

There are many beautiful Easter symbols that have significance to us. But do you know why we celebrate with Easter eggs, rabbits, lilies, and the lamb? Find out the surprising origins of Easter symbols—and share this information with friends and family!

Easter is the most important feast day in the Christian church, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The feast day is “movable” and always falls on the first Sunday after the first full Moon after the spring equinox.

Easter Traditions

When you think of Easter—whether you’re religious or not—which family traditions come to mind? We decorate homes with colored Easter eggs, put out baskets for the Easter bunny to fill, give Easter lilies as gifts, and even eat traditional foods, from lamb to ham to special sweet breads.

The history of Easter symbols is really quite interesting. It’s not as simple as saying whether they are pagan or Christian; history is a rich and beautiful tapestry woven through the ages.

Easter Eggs

The oval-shape egg has been a universal symbol in many religions across the millennia, symbolizing new life, rebirth, and fertility.

According to *The Easter Book* by Francis X. Weiser, S.J., “the origin of the Easter egg is based on the fertility lore of the Indo-European races. To our pre-Christian ancestors, it was a most startling event to see a new and live creature emerge from a seemingly dead object. The egg to them became a symbol of spring. Long ago in Persia, people used to present each other with eggs at the spring equinox, which for them also marked the beginning of a new year.”

In Judaism, eggs are an important part of the Passover seder plate. For some Christians, the egg symbolizes the rock tomb out of which Christ emerged to the new life of his Resurrection. Also, there was a practical reason that eggs became popular on Easter: They were forbidden during the 40 days of Lent. However, chickens still laid eggs, so they were often collected and decorated.

In most countries, the eggs are stained in plain vegetable dye colors. Among Orthodox Christians, the faithful present each other with crimson eggs in honor of the blood of Christ. In parts of Eastern Europe, it's tradition to create intricate designs on the egg with wax or twine before coloring. Called pysanki, these special eggs are saved from year to year like symbolic heirlooms and can be seen seasonally in Ukrainian shops. In Germany and other countries, the eggs are pierced and made hollow so that they can be suspended from shrubs and trees during Easter Week—much like decorations on a Christmas tree.

Of course, many countries have egg hunts and games, too. Plastic eggs are often filled with candy treats, since it's the end of Lent. Every year in Washington, D.C., there is an egg-rolling party on the lawn of the White House. This custom is traced back to Sunday School picnics and parades at Easter in the years before the Civil War. At these picnics, the children amused themselves with a variety of games, and egg-rolling was one of them.

The Easter Bunny

Easter comes during spring and celebrates new life. What springtime animals better represent fertility than the rabbit or the hare, which produce so many offspring?

The rabbit symbolism had its origin in pre-Christian fertility lore, while the hare was the Egyptian symbol of fertility. The ancient Greeks thought that rabbits could reproduce as virgins, and in the early medieval times, the rabbit became associated with the Virgin Mary and commonly appeared in medieval art.

However, the “Easter Bunny,” who visits children on Easter morning, was an invention of German Protestants; the Osterhase or “Easter Hare,” brought eggs and sweets to “good children,” in the same way that Santa Claus brought gifts to well-behaved youngsters.

The Easter Hare played this Santa Claus-like role at the start of the Easter season, judging whether or not children had been obedient to their parents. The symbolism is not particularly religious, but we can be reasonably certain that the Lutherans of long ago were not intending to teach their children about fertility. Like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny is something fun to do with the kids.

The Easter Bunny followed German immigrants to the American colonies in the 18th century, and the folklore spread across the United States. Initially, children fashioned nests for their Easter Bunnies out of bonnets, hats, or boxes; eventually, these became the colorful Easter baskets that we use today!

Easter Lamb

Among the popular Easter symbols, the lamb is by far the most significant of this great feast. The lamb is said to symbolize Jesus, as it embodies purity and goodness, but also represents sacrifice.

The lamb was a sacrifice made during the Jewish Passover, which is a holiday commemorating the passage of the “angel of death” over the homes of those who had smeared the blood of sacrificial lambs on their doorposts, thus sparing the firstborn sons. Roasted lamb shanks are an important part of the Passover seder plate; roasted leg of lamb is popular for Easter in Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Greece.

Jesus was crucified during Passover week and then made the ultimate sacrifice, his life. He is referred to as the “Lamb of God” and “our Passover lamb” in the Bible. During Easter, we celebrate Jesus’ passover from death to life.

The oldest prayer for the blessing of lambs can be found in the 7th-century sacramentary (ritual book) of the Benedictine monastery in Bobbio, Italy. Two hundred years later, Rome adopted it, and thereafter the main feature of the Pope’s Easter dinner for many centuries was roast lamb. After the 10th century, in place of the whole lamb, smaller pieces of meat were used.

The ancient tradition of the Paschal lamb also inspired the Christians use of lamb meat as a popular food at Eastertime; at the present time, it is consumed during the main meal on Easter Sunday in many parts of eastern Europe. Sometimes, families will bake a lamb made of butter, pastry, or sugar to be a centerpiece; this is often a substitute for meat on Easter.

Easter Ham

Since we’re talking about the Easter lamb, let’s not forget the Easter ham. It, too, is an age-old custom, handed down from pre-Christian times, to eat the meat of this animal on festive occasions, feast days, and weddings.

The pig is an ancient symbol of good luck and prosperity. In some popular German expressions, the word “pig” is synonymous with “good luck” (Schwein haben, i.e., “to have a pig”). In Hungary, the highest card (ace) in card games is called “pig” (disznó). Not too long ago, it was fashionable for men to wear little pig figurines as good luck charms on their watch chains. More recently, charm bracelets for teenagers contained dangling pigs. Savings boxes for children in the figure of a pig (piggy banks) continue the ancient symbolism of good luck and prosperity.

Smoked or cooked hams, as well as lamb, have been eaten by most European nations from ancient times and are a traditional Easter dish from coast to coast in this country. Roast pork is another traditional main dish in some countries.

Easter Breads

Sweet breads are also a tradition, especially with the conclusion of Lent, a period when many people do not indulge in sweets. For Christians, the resurrected Christ is called, “the bread of life” (John 6:35), in whom believers will find their daily spiritual sustenance.

In Russia and Austria, the sweet breads are often marked with a cross or image of a lamb. In Germany, the Easter bread is baked in loaves of twisted or braided strands (Osterstollen). Another kind of Austrian Easter bread is the Osterlaib (Easter loaf), a large, flat, round loaf marked with the cross or an image of the lamb. In Poland and other countries, folks enjoy a special cake called the Easter baba (Baba Wielkanocna).

In Greece, the traditional Easter bread is baked with a red-dyed egg on top, covered with two strips of dough in the form of a cross.

In Italy, the Easter bread is braided with eggs, symbolizing new life.

Hot Cross Buns

Hot cross buns, hot cross buns! Traditionally, this delicious sweet bun was served on Good Friday, the Friday prior to Easter. Good Friday marks the end of Lent and is the day that Jesus died on the cross. The sweet bun is marked with a cross to help the bread rise and as a visible sign that the bread was “blessed.”

Easter Lily

The magnificent Easter lily, with its sheer white petals, symbolizes life, purity, innocence, joy, and peace. The beautiful white flowers of the lily were connected with these traits well before Jesus Christ. Many ancient allegories connect the flower with motherhood. One fable tells us that the lily sprang from the milk of Hera, the mythological Queen of Heaven. This may explain why the lily is so closely associated with Mary in Roman Catholic tradition.

In early paintings, the Angel Gabriel is seen handing a bouquet of white lilies to the Virgin Mary. In other paintings, the saints are bringing vessels full of lilies to Mary and the baby Jesus. It is said that beautiful white lilies sprang up in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus wept in the last hours before he was betrayed by Judas. The lilies sprang up where drops of Christ's sweat fell to the ground in his final hours of sorrow.

The lilies from Christ's time were not the Easter lily that we know today (*Lilium longiflorum*), which is native to the southern islands of Japan and now cultivated in areas such as California and Oregon. The lilies in Jesus' area were wild lilies of the valleys and fields. Still, our Easter lily serves as a reminder of the lilies mentioned frequently throughout the Bible. Easter lilies grace homes and churches each spring as a symbol of new life.