

Staying awake for Easter

What ritual remedies exist to sharpen our spiritual attention, focus, and clarity?

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April 5, 2023



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Easter offers Christians a spiritual wakeup call.

For some, the call is literal. Many denominations observe the tradition of an Easter Vigil, keeping awake late into—if not always through—the night before Easter Sunday. In doing so, they symbolically keep faith with Jesus during his entombment.

By elongating the night, the vigil sharpens the yearning for Easter morning and the deliverance it heralds.

This hyper-vigilance need not be restricted to Easter alone. As Thomas Merton memorably put it, “The spiritual life is . . . first of all a matter of keeping awake.” Nothing else of significance can happen if we sleepwalk through our spiritual lives. How, then, might one extend this attentiveness throughout the year? And what other ritual remedies exist to sharpen our spiritual attention, focus, and clarity?

For those with an appetite for asceticism, Christian tradition offers a bevy of options. In a centuries-old tradition in Ireland, pilgrims take boats out to St. Patrick’s Purgatory, located on a tiny island in the middle of a remote lake. With only a bit of bread or oatcake to nourish them, they process barefoot through a series of prayer stations. The first night is an all-night vigil, and those who drift off are said to face eternal damnation, turning the pilgrimage into a high-stakes gamble.

Other faiths provide instructive examples, too. In Judaism there is a custom at Shavuot—the holiday that commemorates God’s gift of the law to the Israelites—of staying up through the night studying Torah. There’s even a legend that the Israelites slept in late on the morning God was set to deliver the law to them on Mount Sinai, so Shavuot offers an opportunity to make up for one’s ancestors’ drowsiness. While staying awake studying might seem like homework, the point is actually that spiritual study is a privilege and joy, so much so that one might be so carried away by it that morning comes unexpectedly.

The importance of spiritual vigilance is hardly just a Western discipline. Yoga, for example, pays particular attention to the role of the body in channeling and sustaining spiritual attentiveness. *Savasana* (corpse pose) is often described as the most challenging pose, not because it is physically grueling but because it requires one to keep the mind quiet but present even when in physical repose, ready to drift off.

Buddhism is replete with stories that emphasize the value of mindful contemplation and literally keeping one’s eyes open. One of the most celebrated Buddhist monks is Bodhidharma, who transmitted Chan (Zen) Buddhism to China. Bodhidharma is said to have stared at a wall in meditation for nine years, growing so frustrated when he lapsed into sleep that he cut off his eyelids (take that, Van Gogh!). According to legend, his eyelids fell to the ground and sprouted tea leaves, which monks

harvested and brewed through the centuries to keep awake during their own meditations.

We do not need to think of Jesus as a Buddhist guru—though some writers have—to imagine he would have appreciated the prodigious self-discipline of Bodhidharma and his followers. Indeed, one of Jesus' last requests of his disciples is a simple plea to stay up with him. "I am deeply grieved, even to death," he tells several disciples in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, "remain here, and stay awake with me" (Matthew 26:38). Not once but three times his groggy companions doze off.

Easter is an invitation to do better, to stay awake not just for oneself but in solidarity with those in times of trial. If we can manage to do that, maybe we'll even find we rest easier when the time does come for sleep.

This article is adapted from the author's book What Would Jesus See, forthcoming from Broadleaf. Used by permission.