it means, preaching about self-denial, being at least a little gloomy, and then bringing it all to a peak with Holy Week, which in turn climaxes in Maundy Thursday and Good Friday . . . and then, after a rather odd Holy Saturday, we have a single day of celebration.

All right, the Sundays after Easter still lie within the Easter Season. We still have Easter readings and hymns during them. But Easter week itself ought not to be the time when all the clergy sigh with relief and go on holiday. It ought to be an eight-day festival, with champagne served after Morning Prayer or even before, with lots of alleluias and extra hymns and spectacular anthems. Is it any wonder people find it hard to believe in the resurrection of Jesus if we don't throw our hats in the air? Is it any wonder we find it hard to live the resurrection if we don't do it exuberantly in our liturgies? Is it any wonder the world doesn't take much notice if Easter is celebrated as simple the one-day happy ending tacked onto forty days of fasting and gloom? It's long overdue that we took a hard look at how we keep Easter in the Church, at home, in our personal lives, right through the system. And if it means rethinking some cherished habits, well, maybe it's time to wake up. That always comes as a surprise.

And while we're about it, we might write some more good Easter hymns and take care to choose the many good ones already written that celebrate what Easter really is rather than treating it as simply our ticket to a blissful life hereafter. Interestingly, most of the good Easter hymns turn out to be from the early church and most of the bad ones from the nineteenth century. But we should be taking steps to celebrate Easter in creative new ways: in art, literature, children's games, poetry, music, dance, festivals, bells, special concerts, anything that comes to mind. This is our greatest festival. Take Christmas away, and in biblical terms you lose two chapters at the front of Matthew and Luke, nothing else. Take Easter away, and you don't have a New Testament; you don't have a Christianity; as Paul says, you are still in your sins. We shouldn't allow the secular world, with its schedules and habits and parareligious events, its cute Easter bunnies, to blow us off course. This is our greatest day. We should put the flags out.

In particular, if Lent is a time to give things up, Easter ought to be a time to take things up. Champagne for breakfast again-well, of course. Christian holiness was never meant to be merely negative. Of course you have to weed the garden from time to time; sometimes the ground ivy may need serious digging before you can get it out. That's' Lent for you. But you don't want simply to turn the garden back into a neat bed of blank earth. Easter is the time to sow new seeds and to plant about a few cuttings. If Calvary means putting to death things in your life that need killing off if you are to flourish as a Christian and a truly human being, then Easter should mean planting, watering and training up things in your life (personal and corporate) that ought to be blossoming, filling the garden with color and perfume, and in due course bearing fruit. The forty days of the Easter season, until the ascension, ought to be a time of balance out Lent by taking something up, some new task or venture, something wholesome and fruitful and outgoing and self-giving. You may be able to do it only for six weeks, just as you may be able to go without beer or tobacco only for the six weeks of Lent. But if you really make a start on it, it might give you a sniff of new possibilities, new hopes, new ventures you never dreamed of. It might bring something of Easter into your innermost life. It might help you wake up in a whole new way. And that's what Easter is all about.

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