



INTRODUCTION

IT'S NO CHRISTMAS

Does Easter sneak up on you every year?

About the time you start to see buds on trees and set your clock ahead an hour, you suddenly find yourself thinking “When’s Easter this year?” It’s confusing because the date hops like a bunny from one year to the next. Christmas is so much easier!

Not only is the date of Christmas easier to remember, but unless you sequester yourself in some off-the-grid cabin in the woods, there’s no way you can ignore Christmas. There are thousands of merchants who will make sure

you don't forget that Christmas is coming. They're counting on you to make Christmas a big deal every year.

Easter? Well, chocolate and candy sales might go up a bit but, thankfully, you're unlikely to find yourself too out of pocket – or enjoying time off work. There was a time when what we now call Spring Break was officially the Easter holiday from school. The week off from school was always synched with Easter.

That was a generation ago. Today, the school holiday is scheduled for a random week in March or April. Any connection it might have with Easter is purely coincidental. Children may wake up to find a basket with candy waiting for them. A few local restaurants may offer a big buffet or a special menu. But for most people, Easter passes like a light spring breeze. Unnoticed.

Because families often travel together during the spring break from school, the hotel chain Travelodge in 2014 decided to see what British children – who do get time off at Easter – knew about the holiday. You know where this is going, right? It turns out that nearly half of the children in Britain had no idea that Easter

was a religious holiday. A third of them said that Easter celebrates the birth of the Easter Bunny. Another 25% thought Easter is somehow connected to the invention of the chocolate egg. As for going to church on Easter, 37% of parents in the UK said they would be taking a holiday at the beach instead of taking children to an Easter service at church.

If Christmas is MVP of holidays, Easter is the overlooked bench player. Of course, the irony is that without Easter, there would be no Christmas. The two holidays are joined at the hip. They are the pillars of Christianity. Christmas is about the birth of Jesus Christ. Easter is about his death and the subsequent reports of a resurrection after his body had been interred in a crypt in Jerusalem.

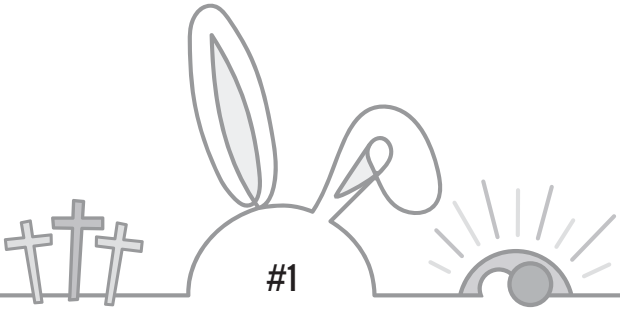
If Jesus' life had ended with his arrest and execution, virtually no one today would know anything about him. We'd know nothing about his birth and no details of his life. He would be a footnote in the history of the Jewish people – a Rabbi who preached about love and forgiveness and reportedly performed miracles

while attracting a small band of followers. Then died. End of story.

But when the news started to spread that this Rabbi had died and then somehow had come back to life again, people took note. The reports of this miracle spread throughout the Roman Empire. And because the news was received and believed by many, we have a holiday that still shows up on our calendar every spring all these centuries later.

Easter may not capture the attention of the culture the way Christmas does, but you have to admit the holiday has demonstrated staying power.

And yet, like the British school children who took the Travelodge survey, there are a lot of us who don't know much about Easter. Fear not! By the end of this little book, you'll have twelve facts under your belt ready for any Travelodge survey that comes your way.



THE EASTER BUNNY WAS A LITTLE LATE TO THE PARTY

German Lutherans were apparently the first to imagine a giant Easter Bunny back in the 17th century – a tall rabbit carrying his Easter basket and dispensing eggs and candy to good girls and boys. He was kind of springtime Santa Claus with floppy ears and a cotton tail. In German folklore, it’s the Easter Bunny who hides the eggs and delivers the Easter baskets on Easter eve.

It wasn’t until the 20th century that the Easter Bunny was given a proper name. After cowboy singer Gene Autry scored a hit with “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer” and “Here Comes

Santa Claus,” he turned his attention to Easter. He recorded “Here Comes Peter Cottontail” in 1950, and it peaked at number 3 on the country songs chart, further establishing the Easter Bunny’s reputation as central to the holiday.

But of course, Easter didn’t originate with the Easter Bunny. To really score points on an Easter knowledge test you have to dive all the way back to the 1st century AD and to Roman-occupied Jerusalem. The Jewish people flocked to the capital each year to celebrate Passover, the festival remembering their escape from enslavement in Egypt many centuries earlier.

One particular year, sometime between AD 30 and AD 33, Jerusalem was in a frenzy. A popular local preacher and miracle worker had entered the capital a few days earlier to cheering crowds, but tension ran deep. The religious leaders had long hated Jesus of Nazareth and suddenly everything came to a head as one of Jesus’ closest friends offered to sell him out. Within days the crowds were shouting “Crucify!” Jesus was put to death on the day we now call Good Friday.

While the exact year of his crucifixion isn't settled, the timing of the event is documented. On the first day of the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross and executed for sedition. And according to the biblical record, on the following Sunday, the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid after his execution was found to be empty. For hundreds of years before anyone had thought to dress up as a bunny, Christians were celebrating Jesus Christ's return to life following a brutal death. That's Easter in a nutshell.

For those who saw and spoke to and touched and ate meals with the risen Jesus, the resurrection was the confirmation that Jesus was not just a good moral teacher or even a miracle worker. The resurrection of Jesus convinced them that their friend was both Savior and Lord, and they worshiped him as Christians have been doing ever since.

The death of Jesus occurred during the Jewish Feast of the Passover, a festival remembering the time when God set his people free from slavery in Egypt. To avoid the punishment of God back in Egypt, a lamb was sacrificed. Immediately

links were drawn between the Passover and Jesus' death. Jesus himself told his followers that rather than a lamb being sacrificed for them, he would be sacrificed on the cross. To save people, Jesus died – keep reading for more on that!

Early Christians wanted to draw the connection between the ancient Jewish Feast of the Passover and the death and resurrection of Jesus. They called this new annual resurrection celebration the Pascha, or the Christian Passover. And 2,000 years later we have Easter, complete with the Easter Bunny and Creme Eggs (read on to see how on earth they fit in!), but Jesus still remains central to it all.