



How do they decide when Easter is going to be each year?

This question has come up more this year because Easter is so early - March 23. (It's actually the second earliest date that Easter can be.)

Here's the explanation:

The date for Resurrection Sunday ("Easter") varies considerably from one year to the next. It should come as no surprise that the date changes each year. Since the Resurrection occurred on a Sunday, the dates for a given Sunday change from year to year. (It's kind of like our Thanksgiving holiday which is always on a Thursday, but the date changes from year to year.)

The date for Easter is chosen differently than for Thanksgiving, however. Thanksgiving always occurs on the 4th Thursday in November. Whereas Easter can be anywhere from the 4th Sunday in March to the 4th Sunday in April - quite a range. Here's why: The date chosen to celebrate the Resurrection comes from a formula established by Roman Emperor Constantine the Great and the church-wide Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. That formula is: "The first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox (first official day of spring).

This year the Spring equinox occurs at 1:48 a.m. on March 20. The first full moon after the Spring equinox is on Friday, March 21. That means the following Sunday, March 23, is Easter.

According to this rule, the latest possible date for Resurrection Sunday is April 25, next occurring in 2038. (The second-latest date - April 24 is coming up in just three years). We won't see the earliest possible date, March 22, until 2285. (That means you'll have to live another 77 years to see an Easter earlier than this year!) Most often, Resurrection Sunday comes during the first week of April.

Just to further confuse the issue, the date for Easter is calculated differently by Eastern Orthodox Christians who use the Julian Calendar (we use what is known as the Gregorian Calendar). Only about every fourth year do the Gregorian and Julian Calendars line up, so three-fourths of the time Eastern Christians and Western Christians celebrate the Resurrection on different dates. Attempts have been made to come up with a common date. (It's not a real good witness to the non-Christian world when we can't even agree on when to celebrate the greatest event in history). So far those attempts at a unified Easter date have not been successful.

Since the date of Easter is moveable that means that many of the other special days and seasons of the Church Year are moveable, because almost everything keys off of Easter.

For example, Lent always begins 40 days before Easter (not counting Sundays), so Ash Wednesday always falls on a different date. Since Ash Wednesday brings the season of Epiphany to an end, when Ash Wednesday and Easter are early the Epiphany season is very short. When Ash Wednesday and Easter are late, then the Epiphany season is nearly a month longer.

Also, since Pentecost always falls 50 days after Easter, that festival also moves with Easter. And, of course, if Easter is late, then Pentecost is late and the Pentecost season is shortened. In the Church Year, everything keys off of Easter - as it should. It is the event that our faith hinges on.

For merchants, the changing date of Easter is inconvenient for their annual planning of sales and inventory. However, it is good that this special day is not determined by commerce but by the movements of the sun and moon. This agrees with the divinely ordained purpose of heavenly lights as markers for times and seasons (Gen 1:14).

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net