

After living in this country for more than 12 years, I feel that the United States is my home. However, my connection to my first home, Syria, is deeply rooted in my heart and soul. This is more evident to me during the Easter season than at any other time of the year. The rituals, smells, experiences, foods and colors of Easter are woven powerfully into the mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a way that cannot be replaced for me by other traditions.

For Christians in Syria, Easter is an eight-day experience that starts with Palm Sunday and ends on the Monday after Easter, which is known as “Easter Monday.” To Syrian Christians, Easter is called the Great Feast because it celebrates the most important event in the story of Christ’s life. For eight days, Syrian Christians relive the whole story through elaborate ancient traditions that help everyone relive that story and proclaim its mystery to the world.

After 40 to 50 days of fasting during Lent, the Easter journey starts with the Saturday before Palm Sunday, as the church celebrates the resurrection of



Passion Week Through Syrian Eyes

By Roula Alkhouri

Friday, or Great Friday, and indeed, people take their worship out to the streets, where they walk in a funeral procession with a mock coffin of Christ. Walking the streets of Damascus as part of the procession often brought tears to my eyes as I reflected on human pain and the depth of God’s involvement in it. The music played by the marching bands and

Lazarus from the dead. The joyous celebration of Palm Sunday is usually taken out to the streets where people remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The smiles on people’s faces remind me of the joy of remembering God’s love for us in Christ, even as it led Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross. The large decorated candles that the children take to church to light echo the celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The hunt for the best candle is a traditional part of every family’s expression of dedication and faith.

On Thursday of Passion Week, Syrians begin a journey of grief as they celebrate in worship the Last Supper and remember the agony of Christ. A sense of awe and mystery fill my heart as I ponder the story of the Last Supper. Good Friday is referred to as Sad

the long wait outside the church also add to the melancholic mood of the day.

Saturday of Passion Week is known for being a day of light. Christians go to worship in the morning to celebrate the life of Christ that conquers death. The rest of the day is usually spent in busy preparation for Easter—cleaning our homes, coloring and decorating eggs, preparing food for the feast and setting out the new clothes we will wear to worship. This leads up to the happiest day of the year—Easter. I remember waking early in the morning so that I could be the first to greet my family, saying, “Christ is Risen!” The phone often rang with relatives and friends calling to share this greeting.

Worship in Syrian churches is full of joyous music and celebration. The Easter Parade starts at church and goes around the neighborhood, with hymns, bands and an empty cross. The excitement of the day would fill my heart with faith and a deep sense of the presence of God. After worship and Easter dinner, we had several visits to make and many visitors to receive. It is customary for relatives and friends to exchange visits on the same day to share Easter greetings. I loved those visits, as I got an Easter egg from every house and the best Jordanian almonds and chocolate. Of course, the adults got to drink liqueur in small, fancy shot glasses!

On Easter Monday, another great celebration, both at church and on the streets, takes place. People gather to share the good news that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has taken place. Easter Monday marks the begin-

For Everything, A Seasoning

Ma’amoul (or mamool), Easter Walnut Cakes

Filling:

2 cups ground walnuts
1/2 cup sugar
2–3 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon orange blossom water
Combine all ingredients; set aside

Cakes:

1 1/2 cups butter
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup evaporated milk
3 cups flour
1 teaspoon orange flower water

Cooking Instructions

Preheat oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit. Melt the butter and blend it with the sugar. Add the milk and flour; knead well. Form dough into small round balls (two inches). Make an indentation and fill with one teaspoon of the nut mixture (filling). Close the top, sealing dough together. Place in a ma’amoul mold to form pattern on the bottom. Using your fingers, flatten the top of the dough. Tap mold to release ma’amoul. Place on an ungreased baking tray. Place the tray on the middle shelf of the oven. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes. Move tray to upper shelf and bake another five to six minutes. When cool, sprinkle with powdered sugar.

Traditional Craft: Decorated Candles

It’s a Syrian tradition for children to take candles decorated with flowers and ribbons to church for Palm Sunday, along with palm branches. As part of the Palm Sunday parade, children carry their lit candles to share the light of Christ with the world. Although we don’t usually have children carry three-foot decorated candles in the United States, you may use 12" tapers and decorate them with Easter symbols (such as butterflies, eggs, crosses or lilies) using colored markers, glitter, glue and fronds.

Church/Family Activity: Olive Leaf Pins

For Easter Sunday, a family or a congregation may pin olive leaves on their clothes as a symbol of new life and the resurrection of Christ. You also may attach the leaves to a small piece of paper, on which you’ve written the words, “Christ is Risen.”

Game: Easter Egg Contest

In Syria, an egg-knocking game is played using decorated eggs. The object of the contest is to hit everyone else’s egg and to keep one’s own unbroken. The last player with a whole egg is declared the winner.

ning of our witness to the love of God as shown in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we not only celebrate the resurrection, but we also share the good news with others. We live every day of our lives as

a witness to the great mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again! I pray that you will find this Easter season a time to enter deeply into this mystery of faith.