A Brief History of Easter—From Biblical Origins to Egg Hunts.

This 2,000-year-old Christian holiday celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is a symbol of spring.

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CHOCOLATE BUNNIES. BOUQUETS of lilies and daffodils. Hunting for dyed eggs. For many, Easter functions as the unofficial kick-off of spring—but for Christians around the world, the holiday is the most important celebration of the year.

Rooted in more than 2,000 years of ritual and rite, Easter commemorates the central event in the Christian church: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which Christians see as fulfilling the biblical prophecy of a messiah who would rise from the dead and give eternal life in heaven to those who believe in him.

The holiday takes place at the end of Lent, a 40-day season of fasting and repentance that culminates in Holy Week and a commemoration of the biblical events surrounding Jesus' persecution, crucifixion, and death. Holy Week includes Palm Sunday, Holy or Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter.

The New Testament outlines that story. Miraculously conceived and prophesied to be both son of God and king of the Jews, Jesus of Nazareth has made a name for himself as a rabblerousing minister, miracle worker, and advocate for the poor and marginalized who gains a group of devoted followers and disciples.

But Jesus' popularity also pits him against Roman authorities and religious hardliners who object to his proclamations and his ministry. That animosity begins to come to a head when Jesus makes a triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem, where he was welcomed by a crowd of acolytes who laid palm branches in his path (Palm Sunday). During a meal with his disciples, later known as the Last Supper, Jesus predicts that one of his followers will betray him and invites his disciples to eat bread and drink wine in memory of him.

After the dinner, Jesus is arrested. It's revealed that Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, had decided to hand Jesus over to the city's Jewish high priests in exchange for 30 pieces of silver. (Holy or Maundy Thursday)

Jesus is tried and beaten. Seeing that the crowd has now turned against Jesus, Pontius Pilate, the Roman provincial governor, agrees to put him to death. Jesus is then crucified (nailed to a cross alive), the death of a common criminal. He dies and is buried (Good Friday) in a tomb where his body lies throughout the next day (Holy Saturday). But when his mourners return to his tomb on Sunday, it is empty. Jesus has been resurrected. That day is celebrated as Easter.

Christians celebrate Easter in a variety of ways, including sunrise services favoured by Protestants and the Easter Vigil, an ancient liturgy and baptismal rite celebrated by Catholics on the night of Holy Saturday. Members of the Orthodox Church celebrate Easter, but 13 days later than other Christians since their religion is based on the Julian calendar.

Over the years, Easter has merged with pagan spring celebrations. Popular traditions include a visit from the Easter Bunny, a folk symbol of spring who bears eggs that symbolize new life. One theory holds that the tradition originated in Germany, but the jury is still out. In any case, Easter egg hunts, egg decorating, and candy consumption are a big part of the modern Easter holiday. (See Easter traditions from around the world.)

So are fancy clothes. During the 1870s and 1880s, just as Easter became commercialized, American store windows began to reflect the increasingly ostentatious decor on American altars. Milliners and dressmakers then reflected those themes in women's clothes. As a result, Easter fashions—and show-stopping Easter bonnets—became popular among American women, prompting annual "Easter Parades" in which cities' well-dressed elite promenaded in public. This year, thanks to the novel coronavirus, those who celebrate Easter will have to do so at home. In places like Italy and across the United States, Easter will become a virtual event with masses via Zoom and other streaming services.