

TAKE UP MY CROSS

A New Perspective on Easter Inspired By Persecuted Christians



““ Persecution
is an enemy
the Church has met
and mastered many times.
Indifference could prove
to be a far more
dangerous foe.””

—BROTHER ANDREW

FROM HIDING TO HOPE

“There is no resurrection without crucifixion.”

—NIK RIPKEN, AUTHOR OF THE INSANITY OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

Here in the United States, Easter often ends up being the highest attended Sunday of a church’s year. That’s because community members who don’t regularly go to church may consider it an annual tradition to participate in special events such as “Sunrise Services” or “Passion Plays.”

But, as you might imagine, Easter gatherings play out differently in areas of the world that are hostile to Christianity. In many of the top 50 countries named in Open Doors World Watch List, Christian holidays take on greater risk and must therefore be more subdued...or even completely secret.

When Christians in these difficult places openly celebrate the resurrection of Christ, it can prompt extremists to target them with harassment or violence.

Although Christians in the free world may think of our celebrations as being the traditional way to honor Jesus’ sacrifice, it’s actually these persecuted believers who might be experiencing something much closer to the original Easter.

THE FIRST EASTER

As followers of Jesus, Easter week is of course rightfully celebratory. It starts with familiar stories like the “triumphal entry” and ends with Jesus rising from the grave to reunite with his disciples. But, to follow Christ in that era, in a community where Christians were considered a threat to the state? That would include as much hardship as it did celebration.

There were real military and religious officials, sometimes armed with the weapons of their day, targeting Christians who gathered in the name of Jesus. This is why, for example, that Mark 14:50 tells us that when Jesus was arrested, His disciples deserted him and fled. And this is also likely why Jesus’ followers, according to John 20:19, were hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews after Jesus was crucified.

WHAT DOES EASTER MEAN TO SOMEONE EXPERIENCING PERSECUTION?

As we reflect on the tone of the original Easter, where first century Christians prayed in fear for their lives, it perhaps helps us see the experience



of today's persecuted Christians—at Easter—in a new light.

As you read through the following stories, consider how the people in these stories might experience Easter this year.

PALM SUNDAY IN EGYPT

On Palm Sunday in 2017, suicide bombers attacked two churches, killing 49 people. The bomber of the second church in Alexandria targeted the Coptic Pope Tawardos, but the guard, Naseem Fahmi, sacrificed his life to help prevent the attacker from assassinating the Christian leader. The guard's widow, Samira, is mourning the death of her husband, but she is not angry. She says, "Naseem's life was at the church, and now his life is in heaven. I know he is in a good place." She goes on to say she has a loving message for the killer and those in Egypt that think like him: "I forgive you and I ask God to forgive you. I pray that God may open your eyes to enlighten your minds."

EASTER SUNDAY IN PAKISTAN

On Easter Sunday in 2016, hundreds of people,

including many Christians, gathered at a large park in Lahore, enjoying the warm Easter weather. Sadly, during this time, suicide bombers from the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar group invaded the park and attacked the Christian families there. At least 74 died, including 29 children. The extremists later announced they had "targeted Christians celebrating Easter." At the time, this incident was the deadliest terror attack in the history of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and most Christian state.

ASCENSION DAY IN EGYPT

In 2017, gunmen opened fire and killed at least 28 Coptic Orthodox Christians—some reports say up to 35—and wounded about 25 others as these Christians traveled to Ascension Day services at a monastery in southern Egypt. When the militants intercepted their truck and two buses at gunpoint, they forced all the Copts to give over their jewelry, money and mobile phones. They then ordered the Christians to convert to Islam. One militant demanded, "Bear witness that there is no god to be worshipped but Allah, and that

Mohammed is the messenger of Allah!" When the Coptic Christians refused, saying, "We are Christians," the attackers opened fire, shooting most of their victims in the head. A number of children were confirmed among the dead, and all eight men in the truck were killed.

Reflection and Prayer

1. As you reflect on the Bible's account of the first Easter, where do you see yourself in the story? Most of us may most easily identify with the disciples who stood at the foot of the cross and watched their Messiah crucified. But how might a persecuted Christian relate to the story differently? Perhaps they would most identify with the followers of Jesus as they hid in fear, after his arrest or crucifixion. Or perhaps some would identify with the thief on the cross, who was likely marginalized and rejected by society for his misdeeds. Or maybe, those who have seen loved ones die because of their faith in Jesus, might see themselves in the place of Jesus himself as soldiers assaulted and mocked him as he hung on the cross.
2. What kinds of things might we pray for Christians who even today face the same fears as these early disciples? What kinds of needs might believers have who have to take shelter, secretly, as they follow Christ? Who worship on Easter, knowing they may be targeted for their public expression of faith? Will you join us in praying for these Jesus followers today?

"Jesus told us that if the world hated Him, it will also hate us. So we must not be surprised by the increase in persecution around the world. However, we are not weak. There is much we can do, starting on our knees."

BROTHER ANDREW



So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer.

ROMANS 12:1



3. What lessons and wisdom might persecuted Christians learn from their experience following Jesus amidst hardship? How might they better understand, for example, Jesus' words in Luke 9:23: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."
4. As we read about Easter attacks that have taken place in hostile parts of the world, how many of us would eagerly attend Easter celebrations knowing it may increase our chance of being attacked? How can we allow the courageous witness of such believers to inspire us to be more bold as we follow Jesus in our parts of the world?

HOPE

Although the disciples faced great fear in the time surrounding Jesus' arrest and persecution, God used this period to develop them into powerful witnesses. In Acts 4, after Jesus' followers prayed, the Bible tells us "the place where they were meeting was shaken." What happened next transformed the believers present and "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word

of God boldly...With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."

This group of Christians, who faced persecution the first Easter, would emerge from hiding behind locked doors to boldly declare Jesus—ensuring the gospel would spread to all corners of the world and be passed down to future generations for ages to come.

Today, we are saddened and grieved by the things Christians in some parts of the world face. However, with faith, we ask God to develop modern day persecuted Christians into the same kind of powerful witnesses.

We pray today's persecuted believers will, like the disciple John, be able to say: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:1-3)



"The bigger the darkness, the easier it is to spot your little light."

—BROTHER ANDREW