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Easter:

The day that changes everything

Editor's collection
for Holy Week

SEEN&UNSEEN

EASTER

THE DAY THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

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Easter: The season that changes everything

A Seen & Unseen collection.

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About Seen & Unseen

Seen and Unseen is an online magazine that offers an invitation to see the world differently. In a world often fixated on the seen, but blind to unseen realities, it offers fresh Christian perspectives on the issues we are all talking about. It includes stories, opinions, podcasts, cultural commentary, book, music, arts and film reviews.

It brings together voices from many mainstream Christian traditions to give new insights on culture, politics, history, spirituality, freedom of belief, philosophy and theology.

Seen and Unseen seeks to open your mind to new possibilities, to lift your heart and to strengthen faith.

www.seenandunseen.com

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Theology is Barnabas' second career. He first studied Computer Science at Exeter University and worked for the BBC for several years as a software engineer. Then he went to Regent College, Vancouver, to complete a Master's in Biblical Studies, then to Cambridge for a systematic theology MPhil. His PhD, also at Cambridge, uncovered the theological potential in Paul Ricœur's philosophy. It has been published by CUP as *Ricœur at the Limits of Philosophy: God, Creation, and Evil.*

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Graham Tomlin is the Director of the Centre for Cultural Witness, and Editor-in-Chief of Seen & Unseen. He was Bishop of Kensington from 2015-2022 and was deeply involved in the church's response to the Grenfell Tower fire. He is a regular contributor to national media, such as *The Times* and BBC radio, and has written many books and articles, both academic and more popular. He taught theology within Oxford University for many years before helping found St Mellitus College. Read Graham's other contributions to Seen & Unseen.

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Introduction

Graham Tomlin

We live in an age that is yearning for two things: Hope and Home. Wherever we look, whether at international politics, the state of the planet, or on a more personal level, hope for the future is hard to find. At the same time, many people are looking for a home. Some are refugees, desperately seeking a place they can put down roots, raise a family, earn a living in safety. Others of us just want a place where we can feel safe, at home, a place where we won't be shouted at or cancelled, where we can find security and comfort.

For Christians, the season of Lent, culminating in the feast of Easter provides Hope and Home. Lent disciplines us and teaches us patience for the joy of Easter, the feast that celebrates and focuses attention on the central Christian claim: that despite the worst that we humans have done, in killing God's son, God has raised his son Jesus from the dead, as the first tangible sign of the renewal and healing of this broken world that will one day come about.

Easter points forward to that new heaven and new earth, seeding an unbreakable hope in the hearts of those who believe that promise. It also beckons us home, to the God from whom we came and to whom we shall return.

Seen & Unseen is a website which seeks to describe the world through Christian eyes, showing how the Christian faith gives a richer and more hopeful vision of the world. It also offers a vision of home – a place where interested people can find content that is not aggressive, angry or hostile, but always respectful, interesting and generous.

This short e-book collects together a number of articles that have appeared on the site in the last two years on the seasons of Lent and Easter.

It looks at the relevance of Easter to issues such as the climate crisis, the chaos of an unpredictable political world, pagan spring festivals, why Christians embrace death, the tradition of western Holy Week art, and a survey of some of the great Easter films.

We hope it provides a good companion to this important season and opens up new horizons on this ancient festival which can offer the things our culture is longing for: a strong and grounded hope and a delicious vision of the home towards which we are beckoned.

When creation and justice converge

In a world of climate catastrophe, what does the message of Easter have to offer? N.T. Wright contemplates the hope of a new heaven and a new earth.

N.T. Wright

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https://www.seenandunseen.com/when-creation-and-justice-converge

What on earth might the Easter story have to say about our climate catastrophe? What does this ancient story mean to us today, who know that the universe is fourteen billion years old and that, according to the best predictions, one day entropy will have its way with our world, leading to the universe either cooling down as it expands or rushing back together as gravity reasserts itself: the big chill or the big crunch? And what more urgently, might it mean in a world where we have woken up not only to man-made climate change but also to frightening levels of toxic pollution, in our seas, in the atmosphere?

John's gospel is one of the sources of that ancient story. And the way the author tells it, gives us an answer.

Like Shakespeare, John does nothing by accident. The way the author introduces the story of Easter reaches far beyond the central fact of Jesus rising again from the dead. John's point is that with that extraordinary event a new creation is launched. And that means hope – not just for individual humans, but for all creation.

On the first day of the week, very early, while it was still dark. That's how John begins the story. Twenty chapters earlier, at the start of his book, he deliberately echoed the start of the book of Genesis: 'In the beginning was the Word.' He has told his story in a great sequence of seven 'signs', representing as it were the 'week' of creation itself. Now, with Jesus' resurrection, a new week is beginning: the eighth day of creation, if you like.

It takes everyone by surprise. At the time, many Jewish people had longed and prayed for God's new day to dawn, but nobody had imagined it would look like this – a young Jewish prophet announcing that it was time for God to become king at last, being brutally executed by the ruling authorities, and then rising again from the dead. The hope of 'resurrection', cherished by many Jews at the time, was the hope for all God's people to be given new bodies to share in God's new world, the world in which heaven and earth would at last become one. Nobody imagined that this might happen, in advance as it were, to one person ahead of time. But by the time John writes his gospel he has reflected long and hard on what it all means. When he says 'On the first day of the week' – which he repeats a little later, in case we missed it – he is pointing to the truth that Paul expressed when he wrote that 'if anyone belongs to the Messiah, there is a new creation.' With Jesus, and then with his followers, we see in microcosm that the new creation has been launched.

This truth, central to the early Christians, has long been obscured by the influx of Greek philosophy into Christian thinking. For Plato, and those Christians who looked to him to help explain their faith, the point of it all was not to renew the present creation but to leave it behind. They supposed, as many Christians do to this day, that the aim of the their faith was to go to 'heaven' after they died, where they would at last see God. But the central story of the Bible, stretching back into Israel's scriptures but focused now on the story of Jesus, is that 'heaven' was supposed to come to earth. That, after all, is what Jesus himself taught his followers to pray. The point was not that we – or our 'souls' – would go and live with God. The point was that God would come and live with us. The 'God' in question is the creator God. His aim, emphasized repeatedly in the Bible, is to renew his good creation, flooding it with his presence 'as the waters cover the sea.' That is the biblical hope, quite different from that of Plato and his followers.

St Paul insists, at the climax of his greatest letter, that this will happen through a powerful, convulsive, fresh action of God. All creation, he says, is groaning like a woman going into labour, awaiting the new world which is to be born. And he sees Jesus' followers as themselves 'groaning' in their present suffering; a majority of Christians in Paul's world, just like a significant number in our own day, were being persecuted for their faith, and Paul encourages them to see that suffering as part of the larger cosmic labour-pains. But then, he says, God's own spirit is also groaning within us, so that the new world which is to be born will come by the same divine agency that raised Jesus from the dead. In fact, Paul's claim could be summarized that way: God will do for the whole creation, at the last, what he did for Jesus at Easter. The message of the resurrection isn't just about God rewarding Jesus for his own terrible suffering. Nor is it simply about there being hope beyond death for his followers. It is about new creation – a new world in which we are all invited to share, not just eventually but already in the present.

Looking at the evidence, at the present state of the world, it might indeed seem that the promise of new creation is just a fantasy. But the message of Jesus' resurrection was never designed to fit into the expectations people already had. Everybody knew perfectly well that dead people don't rise. The Jews believed that one day all God's people would be raised because they believed in two things about God: first, that he had made creation and made it good; second, that he was committed to putting right everything that had gone wrong. Creation and justice converge at this point: resurrection and new creation.

But Jesus' resurrection, bursting into the world unexpectedly, like an important guest arriving several hours early when the family is all still asleep, adds another dimension to this. In Jesus, God himself has come forward in time to meet his tired and groaning world halfway. When the early Christians tell the story, they indicate that this is above all else an act of love: of rescuing, re-creating love. And that love invites an answering love, which takes the form both of faith itself and of allegiance, personal commitment. It takes basically the same faith to believe that God will one day renew the whole creation, flooding it with his glorious presence, as it takes to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. And that faith is awakened, again and again, as people hear the news about Jesus and realise that it is a message of love, the love of the creator God for his wounded and weary world.

With that faith, and that love, there comes as well a new vocation. If Jesus represents the long-term hope of God's people arriving unexpectedly in advance, in the present time, then part of the point is to equip people who follow him with his own spirit so that they can be agents of new creation even in the present time. That means a vocation to be small working models of new creation: to engage in advance in the tasks of creation care and renewal, and to encourage those working to address the major challenges of global warming and pollution. We are meant to bring into the world

such a measure of justice and beauty as we can, to model in communal and personal life what the creator God always intended and what will come to pass in the ultimate new creation. We are meant to be people of hope: not just people who are motivated by the personal hope of sharing God's new world, but people through whom that hope comes true in the present time in a thousand living ways, all of them anticipations of, and hence signposts towards, that final new creation.

Beyond pancakes and chocolate: a sensory guide to Lent and Easter

It's a time to discover the whole range of human experience and emotion.

Lianne Howard-Dace

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In the dusk light, I could just see the order of service in my right hand and the candle in my left. As the clergy processed from the back of the Cathedral, the smell of frankincense proceeded them.

Light was passed from the fire pit at the back of the building, via the huge pillar of the Paschal candle at the front of the procession, to tapers taken to the end of each row of seats. Then, finally, it was passed from person to person, as each of us lit our candle from our neighbour's. As a warm glow filled the huge room, I could now read the paper in front of me. Just in time to join in with the start of the singing.

It was the evening before Easter Sunday and I, along with 22 others, was going to be baptised that night. Having grown up in a non-religious family, I was not christened as a child. And so, aged 26, I made the choice for myself to draw a line in the sand of my life and commit to being a follower of Jesus.

I didn't realise at the time, but the practice of being baptised at Easter goes right back to Jesus' first followers in the early church. Of course, taking part in a ritual of rebirth on the day that Jesus came back from the dead makes a lot of sense, when you think about it. That service was the beginning of a new life for me in many ways, and also the beginning of a love for this kind of high-drama expression of church.

I love that there are so many different expressions of Christianity. Different ways of being together, of worshipping God and shaping the church gathering. Whilst I have tended to be part of churches that lean more towards contemporary music and less formality, I enjoy taking the odd excursion to other types of church. And for me, Easter is the perfect time to embrace more traditional – or "high church" - ways of worshipping.

The secular world has kept hold of a couple of the edible Lent and Easter traditions. Fair enough; I don't need much convincing to eat pancakes or chocolate eggs either. But I'd say that topping and

tailing this season with sweet treats, without the full spectrum of bitter, salty, sour and umami in between, is a missed opportunity.

Lent helps us to remember the 40 days and nights Jesus spent in the desert, when he was tested and tempted. It is a time to reflect, think about things in our lives which we want to change, perhaps even to ask God for forgiveness for. It is a time to dwell in God's word through the Bible and to fast. That's where the pancakes come in, to use up the sugary and fatty ingredients in the house so we aren't tempted to eat them in Lent. Though nowadays you're probably as likely to find people taking up a wholesome practice or habit in Lent, as you are to find them giving something up.

I'd argue that in the modern world we aren't great at thinking about death and darkness. We try not to dwell on the things we might need forgiveness for. Instead, we supress them and pretend they don't exist. We can move so far the other way that we fall into toxic-positivity; we deny the breadth of what it is to be a human in this world. That's why the symbols and rituals of Lent and Easter can be so helpful. They give us containers in which to explore the whole range of human experience and emotion. They give us permission to enter into the depths of it all.

So, after you've put the Jif lemon away from Shrove Tuesday, you might like to go to an Ash Wednesday service to mark the start of those 40 days of Lent. You'll find this service in Roman Catholic churches as well many Anglican churches and some other protestant traditions. The culmination of the service will be the "imposition of ashes", hence the name. The palm crosses from the previous year (more on that later) will have been burned and mixed with water to form an ashy paste.

Those present will be invited to come forward and have an ash cross marked on their forehead. As the priest does this, they will say to each person:

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

I realise to some this may seem quite morbid, and possibly eccentric. But if you can suspend your inner cynic, you might find that there is something rather freeing about remembering that we are made from dust.

When the writers of Genesis, the opening book of the Bible, wrote those words centuries ago they didn't know, as we do now, that the elements that make up each human were formed in supernovas. But they knew that we are intrinsically linked to God, one another, the earth and the universe. Remembering that I am dust puts things in perspective; I am only here for a short time and many of the things I expend energy worrying about are inconsequential. But it also hints at a miracle; I am a thinking, feeling being, made from pieces of billion-year-old stars.

Lent is time to ponder such mystery. As the season progresses, people may try to carve out more time than usual for spiritual practices like prayer and reading the Bible. If you give something up, you'll likely find the discipline of sticking to it helps focus the mind. It brings you back to the things you want to contemplate. I think the hardest thing I ever gave up was coffee; I did a lot of thinking that Lent.

Churches tend to follow the story of Jesus' last days on earth throughout their services in Lent. The last Sunday before Easter marks Jesus' final arrival in Jerusalem before he was killed. We read in all four gospel accounts that Jesus, whose renown had

spread by this time, entered the city to be greeted by huge cheering crowds. Many were said to be waving palms, which is why it's become known as Palm Sunday. Many churches give out crosses made from palm fronds as a tangible symbol of the story.

From Palm Sunday we enter into Holy Week, which runs right up to Easter, as the story intensifies. Many churches will have additional services during this week, which vary depending on the tradition of church and local habits. As a night owl, I am a big fan of compline, the night prayer service used in many monasteries and new-monastic communities. A couple of years ago I lived in an Anglican parish where they had compline every night during Holy Week. The compline liturgy – its format and typical pattern of words – helps me reflect and wind down at the end of the day. My delight in being able to take part in the service every day that week was only increased by the fact that several people each evening brought their dogs with them.

The Thursday of Holy Week - referred to as Maundy Thursday - marks the last supper and Jesus' arrest. The word maundy comes from the same root as the word mandate, because at the last supper Jesus gives a new mandate, or commandment to his disciples. He says "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

One of the ways that Jesus expressed this love for his disciples at the last supper was to wash their feet. Constantly wearing sandals or bare feet in a sandy environment meant frequent foot washing was needed in first century Palestine. Usually those of lower standing would be the ones doing the washing, but Jesus flips this on its head. Despite being their rabbi – their teacher – Jesus is the one who ties a cloth round his waste to wash his followers' feet in

an act of service. Often this is re-enacted at a Maundy Thursday service, with the priest or leader washing the congregation's feet. It is a way of trying to live out that new commandment, to love each other as Jesus has loved us.

A Maundy Thursday service often happens in the evening, when the last supper would've taken place. To acknowledge the sadness and indignity of Jesus' betrayal by Judas and his unjust arrest, in many churches the congregation will strip the alter of all its decoration at the end of this service. There may then follow a silent vigil, where people are invited to stay into the night, keeping silent watch, as Jesus asked his disciples to keep watch as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. The alter will remain bare and empty until Sunday.

That starkness suits the mood as we move into Good Friday, the day that marks Jesus' execution on the cross. Of course, we have the benefit of knowing the redemption and renewal which is to come when Jesus comes back from the dead, but I expect that Jesus' devastated followers would not have called it good at the time.

On Good Friday we sit in the pain of knowing that Jesus was taken by the authorities and violently killed. We come face to face with all the worst that human experience can entail. Hurt, anguish, desolation, loss. We do this not in spite of or in ignorance of the resurrection and joy to come. We don't do it to be morbid, or to wallow in pain for the sake of it. We do it because sadness and grief are valid parts of the human experience. And, because being a follower of the God who became human and entered into our suffering, is to remember that he died.

Services taking place on Good Friday will vary according to the traditions of each church, but they will be reflective and sombre in nature. Some will simply hold space for people to sit and reflect

on the magnitude of the day's meaning. Others will hold services which take in the fourteen scenes which tell the story of Jesus' death, known as "stations of the cross". Some churches have artworks depicting these on their walls at all times, others will put something up for the occasion. People may move around each scene – from Jesus being condemned to death, to being laid in the tomb – taking time to reflect, read the bible and pray at each. It is a way of recreating a pilgrimage to the cross and entering into the story of Jesus.

The comes Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. But it is not practiced with the same excitement as Christmas Eve. The anticipation of Lent is different to the anticipation of Advent. Whilst the joy of Jesus being resurrected from the dead is arguably even greater than the joy of his birth, we must – like too often in life – pass through grief to get there. Even though we have the advantage over Jesus' disciples of already knowing that Jesus will rise from the dead, Holy Saturday in fact represents where we spend much of our time in life. The in between. The messy middle. Knowing that painful Good Friday experiences happen in the world, whilst looking to the hope of renewal which Jesus promises.

Some churches, like the Cathedral I was baptised in, will carry out their Easter vigil late on Holy Saturday. Others will save that celebration of the resurrection until first light, beginning Easter Sunday with a dawn service that follows a similar pattern with fire and candles. Some churches will even eat together after the formal part of their time together is finished. I remember having to get up at 5am one year to cook the 50 sausages which were my contribution to the cooked breakfast we shared, though I did doze in the kitchen whilst they were in the oven.

Of course, the vast majority of churches will have their usual service slot on a Sunday. However many of these rituals they have marked in the lead up, each community will take time on Easter Sunday

to celebrate. Because the tomb is not the end. When some of his women followers went to cleanse his body, Jesus was not there. He rose again. It is this promise of death being defeated which we remember and celebrate at Easter. From the depths of darkness, we emerge into light.

My favourite part of the Easter Sunday service is when the leader proclaims "He is risen," and everyone responds with "He is risen indeed. Alleluia!" at the top of their lungs. Through the mystery of his death and resurrection, Jesus gives us certain hope that all people and all of creation will be renewed and reconciled to God in the fullness of time. And that's worth shouting about.

Pilate: a lord of misrule

Agents of chaos still inhabit our world today.

George Pitcher

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https://www.seenandunseen.com/pilate-lord-misrule

I've had a lot of Pontius Pilate in my life lately. And this week he's set to play arguably the second-biggest role in human history, as the Passion of the Christ reaches its climax on Good Friday.

The reason I've been spending a lot of time with Pilate is that I've done a podcast about him for Things Unseen, which sounds like a sister operation for this platform, but isn't. Its title was Pontius Pilate: A man like us and addressed the question "Was the man who sent Jesus to the cross evil or merely weak?"

I'm accustomed to Pilate being a paradigm for flawed human leadership – vain, indecisive, distracted, cowardly. A former archdeacon of London, the Ven. Lyle Dennen, had a very good stock sermon entitled "Pontius Pilate's Brother", in which he recalled that his elder sibling had played Pilate in a school play.

Consequently, the headmaster had made a habit of greeting little Lyle in the corridor with the words: "Ah, if it isn't Pontius Pilate's brother." It was an engaging way to develop the thought that we're all Pilate's brothers and sisters, collectively executing the Christ on a daily basis.

My fellow podcast panellist, the novelist and musician Chibundu Onuzo, was having none of this "Pilate inside us" stuff, making the case for his particular circumstantial weakness. It's a good listen. But it's set me thinking, since we recorded it a fortnight ago, a whole lot more about the local Roman procurator, the man who has history's worst morning at the office.

The veracity of Pilate's gospel role is hotly disputed. He's undoubtedly a real historical figure, as is Jesus of Nazareth, and his jurisdiction presided over the crucifixion of the latter. Beyond that, the interpretation of his scriptural role varies.

Perhaps it was written back, particularly in John's gospel, as a means of exculpating the repressive Romans of Jesus's death and putting the blame firmly on the Jews (with very terrible historical consequences).

If that is even partly so, we're invited to view Pilate's interrogation of Jesus in his palace allegorically; especially around Pilate's rhetorical question of Jesus, "What is truth?", when the answer is literally standing right in front of him and from which he doesn't even bother to await an answer.

So if this gospel section contains the kind of truth that the Nazarene's parables held, what is it meant to tell us? I've come to consider that there is a third way, a via media, between this being a verbatim transcript and a metaphor for his judgment by worldly authorities.

Before I left for a holiday in the Balkans early this month, I decided on a book to take with me. Should I re-read Ann Wroe's excellent *Pilate: The biography of an invented man,* in preparation for the podcast? No, I thought, there's plenty of time for that. So I took a novel I've been meaning to read for decades, Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita.

Alarmingly, it turns out that Bulgakov's novel has a recurrent deconstructive sub-plot of the fate of Pilate running throughout it. This was the sort of coincidence of which we're taught to be suspicious at theological college. So I paid attention.

The book's main narrative is a satire of Stalin's post-revolutionary Russia. Satan, in the character of Woland, visits Moscow to see how things are going. Death and destruction ensue, as Woland and his weird retinue cause havoc. Yet, along the way (spoiler alert), he reconciles a crazed and failed author (the Master) to the love of his life (Margarita), which is not a bad thing to do.

A lot of it is in the rather annoying style of magic realism. But annoyance is a point. The work of a devil in human affairs is annoying, but it doesn't have the last word, just as Pilate doesn't.

What I took from this novel was the darkness of chaos before the divine order that is brought in the act of creation, from which humanity constantly falls back into chaos.

Woland isn't really evil (he's quite kind to Margarita and may even be in love with her), he's just the agent of chaos, like Pilate. A lord of misrule, if you will.

We have many such agents of chaos in the world, from US and European politics, to Russia (again) and Ukraine, from Israel and Gaza to the famine of Sudan and the global technological interference of China.

Pilate, as he faces the mob bent of insurrection and baying for blood outside the praetorium, is an agent of worldly chaos too, a lord of misrule. But as Bulgakov's novel tells us, he can be redeemed.

The difference between him and us is that we have the benefit of hindsight. When we ask despairingly, like him, on all the Good Fridays that afflict the world, "What is truth?", we may not (also like him) recognise it.

But, unlike him, we have the chance finally to recognise that truth, as it stands right in front of us on Easter morning.

Life before death

Embracing death, parading it down streets, and even downplaying their egos, here's why Christians do death.

Julie Canlis

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Easter is not about the Easter Bunny. Easter is about the paradox that we all try to skirt: only in death is there life.

But Easter is not just about metaphorical death and rebirth, at least not for Christians. Christians don't believe that Jesus died for our self-esteem. Nor that he raised an Idea of himself. As Thomas Lynch, undertaker and poet in Midwest America reminds us,

"Do you think they would have changed the calendar for that? Done the Crusades? Burned witches? Easter was a body and blood thing, no symbols, no euphemisms, no half measures."

Christians believe that Jesus' body died. Ceased breathing. Flatlined for three days. And then (in myth-like fashion of the dying and rising god) this human being who lived at certain GPS coordinates, and had DNA from his mother, was given his life back. Not resuscitated. But resurrected. Yes, reader, Christians believe this.

Who are we without our bodies? When people die, Christians insist that their body isn't just a "shell" of the real person. No, their body still is the person. That's why cremation didn't catch on in the Christian west until recently, and even so, your local priest might turn up their nose if you want to distribute the ashes into jars to be divided between the grandkids. Often, as soon as a person dies, our impulse is to insist, "she's not there." This is because our culture is body-obsessed when we are living, and body-denying when we die. As Prof John Behr, a University of Aberdeen specialist in thinking about death, observes, we want to live like hedonists and to die like Platonists. Easter presents a counter-narrative here. Our bodies have meaning. Jesus' body has meaning.

In re-living the events of Holy Week, all eyes are on Jesus' body. And Jesus' body is doing some very physical actions – like healing bodies, raising bodies, touching unclean bodies, washing feet. And then it is his turn to have his body ravaged by arrest, torture, sleeplessness, betrayal, and execution. All eyes are not on the idea but on the body of Jesus. So much so, that they put guards at the tomb so that there could be no more monkey business about this man's body. It might seem peculiar to us that Christianity, infamous for its historically mixed relationship to the body, is centered on one man's body. Ancient Christians spoke poetically that the tomb that held Jesus' body became a womb. In his death, in the

absolute silence of death, Jesus chose to share dead-ness with us. That this was the essence of his "work." That his work could only be accomplished by surrendering, doing nothing – and that in doing nothing, he undoes the great "nothing" that threatens each one of us. Almost everything we fear, big and small, is somehow connected to a fear of death in one form or another. It is not death, per se, but the "fear of death" that enslaves us (says an early Christian preacher in Rome. And so, Easter stands at that pivot point between fear of death and life. Christians celebrate Easter as the day the world tilted. Where death no longer has the final say, but is something we can now use to our advantage. In fact, life begins to break in precisely through death. This is only because, as James Alison once said in an Easter sermon, "He entered into death and made it untoxic."

And so, strangely, Christians embrace death. We parade it on crosses through the streets. We paint it on our tombs, over our meeting houses, wear it on our chests. Because in embracing death (and the even more enslaving fear-of-death), we defeat it. Because of this belief, ancient Christians flung themselves at lions. They endured the agony of torture. They sanctified suffering. They also practiced small unnoticed "little deaths" of that great overlord, the ego. Not because suffering or death is good, or to be sought. But because death and suffering have been transformed into portals. Even in baptism, with oblivious babies being christened in frilly white dresses, we are dipping them defiantly into the waters of death and waging war on death. This is the mystery of Easter. This is why every Sunday is called a "little Easter" because even as we shuffle into that old stone church, something outlandish is being proclaimed. Death is not a friend, but neither is it to be feared. The worst has already happened. Now we can get on with living. The question is not "is there life after death" but is there life before death?

And here is the final kicker: Christian orthodoxy proclaims that Jesus still has his body. (Not every Christian would insist on this, but it has been central to the tradition for two millennia). Easter isn't just a mythical story of the paradigmatic victory of life over death. Paul talked about it as a complete reversal: that instead of death swallowing life, Jesus' embodied life swallows up all death. Christians believe that he is alive and well, in some kind of body ("transfigured" in Christian slang), pouring out blessing on all embodiment. This isn't a body that is somewhere floating above us in the clouds, but is an embodied person raised as their whole life narrative into eternity – as one recognizable life. Resurrection is not the hope of our joining Jesus in the clouds, but of this same raising of our whole lives into Life itself. This is called "putting on immortality" like a coat – where everything from our past (even scars, like Jesus still had) is integrated into one recognizable life.

This is the Christian hope of Easter, as we live in the interim, no longer fearing but using death for dear life.

Pesellino: making the vital visible

Great art doesn't just delight, it educates.

A gallery visit leads to learning deep wisdom.

Andrew Davison

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My favourite idol features prominently in National Gallery's new exhibition of paintings by Francesco Pesellino (1422–1457). I say that by way of provocation: I don't really think it's an idol, but that is how it was described to me – by a ten-year-old – in one of the best conversations I've ever had as a teacher.

That was fifteen years ago. I was in the gallery to give a theological tour, as part of a Confirmation class for Westminster Abbey. Half an hour in, we came to Pesellino's Pistoia Altarpiece. It's a glorious

painting, but I was unconvinced by what it sets out to do, with its dead Christ within a portrayal of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is about the nature of God, as love and life, and there's no death there.

Not that I mean to single out Pesellino for criticism. He isn't the only painter to represent God that way. Massacio's version is one of the most significant works of the early Florentine Renaissance, resurrecting linear perspective in painting. Just down the road from the National Gallery, at the Courtauld Institute, there's a similar painting of the Trinity by Botticelli. They're all magnificent, I just think that if you're going to try to depict God, the emphasis should be on life.

Standing before Pesellino's painting fifteen years ago, with those misgivings in mind, I asked the dozen or so kids in the Confirmation class what might be wrong with what the painter as trying to do. One child replied instantly: 'Please Father, it is an idol.' Dread rose within me. This child was an Arab Christian. Had he, I wondered, grown up in a culture that treated religious art as idolatrous? Had I offended his conscience continuously for the past half hour, with painting after painting? Best to find out. 'Have the other paintings been idols?', I asked. 'No', he replied. 'Why not? Why is this one bad?' His reply came without pause: 'Because there's God the Father in it.' This was getting interesting. 'So', I asked, 'it's OK to show Jesus, like the other paintings we've seen today, but not God the Father?' 'Yes', was his firm opinion.

These are deep waters, and this was a thoughtful child. To this day, the Orthodox Churches generally forbid depicting of God the Father in icons. Then came one of the most glorious moments of my life as a teacher. 'Why's that?', I asked. 'Why can we paint Jesus, but not the Father?' The boy stood silent for some moments. 'Because', he said, the cogs of his mind clearly turning, 'because…

because God has made an image of himself in Jesus… You could see Jesus… so you can paint him.' This was no pre-packaged answer. He was not recycling anything he'd been told before. He was recapitulating the arguments of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (at Nicaea, in AD 787) in real time.

The eight century was a turbulent time when it comes to religious images. They were supressed in the Byzantine Empire from around AD 730, with a firm condemnation in AD 754. Twenty-three years later, at Nicaea, the church reversed the ban. The decisive argument was formulated by St John of Damascus (AD 675 or 676 – 749): 'When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form.' It's the same position as our young theologian in the National Gallery had got to on his own.

In this way, Christian art rest on Christmas: on the Incarnation, on God's coming-into-the-flesh. Heir to the Judaic prohibition of 'graven images' Christianity – or most of it – made its peace with depicting holy things, and art in churches, because of Christmas, where we see 'God made visible' in Jesus.

In the mystery of the Word made flesh

the light of your glory has shone anew upon our minds

that seeing here God made visible,

we may be caught up in love for God whom we cannot see.

Those are words from the central acclamation of Christmas (the Eucharistic preface) at Midnight Mass (and at Holy Communion for the rest of Christmastide). 'Seeing here God made visible.'

The events of Christmas form one of the two poles of Christian art. Some delightful examples feature in the Pesellino exhibition: a virgin and child and an Annunciation. The other supremely worthy subject for Christian art is the crucifixion and all that surrounds it. As I have noted, in the current exhibition the crucifixion features in his Trinity altarpiece. God's humanity is most clearly witnessed at the beginning of Christ's life, and at the end.

In the intervening years, I have mellowed towards Pesellino's painting, and that way of depicting something about God. Painting the eternal reality of God is impossible, but in Jesus we see what we need to see. There is no death in God, but the crucifixion is what God's life looks like when it is made flesh in a world full of evil. The crucifixion shows God's embrace of human life to the furthest extremes of suffering and degradation. It shows the life of God overcoming death. We can hold onto what the crucifixion offers in a painting like this one, while remembering that the Resurrection underlines the priority of God's life over death. One painting can't say everything.

Those fifteen years ago, I was aware that I'd been in a remarkable exchange, one that I would not forget. As I found across my time as a curate, children ask the best theological questions. That might be reason to go to see the Pesellino exhibition with a child. Alongside the paintings I have mentioned already, there are also two gloriously child-friendly panels, each showing multiple events from the life of King David. They offer a sort of fifteenth century comic strip, except that the events are fused into one long scene. Pesellino was a master at painting animals. Magnifying glasses are provided to help you search them out.

Cinematic Passions

Gibson, Darbont, Pasolini, Eastwood and Scorsese all feature in our reviewers top five Good Friday movies.

Yaroslav Walker

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Good Friday is a tough day for a Christian. It is a day of weeping and mourning; of venerating the Cross and meditating on the terrible reality of Christ's tortuous death. It is an annual memorial service for a loved one, and the pain and grief is never made any easier because the reality of the Cross is fresh and relevant and immediate in the life of the believer: it is a moment that transcends time and space and is as real this year as it was in the thirty-third and final year of Christ's life. It is also traditionally a day of intentional and serious fasting - mainly a diet of water and weeping for me. So, by the evening you're wiped out and just want a bit of rest,

perhaps relaxing in front of a film; that is certainly how I feel. Yet every Christian wants to spend the day focused on the Passion of Jesus, so not just any old film will do - it ought to be a film that allows us to keep Jesus's sacrifice in mind. Below are my top five tips for a Good Friday evening watch… popcorn to be eaten plain, or salted with tears if you must!

5 - The Passion of the Christ

The obvious choice. Controversial upon release for its depiction of the Temple hierarchy and the bloody violence with which it depicts Christ's scourging and Crucifixion, it lives now in a certain ignominy. I would argue it deserves a reappraisal. Gibson is a solid director, takes the work seriously, and gives us a good-looking film. Jim Caviezel gives a terrific central performance (that makes you think he deserved a better career for the last twenty years), and all the cast put in good turns. However, it's the interpretation of the meaning of the death of Christ that intrigues me. When it first hit the screens, some saw it as a bloody expression of the view that Jesus dies to appease God's wrath. Yet Gibson carefully intersperses scenes of the Last Supper with the scenes of torture, makes Satan a demonic inversion of the Madonna and Child, and constantly makes clear that it is the power of love and not anger or cruelty that is conquering the world. It is brutal and horrific (and so in fifth place) - but so is capital punishment… so maybe we need to endure it. In this film you can find many nuances of the Christian idea of love and redemption and salvation etched upon the screen.

4 - The Shawshank Redemption

A less obvious choice, and a film in which there is no vicarious death, but bear with me. Frank Darabont's epic drama sees Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) locked up for a crime he did not commit.

Over the decades he learns how to navigate the dangers of prison life, makes friends and enemies, and becomes implicated in a great web of corruption. His great supporter and confidant is 'Red' (Morgan Freeman), who is the only man in Shawshank Prison who will admit his murderous guilt. This is one of those films that it's hard not to love, and you've probably seen it so many times before that it is the cinematic equivalent of a comforting takeaway. Under the surface of some terrific performances, masterful direction, and a heart-tugging score, the film is full of Christian themes. The innocent man punished for the sins of another, the death of Andy's ego as he learns to find purpose in improving the lives of his fellow inmates, the dark powers of corruption brought to justice, and a man descending in the very bowels (the right word if you know the escape scene) of hell and emerging clean and reborn. Its aged beautifully, and inaugurated the Freeman voiceover as a staple of cinematic culture.

3 - The Gospel According to St Matthew

Approved by the Vatican and made by a director in his prime wrestling with his faith, Pasolini's masterpiece is a sumptuous black-and-white exploration of the life of Christ. The entire film is saturated with the sense of living in the poverty of first-century Palestine. Static close ups jump-cutting between one another disorient the viewer and give the impression that the supernatural is taking over the world we are seeing. It is hardly dynamic by the standards of a modern Passion film, but this is to its great benefit. Pasolini lends the film an Italian neo-realist flair that makes it seem almost like one is watching a documentary. The great joy of The Gospel is that it is a telling of the full Gospel, rather than the Passion in isolation. We see Jesus grow into manhood and into ministry, we see the shocking impact of his radical teaching, we see the conspiracy, and so when the Crucifixion of Jesus does happen it is remarkably impactful while also seeming 'right.' We see how such a Gospel of radical devotion to God and love of

neighbour does terrify a world that thinks in terms of power, and we see the great victory that the Cross really is.

2 - Gran Torino

Clint Eastwood playing a role of a lifetime, and teaching us what loving one's neighbour really looks like... what more could you want. Eastwood plays Walt: a widower, and veteran, a retired blue-collar worker, and an inveterate racist and tobacco user. Walt is embittered and alone, disgusted by the state of his Detroit neighbourhood, which has morphed from an all-white working-class community to a mainly Asian community blighted by gang violence. One night Walt saves his young neighbour from a forced gang initiation, and grudgingly becomes a mentor and quasi-father-figure to the boy, and soon his sister. Walt has no desire to connect with the world outside, but does so out of a sense of discipline and duty, and this is an excellent corrective to modern sentimental notions of love. On the Cross, Christ performs the most perfect act of love, offering forgiveness even to his executioners... it is unlikely that in that moment Jesus liked them. In the Gospel narratives Jesus is often frustrated to the point of anger, with the stubbornness of his hearers, and the lack of understanding of his disciples. Jesus doesn't always like them, but he does love them. In the climactic scene of the film Walt resolves to make a great sacrifice to protect his community - a community he doesn't really like anymore. This is real love, the love of the Cross. It does not emanate from fleeting and flighty emotionalism, but from a tremendous act of dedication and will. Eastwood gives us a great Good Friday lesson in love, and his performance is superb.

1 - The Last Temptation of the Christ

My number one pick is a mammoth of visual spectacle and a roller-coaster of emotions. Martin Scorsese has always been

fascinated with the Catholic faith that he can't quite embrace, and many of his most interesting and personal films have had the Christian narrative of redemption woven through. In 'Temptation' he tackles the subject head on, and gives us a religious epic to rival any Charlton Heston flick. Willem Defoe is a lean, wild eyed, and manic Jesus - plagued by doubt and anxiety and horrific migraines that could be demonic…or they could be God. Scorsese and Defoe work together to present the ministry of Jesus in very human terms. Christ is a psychologically complex man who is struggling to cope with his mission in a world that is so very broken. Much like Pasolini's Gospel, this is a film that takes the supernatural seriously. Nothing is ever just what it is. There is no weather event or vision or animal encounter that is not suffused with eternal meaning. The film touches on every emotion: from furious anger, to heart-rending sadness, to uproarious laughter (to this day I can't see a priest friend of mine without shouting 'Judith' and bursting into laughter). The closing acts of the film allow us to see just what Christ was sacrificing on the Cross - not just the life he had led, but the life he could have led. Christ is tempted to the very end, with the worst psychological torment possible, and still he remains faithful to the end. Scorsese may not know exactly where he stands before God, but he was graced with the talent to give the world a remarkably evocative take on the Passion of Jesus.

Identifying as human has deadly implications

The incarnation and an execution impacts humanity.

Barnabas Aspray

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Christmas makes no sense without Easter.

In Jesus of Nazareth, the Creator himself entered his creation to live among us. This is what Christians call the Incarnation. But why? What was the point of this identification with humanity? You might have expected these sorts of answers: he came to found the Christian religion, to teach us how to live and to gather

a community of followers. These are true enough but look inside any church building or read any part of the New Testament, and you'll find that another thing is the focus, something that makes Jesus different to any other founder of a religion. He came to die.

Jesus' death is the climax of all four gospel stories. It is evident that the point of the narrative is there. The rest of the Bible's New Testament spends more time describing the machinations that led to Jesus' death than outlining what he taught. Does that mean it doesn't matter what Jesus taught? Of course not: Jesus' teachings matter tremendously to Christians. But his death matters still more.

No doubt you knew that. The first thing anyone learns about Christianity is its symbol, the cross on which Jesus was executed. One of the cruellest forms of capital punishment that has ever been legal, those executed on the cross were called 'crucified' – a word which still has its shuddering power even today. Crucifixion was a death reserved for the lowest of the low: common thieves, runaway slaves, rebels, and lawbreakers. Yet this particular death was the ultimate goal of Jesus' life.

Why? What's it all about? For Christians, Jesus' crucifixion strikes at the very root of all that is wrong with the world. To understand it, first we have to understand what Christians believe about that.

Everyone agrees the world in its current state is, to put it mildly, less than ideal. Most put it down to a lack of education, or to the stubborn foolishness of a few isolated individuals.

If you believe that people behave badly because they are ill-informed, then you might think the solution is to teach people what is right. You will put great faith in education: give people the information they need and they will change their ways.

Alternatively, if you believe 'other' people are the problem, you can focus your attention on opposing them, imprisoning them, or stripping them of power somehow. But Christians believe that the root of the problem is far deeper, such that these efforts only scratch the surface and will never be effective in the long run.

Christians believe that the whole of humanity has been damaged, cut off from its relationship to what matters by a primordial catastrophe that we call 'the Fall.' Human beings are not simply ignorant, and the problem does not lie in lack of information, or education. The problem lies in our will, the part of us that chooses what is wrong even when we know full-well that it is wrong. And the problem is not just some people 'over there', conveniently set apart from me. Every single human being has been impacted. Including you. And me. Every one of us is part of the problem, which is why no one of us, however smart or well-informed we are, can be the solution. If you fall into a pit you can't climb out of, then lack of information is not your problem. Nor does it matter how many other people are in the pit with you: nobody down there can pull you or themselves out. You need someone outside the pit who can reach down and grab hold of you.

That is why Christianity is more than a moral programme for self-improvement, or a set of spiritual practices comparable to those of other religions. According to Christians, the human race does not need another set of rules about how to live, or a formula to cultivate mindfulness and inner peace. We need a saviour: someone who does not share our fallen condition, but who can reach down and lift us to safety.

How far down did Jesus have to go? All the way to the bottom, which means death. Even the worst kind of death.

How did Jesus' death save us? Christians have various theories about that. You may have heard the most common which uses law court imagery: we were guilty and sentenced capital punishment, but Jesus was punished instead so we don't have to. Some people love this theory and live by it; others find it morally problematic and offensive. But the point is not the theory: the point is the reality to which it points. One way or another, by dying Jesus reconnected us to God and restored the broken relationship.

But it's stranger still than that, because Jesus' death is not the end. It was only the preliminary to something far more wonderful and transformative, a sign of a promise beyond our wildest hopes. By dying, Jesus defeated death itself and came back to life. If Christmas makes no sense without the cross, then the cross makes no sense without the resurrection.

Why the anthropologists miss the point of Easter

Easter is more than an illustration of new life..

Graham Tomlin

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Bunnies, chocolate eggs, crocuses. It's that time of year again. The dark bleakness of winter is giving way to life and colour as the soil warms. We finally feel sun on the skin, wake up to early dawns and longer days.

Across the world, festivals celebrate the coming of Spring. The Qingming Festival is a traditional Chinese carnival, also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day, observed by ethnic Chinese people across

the world as a celebration of the new season. In the festival of Holi, Hindus across the world douse each other in brightly coloured powder or water, as a celebration of burgeoning love, and a prayer for a good harvest from the new growth in the land. The turning of the year, bringing new life, seems one of the most elemental forces in the universe.

In 1890, the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer published a book that was to become famous: The Golden Bough. It was one of the first works of comparative religion in an age which was gradually becoming more knowledgeable about the religions of the world. In it, he identified a motif in many of the world's religions: the concept of a dying-and-rising god. He saw the pattern repeated in fertility rites connected to the annual renewal of nature from the 'death' of winter. Gods like Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis and Attis, Dionysus - and Jesus - were examples of the same pattern.

These days, you often hear a similar version of this account. Christianity, we are told, is another form of the same story found in so many religions. Christians just took over and erased the earlier annual celebrations with their own version. Christmas was just a replacement for Yule, the ancient pagan winter festival. Easter recalls Eostre, a spring goddess from western Germanic lands, whose festival took place in April, connected to the spring equinox.

Today, we have lambs, daffodils, young rabbits and eggs. All of them emerge at this time of year and are, for us, signs of the rebirth of nature. It always seems miraculous, that from the deadness of winter, life is reborn. No wonder the ancient pagans, and religions all over the world, for that matter, found ways to celebrate new life, and to endue this season with mythical wonder.

It was tempting for James Frazer to bracket Jesus as just another of these myths of the death and rebirth of nature, the dying and

rebirth of nature, the dying and rising god. Bunnies, eggs, Osiris and Jesus were all symbols, pointing to the same thing – the annually repeated miracle of new life in the Spring.

Yet this misses the point of what the early Christians said about the Resurrection. St Paul wrote: "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." His point was precisely not that this event was another illustration of the annual renewal of nature, the cycle of death & rebirth. It was something new altogether. It was the once and for all breaking of the cycle, spelling the end of death and its repeated power over us. Christ breaks through the dark wall of death so that millions of other can follow him through the breach into the light beyond it.

The Resurrection of Jesus was the 'first fruits', like the very first crocus of spring, the first apple on the tree. It was like a man breaking the four minute mile, a human being walking on the moon. A barrier had been broken that had always seemed impregnable and nothing would ever be the same again. It was the beginning of an entirely new creation that will one day come into fullness. It was not another annual temporary suspension of the inevitability of death, it was the breaking of the power of death once and for all, pointing to its final defeat one day. The endless cycle of rebirth is suddenly folded out into a linear trajectory, pointing forward to the day when all shall be made new.

CS Lewis attributed his conversion at least in part to a conversation with JRR Tolkien which persuaded him that the story of Jesus – his incarnation, descent into death and resurrection to new life - was not just another example of the ancient myth of the renewal of the world, but was the thing towards which all the myths pointed – it was, as he called it in a famous essay, 'myth become fact'. It's worth quoting him to get the point:

Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate.

Of course, there will be echoes of resurrection in the other faiths of the world. Of course there will be pagan figures who look like Christ. Rabbits and eggs are to be enjoyed not frowned on as they point to the one great miracle. They are to be welcomed, not disowned. Lewis' point is that the Resurrection is both myth and fact – myth become fact. The Resurrection doesn't just point to the rebirth of the world. It is the rebirth of the world.

Now of course, Christians can't prove it. They can, to be sure, point to evidence that the tomb was empty, that the profound, world-shattering effect on the disciples and even the rest of human history can only be explained by something truly extraordinary. But you can't prove an event that by its very nature breaks the normal cycle of cause and event, death and rebirth, proof and disproof. You can only believe it and then re-build your whole view of the world around it. As theologian Lesslie Newbigin put it:

"At the heart of the Christian message was a new fact: God had acted in a way that, if believed, must henceforth determine all our ways of thinking. It could not merely fit into existing ways of understanding the world without fundamentally changing them. It provided a new *arche*, a new starting point for all human understanding of the world. It could not form part of any worldview except one of which it was the basis."

So, no, we can't prove it. But we can at least do the early Christians the justice of acknowledging what they were saying and what they weren't.

Because this is the central Christian claim – that the Resurrection is not a metaphor for something else – for the rebirth of nature in the spring, or for the fertility of nature. In fact, it's the other way round. The rebirth of nature is a metaphor for the Resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus is not an illustration of something else. It is the one thing of which everything else is an illustration. In the light of the Resurrection, the renewal of nature in spring is not yet another round in the endlessly repeated cycle of death, rebirth and death again, but it points forward to the day when "the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will all be changed."

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