

# Easter, 1927



By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

**T**HIS year on April 17 the whole Christian world will be celebrating Easter Sunday as the Festival of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because Easter means so many different things to many different people, it is worth while for us to take stock of our knowledge of the history of this annual festival, and after doing that we may, perhaps, have a clearer idea of what it should mean to us.

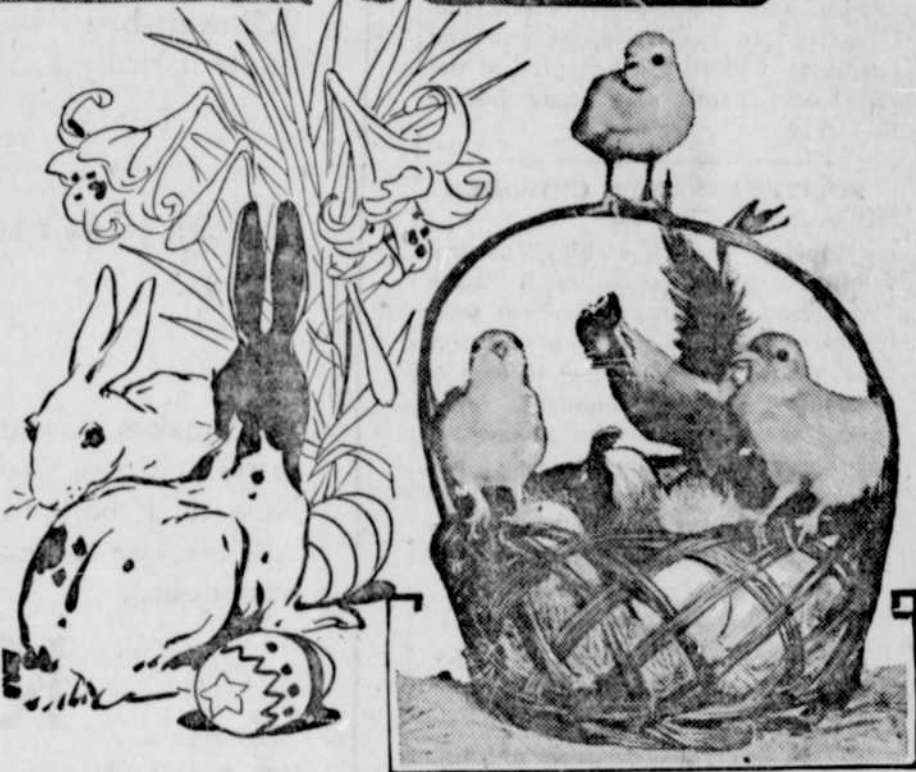
Nearly everybody knows that the date of Easter varies from year to year, that unlike Christmas it does not come on one certain day of the month in one certain month, that unlike Thanksgiving day it does not come on a certain day of the week in a certain month and that it may come on a certain day—Sunday—in either of two months. That is to say, Easter Sunday may fall either in March or April. But they do not know, perhaps, that it cannot come earlier than March 22 nor later than April 25 nor the reasons therefor.

To arrive at those reasons it is necessary to go back into ancient history. The festival now known as Easter was celebrated by ancient Israel as the Passover for many centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ. It was based upon the events which took place when the Hebrews were saved from the destruction which was visited upon the Egyptians, as given in Exodus 12:27. The first Christians, being in the main Jews, continued for a long time to observe the Passover as well as other ancient ceremonies. But gradually these early followers of the Cross began to substitute the Christ for the paschal lamb of Israel in the Passover ceremonies.

Eventually there arose a difference of opinion between the Christians of Hebrew descent and those of Gentile descent as to the time when these ceremonies should be celebrated. Those of Hebrew descent declared that the day of the death of Jesus should be the date of the ending of the paschal fast, which in Hebrew rites, always was on the fourteenth day of the moon in the evening. Therefore the Easter festival, which followed, might fall on any day of the week. Those of Gentile descent, however, wanted the first day of the week, Sunday, to be the first day of the resurrection festival. Thus the Friday preceding would be observed as the date of the crucifixion without paying any attention to the day of the month, the fast continuing until midnight of Saturday.

The dispute over this point was complicated by the irregularities of the time of full moon in relation to the year. The Hebrew sacred year began at the instant of the vernal equinox, but this time is subject to slight changes due to the astronomical fact of perturbations of the motion of all bodies in the solar system. The Hebrews based their years on lunar changes, whereas we now determine the exact length of a year by the sun and stars, which is more accurate. It is notable that the ancient Hebrews always had trouble with their chronology because they based the beginning of each month on the first sight of the new moon.

The trouble was principally due to the fact that the moon revolves around the earth in 27 days, 7 hours, 43 minutes and 11½ seconds, and the earth around the sun in 31,558,149 seconds. Therefore the moon makes 13.3687 revolutions to the earth's one. Full-moon times are also out of harmony with the spring equinox, and



this fact caused trouble in determining time in ancient times. The result of all these complications was that by applying the Jewish rules to Easter, the date of the crucifixion and the resurrection, two days which were supposed to be fixed for all time, varied constantly.

For 325 years the difficulty between the Christians of Jewish descent and those of Gentile descent continued. Not being able to decide the recurrence of Easter, the council of the early Christian church finally appealed to the astronomers in Alexandria, Egypt, for aid. However, these scientists were not of much assistance, for they had no lunar tables such as we now have, computed by master mathematicians. They attempted to make rules, but the variations of the full moon in reference to the year would not cause Easter to fall on Sunday any more than any other day. All wanted it to come on Sunday, so each nation celebrated to suit itself so that it would come on that day. Thus in A. D. 387 the Gauls celebrated Easter on March 21, in Italy it fell on April 18, and in Egypt on April 25.

Eventually the selection of a certain Sunday was definitely fixed during the Sixth century A. D. It was designated as the Sunday between the fifteenth and twenty-first days of the moon in the first month of the Jewish lunar years. It was directed that the computation should be made according to the tables of Victorinus of Aquitaine, introduced in 457 A. D. Because of the fact that Britain had ceased to be a part of the Roman empire, the Sixth century decree did not affect the British church at first, and it continued to calculate Easter on a basis previously approved at Rome. The matter was finally disposed of at a synod held at Whitby in Yorkshire in 664 A. D., after which the clergy of the British Isles conformed to the general practice of the western church.

Accordingly Easter is now observed by both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches on the first Sunday after the full moon (or fourteenth day of the moon) on or next after March 21. So it cannot be earlier than March 22 nor later than April 25. Thus it is possible for the astronomers and mathematicians to tell in advance on what dates Easter will come each year, and they are now known for more than a century in advance. This, of course, may be changed, especially if the proposed new calendar which is to contain 13 months is put into effect universally. In that case Easter Sunday will be a fixed date.

Just as Easter is a variable date, so it has a variable meaning to va-

rious persons. To the child, who cannot grasp its religious significance, it means a day whose symbols are rabbits, little chickens and Easter eggs. To the children of Washington, D. C., it means especially the day when they roll Easter eggs on the lawn of the White House while the President of the United States and the First Lady of the Land look on and enjoy the sight of a child's happiness. To Californians it means the remarkable sunrise Easter service near Los Angeles, the fame of which has become worldwide.

Far as some of these meanings may appear to be from the real significance of Easter itself, they are in reality not so far. Easter day is Resurrection day, the climax of the springtime urge when all nature awakes from sleep, throws off the death-like chill of winter and begins to live anew. The egg is the simplest and most-easily-understood symbol of potential life. Within its shell is concealed the germ which can be warmed into life. So it becomes what can be regarded as the primary symbol of the Easter season. When that germ is warmed into life and develops to a certain point, the baby chick emerges and life, real life, begins. So these fluffy little balls of down, beloved of all the children, are also symbols of Easter.

With all nature bedecking herself in new raiment, why should not mankind also celebrate the surge of renewed life with new apparel? So the Easter hat and the frock in which milady appears at church on Easter morning is not mere human vanity. She puts them on because she must! She has heard the call of spring, the message that all life is renewed, and she attires herself to be in keeping with the season.

Easter has a deep religious significance in its celebration of the triumph of light over darkness, of love over hate, of right over wrong, of the true over the false, of all that is good over all that is bad—of all these as exemplified in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it has a deeper significance in that it exemplifies a fundamental truth of human existence. Man finds life good. He longs for everlasting life. He longs for some assurance that he will have it. And the spirit of Easter gives him that assurance—that though he dies he shall live again. So Easter is a symbol of that assurance. Christ died but lived again. Man may die, but so surely as he has faith he, too, shall live again. So he can lift up his alleluias of joy and hope and victory: Christ is risen! Christ is risen! No victory hath the grave!

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