

Guess who's Coming to Easter

April 5, 2004

“Religious” holidays still bring the crowds to church. As for Easter, people are actually willing to get up and go to church at 6:30 in the morning, and as someone has said, “Almost like they want to be there with the women to see the empty tomb.” For some, it will be their first time since Christmas. As for some of the others, you would be surprised who is among our Easter morning visitors.

For me, I like the opportunity Easter presents—one of those special Sundays in the calendar when the potential for visitors, first timers, and non-churched family guests naturally increase. We do not even have to work at it. It just happens. Of course churches plan special things to aid in getting them to choose “our” church. There is usually some level of special effort for making Easter visitors feel welcome, and for many churches there are plans to “up-it-a-notch” with an emphasis on evangelism.

Allow for some pre-Easter musing on this opportunity.

On Easter Sunday this year about 12% of the atheist and agnostic population will attend a Christian church service. That’s a million and a half adults in the U.S. To give a more personal geographic illustration, in my home State of Connecticut that number will be over 18,000. In Fairfield County alone this type of visitor will number over 4,500. (My good friend’s church in Lanyon, Iowa, population 50, will have 6 atheists and/or agnostics join their Easter service.)

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, nationally church attendance climbed to forty-seven percent (47%). Some prematurely announced a revival of church attendance. But as the unlikely source of the NY Times pointed out, “[A] noticeable rise...but no more than what is usually seen during the Christmas or Easter seasons.” By early November 2001, attendance had dropped back to 42%, the pre-attack levels.

David Letterman once gave a *Top Ten List* of the “Best Reasons To Go To Church.” His third reason was, “This is the only place in the neighborhood you could find a parking place.”

OK, what’s all this have to do with Easter and your church?

As for “Parking,” here’s one of my *top* pet peeves: May I strongly suggest that you show your potential guests on Easter morning that you expected them, saving the closer parking spots for them. I, for one, wouldn’t want to make the casual attendee, especially our neighboring atheists and agnostics, and the closet-doubters have to look far for parking. They have enough barriers keeping them away as it is. You should want them, right away, to know you want them at your church!

(An aside: A lot can be determined by where Christians park on Sunday mornings at their church. I think there is a direct correlation to a Christian’s commitment to 1) church growth, 2) sharing Christ, and 3) whether they expect guests actually to come to their church by where they park—the further away from the most convenient door, the more they expect their church to grow, the more they likely they are to share their faith, and the more they expect guests to show up.)

On Easter Sunday, there will be plenty of sermons giving “proof” that Jesus was raised from the dead. I think the non-churched person is tired of all the “proof.” They are looking for what difference it will make in their lives. According to the Barna Group, at least half of the unchurched find that discovering ways of handling daily challenges more appropriately or effectively are compelling reasons to return to church. They want to know that the Resurrected One answers the challenges they face. You should want your guests to discover that the people at your church actually believe Jesus rose from the dead and that *that* fact has had an impact on our daily lives.

I believe it was natural for people to show up in groves for church following the horrible day of 9/11. It was a natural place for Americans to go after such a devastating—never before happen—event. The sad problem—we didn’t have answers for them so they’d return and stay. I dare say they heard too many sermons on the wickedness

of our culture, the consequences of the sins of our forefathers, and how Islam is taking over the world. If we want “that 9/11 crowd” to re-visit for Easter and return afterward, we need to show them Jesus has the answers, not figure-pointing except for the one that points to Him and all He has to offer for forgiveness and security for the future.

My favorite Bible story is found in Luke 24: two men walking on the road to Emmaus. The men meet up with a stranger, who is actually Jesus, but is unrecognized. The Stranger asks, “What are you discussing?” The men stood still, their faces downcast and said: “Are you the only one who does not know the things that have happened in these days?” This is the most ironic statement ever uttered—Jesus is *the only one* who knows what has happened! This is the One our Easter Sunday guests need to meet.

Easter is a natural opportunity for us. Let us rise up to the occasion and be the people of the Risen One. Perhaps some, maybe even many, of our guests will find a compelling reason to return.

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