

Seven Ways to Celebrate Easter Patricia M. Robertson

(First published in St. Anthony Messenger, April 2019)

Why is it so hard for some people to maintain a spirit of celebration? I ask this, knowing I am one such person. I find the struggles of everyday life and the penitence of the Lenten season easier than seven weeks of Easter celebration. As a lay minister, I would spend hours focused on programs and activities for Lent, then collapse the day after Easter. One day of celebration was all I could handle. Who can keep up a party atmosphere that long? Who can keep up the Easter spirit for seven weeks? And yet that is what the church asks of us each year. We spend six weeks of Lent getting ready for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. Then we are to spend seven weeks celebrating this important season. Many, like me, fail miserably.

That is why I gave myself the challenge to focus on how to keep the Easter spirit all seven weeks until Pentecost. It was hard not to fall back into Lenten struggles or shift ahead into the ordinary. I struggled to come up with ideas. Through it I came up with seven ways to keep focused on Easter, one for each week of the season.

Week 1 – Decorate for the Season!

Eggs are symbols of new life. As a child I loved the tradition of coloring Easter Eggs. However, with four siblings, if mom hard-boiled two dozen eggs, that only gave us each four or five eggs to color. I would take time trying to create the most amazing designs and colors, only to have my masterpieces cracked and gone in a day or two as Mom made egg salad and came up with other ways to use the eggs.

Then Mom heard about blowing out the inside of the egg, leaving the shell to be decorated. All Lent, whenever she made cookies or cake or anything requiring eggs, she would enlist our aid to blow out the whites and yellow inside. Using a needle she poked a hole in the top and bottom, trying to break the yolk as she did to make it come out easier. We would blow until our cheeks hurt and all that was left was an empty shell. By Holy Saturday we had several dozen eggs to decorate.

Mom sent us outside to get a small tree branch with lots of twigs, threaded the eggs, and we hung them on the branches, creating an Easter Egg tree. As our collection of Easter Eggs grew, Mom would use the extras to fill a glass basket and place it on the table as a centerpiece thus filling our house with new life. At the end of Easter, the eggs were carefully packed away until next Easter.

I didn't continue this tradition with my children, and I continue to be lax in my decorations. Easter comes and goes before I know it each year despite my good intentions. However, if this one fails, there's other ways to celebrate the Easter season.

What Easter memory do you have that you can share with your family?

Week Two – Read Acts of the Apostles

Acts of the Apostles rocks! Full of adventure with fearless heroes with magical powers! During the Easter season, readings from the Old Testament are replaced by readings from Acts of the Apostles as we focus on the early church.

The early years of Christianity were a roller coaster ride. First there were those post Resurrection appearances of Jesus as Jesus slipped in and out, going through closed doors, walking with apostles on the road to Emmaus and showing up while fishing. Then, Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit in wind and tongues of fire. After Pentecost, the apostles had adventures of their own. They were fearless in proclaiming the faith which resulted in the apostles spending time in jail.

Read through the Acts of the Apostles. Feel free to skip over Peter's speeches and other speeches to get to the fun stuff. One man fell three stories from a window after falling asleep while Paul was speaking (Acts 20:9). Paul healed him and went on talking until dawn.

There were miraculous healings, multiple baptisms, times in jail and jail breaks (Acts 5:17-26; 12:6-11), the story of Stephen the first martyr (Acts 7) and the story of Paul's conversion (Acts 9) and ensuing adventures spreading the gospel.

You need look no further for an adventure story. Share the story with your children. It's better than X-Men and Justice League and gives them real-life heroes to emulate!

Who are the heroes of your youth?

Week 2 - Spring Cleaning

When I was growing up, the Easter bunny hid candy in our basement. This meant we kids had to clean the basement because the bunny wouldn't leave candy in a dirty basement. Thus, my mom got her basement cleaned and a jump on her spring cleaning.

I was not as successful as my mom at getting my kids to clean the house each year. I'm not a fan of cleaning but I do enjoy that first cleaning that comes with warm weather. I throw open the windows and breathe in God's good air, cleansing my mind, reinvigorating my spirit, redecorating my soul.

Spring is a time to open the windows, let in the fresh air, and chase away all of the dust bunnies that have accumulated over the winter. It's never too early or too late to open the windows of our soul and allow the wind of God's spirit to blow through. It's never too early or too late to allow God to clean or redecorate our conscience. So, celebrate the season by allowing God to blow through the dark and cluttered spaces of your spirit.

What part of your life needs cleaning to be reinvigorated? How might you do this?

Week Four - Remember Mom

It didn't really hit me that I was a mother until that Mother's Day after my twin daughters were born. I was now a mom with a capital M. My son didn't bring the total disruption that two additional babies brought into my life. That was my apprenticeship. One baby had been too easy,

so I needed the three to bring the reality home. Having three in diapers at the same time was the real deal.

As a child, I remember homemade cards and trying to come up with new ways to surprise my mom on Mother's Day. As a mother, I received them with delight, but also as my right. I had earned them! As a grandmother, I watch my daughters adjust to the world with a baby in tow, entering their own apprenticeship.

You don't have to be a mother to appreciate the mothers in your life. Spend time remembering those alive and deceased, our biological mothers as well as adoptive mothers, spiritual mothers, aunts or teachers. Even if the memories are sad, if your mother is no longer alive, there is a reason to pause, celebrate and reflect on how God is mother to us as well as father.

When did you first realize you were a "Mom" with a Capital M? Who are the people who have nurtured you? Who are you nurturing? How is God mother to you?

Week Five - Plant a Garden

Getting your hands dirty in God's good earth is good for your spirit! I attempted a garden when my children were young. I had visions of them assisting me in this endeavor, providing our table with fresh vegetables. However, they never took to the idea, leaving me alone in the hot sun, picking weeds while they retreated to the shade and played. And then, when the vegetables were ready for harvest, I had more than we could eat so I had to seek out neighbors willing to take my excess off my hands. I finally decided it was not worth the effort. I gave up my garden and waited for neighbors to share their bounty with me!

May 15 is the Feast day of St. Isidore, patron saint of farmers. We can learn a lot from farmers. They know their need for God. They plant seeds, pull weeds, then depend on the vagaries of the weather to grow their crops. They are aware of the importance of work, that a garden doesn't grow in a day but is the result of hard work, inch by inch, day by day. They do their work then wait for God to do the rest, a lesson for all of us.

Besides the benefit of producing food and flowers, there are physical and psychological benefits associated with gardening. Being out in nature and digging in dirt is healing to the mind, body and spirit. You don't have to have a large garden to benefit from gardening. A small herb garden will suffice. Or plant some flowers. I always look for the hardiest of flowers and shrubs for my yard and home, ones that thrive on neglect as I'm not the best gardener.

And you can start a spiritual garden during any season. Tend and nurture with prayer, kind words and good deeds. Pull out the weeds of jealousy, greed, envy, pride, vanity, gluttony, and unchecked anger. Ask God to water your garden with the blessings God so freely bestows.

Do you have a garden? What weeds need to be yanked out of your spiritual garden?

Week Six – Pray for Unity and Peace

Before Jesus went to his death, at his last supper, he prayed, "That they may be one, as we are one." (John 17:11b) He prayed for his church, for all of us who would come after him in

faith - a great prayer for unity. When Jesus appeared to the apostles after the resurrection, his first words were, "Peace be with you."

The early church at first experienced a time of unity, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." (Acts 4:32) This was a unity we can only dream about in our country so divided by partisan politics. It was a time of peace.

The unity of that early community was short-lived, as we read shortly after this passage about Ananias who sold a piece of property and only gave part of the proceeds to the apostles. Perhaps this is only a unity to be dreamed about, not realistic in light of our human tendencies. But if so, it is worth praying for and dreaming about.

Perhaps the peace we are searching for is as elusive as that unity that Jesus prayed for. All the more reason to spend time in prayer for both. So, as we await the celebration of Pentecost, it is fitting that we, too, pray for unity and peace.

Can you find time in your busy schedule to pray with Jesus for unity and peace?

Week Seven - Look Up

There's a story I read about a grandfather giving his troubled grandson a kite. The grandson asked him years later why he had given him the kite.

"I wanted you to have a reason to look up," the grandfather responded.

Amidst all of his troubles, amidst all of our troubles, it can help to look up to the sky and remember there is more to this world than what we are experiencing.

I never was much good at flying kites as a kid. As an adult I tried to help my children in this venture but failed miserably. But you don't have to fly a kite to enjoy being outside on a windy day. You don't have to know how to sail a boat to enjoy riding in one under someone else's competent hands. Or you can float a small sail boat on a pond. Or you can just sit and enjoy the breeze against your face or listen to the wind as spring thunderstorms break out, disturbing the quiet and electrifying the air.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles were left looking up into the sky. It's hard to feel down when looking up. Jesus didn't leave them alone. He left them with each other and the promise of God's spirit.

Seven weeks to Pentecost, seven ways to maintain the spirit of Easter. And so, we are left, gazing at the sky, gazing upon God's creation as we await the outpouring of God's spirit at Pentecost.