

Pascha!

Victorious Cross, Empty Grave and Living Lord

by Brad Jersak

The first time I heard of “*pascha*” (pronounced and sometimes spelled *paska*), my beloved mother-in-law, Eleanor Wiebe, baked it for me. What she offered was an oven-fresh loaf of sweet bread, crowned liberally with rich, creamy icing. *Pascha* bread comes to us as sort of a holy dessert from Eastern Europe, where it is baked to celebrate Easter.

In fact, it is so named because many European Christians prefer to call Easter itself “Pascha,” especially if they’re picky about the pagan roots of the word “Easter.” So *pascha* can refer to both the bread and the holy day.

Christians in Eastern Europe see in this bread the symbols of Easter. Inside the *pascha* loaf, they may include a swirl of yellow and white batter that is supposed to represent the resurrection of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Curiously, Grandma-close-by, as my sons call her, blended food and faith in another way. She would ask if we’d like to come by her place for *pascha* (the bread) at “*faspas*.” Eventually, I realized this after-church light meal got its Low German name from “*vespers*,” which means “evening prayers.”

Praying had become eating—fine by me!

Bring on the *pascha*!

Pascha Passover

Now, calling the Resurrection festival “*Pascha*” seems odd, because *pascha* originally comes from the Aramaic word for *Passover* or *Passover Lamb*. The original *paschal* lambs were slaughtered in Egypt at the first Passover (Exodus 12).

Their blood was brushed onto the Hebrews’ doorposts to protect them from the angel that would slay all the firstborn of Egypt. Seeing the blood, the destroying angel would “pass over” their homes as they would eat the roast lamb in peace and safety (Exodus 12:23).

Again, note how faith and food come together around a shared table—a table commemorating God’s covenant of grace. So it is today; so it has been ever since Abraham and Sarah welcomed angels for a meal and received the promise of a covenant son (Genesis 18).

Now, back to *Pascha*: Eventually, the apostle Paul will identify Christ with the *paschal* (Passover) lamb. “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the Festival...” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

And no wonder, since Matthew, Mark and Luke all link the Last Supper to Christ’s final Passover meal (or the “*Seder table*,” as observant Jews call it). John’s Gospel goes a step further, making the crucifixion coincide with the slaughter of the Passover (*paschal*)

lambs on “the day of preparation” (John 13:1; 19:31). In either case, for Christians, Christ has become the great and final Passover Lamb.

Pascha Easter

But then wouldn’t you expect *Pascha* to be associated more with Good Friday than with Easter, since we equate the crucifixion of Christ with the slaying of the Passover lamb? How is it that *Pascha* becomes the Eastern name for Easter, rather than for Good Friday? I can think of two good reasons.

First, it’s possible that *Pascha* was conjoined to Easter because the Jewish Passover focuses not only on how the lamb’s blood spared the Israelites from the tenth plague of Egypt, but more so as God’s decisive act that ensured their exodus out of bondage.

The analogy is this: just as God through Moses freed the Jewish slaves from Pharaoh and Egypt, so now God through Christ freed all those who were in bondage to sin, Satan and death. That is, the Jewish Passover celebrates their freedom from slavery to Pharaoh, just as the Resurrection guarantees our freedom from *Hades*.

Again, think of Paul’s words: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

Second, *Pascha* celebrates **both** the gift of the paschal lamb (by Jesus' death) **and** our deliverance from bondage to death (by Jesus' resurrection). In other words, *Pascha* begins with our perfect Lamb, slain on the cross, and culminates in the Resurrection, our great exodus from the kingdom of darkness. Moses' "let my people go," is fulfilled in Jesus' "follow me!"

"But thanks be to God," Paul proclaims, "who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2 Corinthians 2:14).

So *Pascha* is **the great both/and** of Christ's death and resurrection—of **Good Friday and Easter Sunday**. They're an inseparable reality and a single feast in practice. You can easily hear both elements in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Here we see the power of the Lamb slain (Jesus' death) and the great Deliverer (Jesus' resurrection), expanding God's grand Exodus project to include **all** people and rescue us from **every** kind of bondage.

Pascha combines the three days from Good Friday to Easter Sunday into one weekend feast, but also refuses to divorce them as concepts. We ought not think of Good Friday independently of Easter, because the Cross includes more than Christ's death—it points to Christ's victory over death. And we ought not think of Easter as simply resurrection Sunday, but as the proof that on the Cross, sin and death were truly "finished." I believe when Paul says, "I glory in nothing but the

cross of Jesus Christ," he is not speaking of the crucifixion alone, but of the whole package.

Who Me? I'm No Slave!

Of course, most of us don't see ourselves as slaves. We're free, right? Whoa...*déjà vu!* I just remembered this conversation from John chapter 8:

So He said to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

"We are Abraham's descendants," they answered. "We have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say we will be set free?"

Jesus replied, "Truly, truly, I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:31-36).

This passage holds a few surprises for careful readers. To begin with, Christ is speaking to Judean believers. Before the conversation is over, they will think he is demon-possessed (verses 48, 52) and pick up stones to kill him (verse 59)! Talk about a chat going sideways. But did it really? Or did Christ unveil an unbelief that was already there (verses 45-46)?

More surprising still, can you believe their denial? "We have never been slaves to anyone." Really? The history of the Jews includes slavery in Egypt. Then

Assyria. Then Babylon. Then Greece. And now in their lifetime Rome had occupied Judea and installed its own governor. These Jewish believers seem like an addict who honestly believes there's no problem. "I'm fine; I could quit any time."

But aside from these surprises, did you know that the key phrase here, *You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free*, is etched on the lobby wall of CIA headquarters! I suspect that bastion of secrecy and intrigue is not what Christ had in mind.


Pascha Freedom

No, in fact the freedom of which he speaks is found in the capital-T Truth: Christ himself, who will set us free. From what?

In this text, it's sin. In the Hebrews passage above, it's death and the fear of death. Indeed, even behind iron-gated communities within walled-off borders, we cannot really say we are free until we are free of fear.

And that seems to be something no government, no secret service and, might I add, especially no religion can offer. Freedom from fear comes through Christ alone, whose blood can wash anything and whose life can restore anyone.

This *Pascha*, as we again behold the cross of Christ, the empty tomb and devour the *Paschal* feast, let's embrace afresh the truth that Christ, our Lamb and Deliverer, has freed us *from* fear and freed us *to* love. □



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