

Don't forget the moon

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

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I've been following with interest the conversation between Christian leaders about fixing the date of Easter to a particular day in the calendar—like the second or third Sunday in April. Back in January, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, [voiced his support for the idea](#), joining leaders of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Welby was even so bold as to suggest that the date of Easter could be fixed in as few as five or ten years, saying, "School holidays and so on are all fixed—it affects almost everything you do in the spring and summer. I would love to see it before I retire."

I am, without question, opposed to the idea. But I've really wrestled with it. Am I opposed to it simply because I don't like change? That's a real possibility. When it comes to traditions, I like trying something new, but I need to know that when the experiment is over we'll return back to business as usual. This would be, after all, the biggest thing that the several branches of the Christian community have accomplished since the Council of Nicaea in 325. Forget Martin Luther. Forget iconoclasm. If we can get the Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants to agree on setting the date of Easter, we'd have the first real, substantial agreement since the split over monophysitism. How could anyone—especially me, a parish priest who values deeply the conflicted history of our churches—be opposed to that?

Well, last night, I got my answer. Driving home from dinner with our family, I saw a huge, golden, fully illuminated Passover moon hanging low in the horizon. In that moment, I knew. Seeing that moon awakened a sense of drama and anticipation in my heart. I changed course. Instead of going home, I had to drive down to the river to see it. I knew the moon was rising quickly and that with every passing minute the disc would shrink in my perspective, so I raced down past the empty water park, past the still-illuminated soccer fields, down to the end of the road. I got out of my car and ran down a trail to a point that stuck out into the river, where I could look up and see that moon. There it was. An immutable, unavoidable, incontrovertible call to Holy Week.

The date of Easter is already fixed. It is fixed not to the Gregorian calendar, which most of us use, or the Julian calendar, which the Orthodox Christians use, but to the lunar calendar, which is the ancient calendar of God's people, the Hebrews. For ALL Christians, [Easter is on the first Sunday following the first full moon following the vernal equinox](#), which means Easter Day is whatever Sunday follows the first full moon of spring. That ties the date of Easter to the Jewish celebration of Passover. Granted, ever since the Gregorian and Julian calendars split, the Christian churches can't quite figure out how to align the date of Easter with the date of Passover. Consider, for example, that this year Western Easter is on March 27, Passover is April 22-30, and Orthodox Easter is May 1.

For me, though, the desire and efforts to unify the dates of Easter and Passover should not be based on a single, fixed date on the solar calendar but on a return to the lunar cycle of the Hebrew calendar. Read [Exodus 12](#), in which God commands the Israelites to prepare for their liberation from Egypt. Preparations began on the tenth day of the month of Nissan. Then, on the fourteenth day of the month the lambs or goats were slaughtered and the doorposts and lintels of the houses painted with blood. That night, the Lord passed through Egypt and killed every firstborn in the land whose door was not marked with the sacrificial blood, hence the term *Passover*. When Pharaoh let God's people go, they ran out into the wilderness under the light of a full moon. The full moon happens on the 14th day of a lunar month. Imagine trying to find your way in the desert without even the light of the moon to guide you. Likewise, imagine celebrating Holy Week with a waning crescent moon in the sky. Imagine driving to church for the Easter Vigil with no moon at all up above. It doesn't work.

For a long time, I was worried that my instincts are Luddite—and perhaps they are. No, I don't navigate by the moon. No, I am not Jewish. But Jesus was, and my spiritual ancestors walked out of bondage in Egypt into freedom under the light of the full moon. And, through the Christian *Pesach* of Good Friday into Easter, I claim that freedom for myself. Easter has become a Christian celebration, but it was, to Jesus and his followers, a thoroughly Jewish observance. Read the stories of Holy Week. Even centuries later, they cannot make sense without the Jewish Passover. Thus, we cannot abandon our lunar date for Easter—no matter how convenient or ecumenical it may be.

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