



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Easter 2017

"Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead."
(Colossians 1:18)

Dear friends and co-missionaries,

In China, including Hong Kong, Easter always falls at the same time as Qing Ming, the spring festival. Last year they were on the same day; this year they were five days apart. I am fascinated by the way that the themes of these two holidays connect with each other. They both involve visiting the tombs.

On Easter, Christians go to the cemetery with the disciples in the gospel reading and find Jesus' tomb empty. On Qing Ming, families go to the cemetery to honor their ancestors at their tombs. A Chinese friend told me that honoring the ancestors is important for Chinese people because it helps them to reflect not so much on where they are going after they die but more on where their life came from in the first place. The ancestors brought them into the world and created their family. So, on Qing Ming the whole family gathers at the cemetery to clean up the tomb, burn incense as they say prayers to and for their ancestors, and leave offerings of food and drink.



They might also bring offerings of paper models of the things their ancestors enjoyed in life: food, shoes, money, cigarettes, and burn these in a small oven next to the tomb.

If the item is too big, like this paper car I saw at a funeral home!, they bring it to a special location designated for burning offerings.

Sometimes I talk with my students and colleagues about what Christians do on Qing Ming. They tell me that if the whole family is Christian they observe Qing Ming in a way that reminds me of the Mexican "Dia de los Muertos/Day of the Dead". The whole family gathers for a picnic at the tomb, feeling that their ancestor is somehow present with them. They may pray and sing hymns and leave flowers behind. If there are only a few Christians in the family, they still join the family to show love and respect because this is still where they came from, even if they no longer participate in the offering rituals.



I think that the emphasis of Qing Ming on our origin puts a wonderful spin on Easter. If I go to the tomb of Jesus on Easter not to be reminded of my destination but to be reminded of "the origin of our existence," as a Chinese friend put it, this makes Jesus' empty tomb something truly new and amazing. The place where Jesus' corpse was laid becomes the place from which the cause of all life emerges. It's where we came from as a Christian family. So, on the day of resurrection we revisit Jesus' empty tomb together to share a meal, to pray and sing, and to make the place beautiful with flowers because the Spirit of Jesus is with us there, making us alive together with Christ. Happy Easter season to you all!

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