

## Alleluia Season: Easter to Pentecost 2007

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After the cleansing and renewal of the Lenten season and the harrowing journey through Holy Week come the brilliance and splendor of the Easter season. Stretching for seven weeks from Easter Sunday morning to Pentecost Sunday, the Great Fifty Days offer an extended opportunity for celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

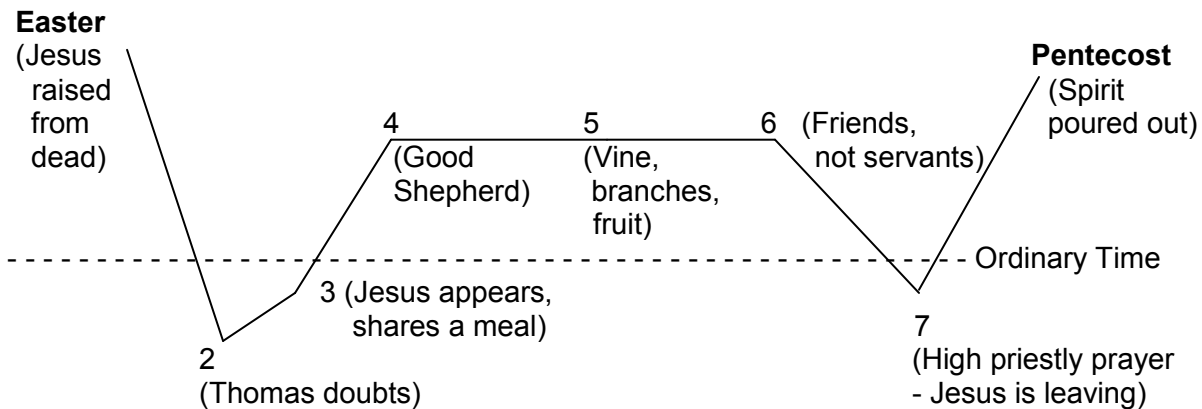
**Not just Easter dinner.** For many congregations, the Easter celebration ends with Easter dinner. Yet the ancient Christian church considered that one Sunday wasn't enough time to celebrate the central event of our faith. So the longest season of the Christian year was born—a 50-day counter-balance to the 40 days of Lenten penitence. Though it is right and necessary for Christians to engage in sober reflection and repentance, we also need to cultivate a theology of joy. Our faith will deepen and grow stronger as we revel in the wonder of God's gift of resurrection life through Jesus Christ and the promise of new life for all.

Such a lengthy season, however, poses challenges to worship planners. How can we sustain the joyful celebration for seven weeks? What ebb and flow of texts and themes might shape our worship?

**Scripture focus of the season.** What can be most helpful in sustaining the joyful celebration is understanding the flow of scripture readings throughout the seven weeks. On Easter Sunday, the lectionary choices of the 3-year cycle include accounts of the resurrection from Matthew, Mark and Luke – with John's gospel always being a choice. Old Testament texts include jubilant prophecies of the fulfillment of God's reign from Isaiah or Jeremiah, while epistle readings focus on the theological significance of the resurrection. This should be a day when we pull out all the stops: the most glorious music and the most festive visual atmosphere should welcome us into the freedom and joy of the day!

During the weeks following Easter Sunday, readings from the gospels focus first on Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and later from his teachings. Readings from the Book of Acts replace Old Testament readings for the season and reveal the early church in action. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the lectionary cycle (which happens to be the case in 2007), various readings from the Book of Revelation highlight the final victory of Christ.

**Dramatic shape of the season.** After the euphoria of the Day of Resurrection, the first disciples did not experience the resurrection as a never-ending celebration – and neither do we. Like them, we struggle to believe, and sometimes God's lively presence seems far away. The scripture texts chosen for the season invite us to follow and participate in the journey of belief, doubt, and reassurance that is common to all believers. The following chart sketches the up-and-down dramatic flow of these stories:



Though Easter Sunday is the dramatic high point of both the season and the entire Christian year, the two Sundays right after Easter are a descent into struggle. The next three Sundays move upward as we encounter Jesus' comforting and promise-filled teachings. Then another descent occurs on Easter 7 when Jesus leaves the disciples to return to God, and they feel bereft of the companionship of their Teacher and Lord. A surge of energy returns on Pentecost when the disciples experience the coming of the Holy Spirit and realize that they are empowered to continue the ministry of Jesus. If worship and music leaders pay attention to this overall trajectory, they can make appropriate choices that will help the congregation sustain the energy and joy of the season.

**Expansion of weekly themes.** The following summary offers a thumbnail sketch of the stories of the season.

**Easter 2:** The second Sunday of Easter drops back quickly into the real world of fear and confusion with the story of the disciples hiding behind closed doors and Thomas confessing his inability to believe in the resurrection. Bringing a message of peace, Jesus restores the shattered faith of his disciples.

**Easter 3:** The third Sunday of Easter is always a meal story: the Emmaus table in Year A; a meal of broiled fish in Year B; and breakfast at the lakeside in Year C. In each story, the resurrected Christ appears and brings illumination, comfort, and peace.

**Easter 4:** Good Shepherd Sunday occurs every year during Easter season. Drawing from the beloved Psalm 23 as well as Jesus' own words in John 10, these Sundays create and interpret a picture of a loving Shepherd who not only cares for his sheep but lays down his life for them. One of the earliest and favorite images painted by the first Christians, the Good Shepherd remains a central image in our faith.

**Easter 5:** This Sunday continues with Jesus' final discourses recorded in the latter chapters of John's gospel. Year A offers the image of a place prepared for Jesus' followers; Years B and C offer vine, branch and fruit imagery.

**Easter 6:** The sixth Sunday is all about love—Jesus' love for us and our love for one another. The promise of the coming Spirit is mentioned in both Years A and C.

**Easter 7:** A foreshadowing of Pentecost, the texts on this Sunday from John's gospel all contain poignant parting words from Jesus before his ascension and the promised coming of the Spirit. This Sunday may also be observed as Ascension Sunday.

**Pentecost:** With multiple symbols of wind, breath, flame, and descending dove, this festive day closes the Easter cycle and opens the way again to Ordinary Time. The church is born in the power of the Spirit, and the Christian community becomes a visible, dynamic sign of the living Christ in the world.