

Brett Younger

Easter Comes to Iraq

On Sunday, people all over the United States will put on new shoes and wonder if they should have gotten a half-size larger. They briefly consider going out for pancakes, but abandon that plan in favor of searching through the plastic grass in the bottom of their children's Easter baskets for the traditional resurrection breakfast of Cadbury chocolate eggs.

Some of the visitors get to church before Sunday school is over and take the best seats. They are blissfully unaware of the members on the pew behind them burning "We've-sat-there-every-Sunday-since-last-Easter" holes in the back of their Easter bonnets. A few wonder why they don't sing "Up from the Grave He Arose" any more.

As the preacher reads about the broken-hearted women who stumbled to the tomb of the kindest person they had ever known, they glance at their watch. As the offering plate passes, they glance at their watch again. As they leave they almost ask the minister, "Why is it that every time I come to church you preach on the resurrection?" but think better of it and comment, "The flowers certainly are pretty."

They go to lunch at a restaurant that has taken more reservations than they have chairs. When they finally get a table they enjoy eating way too much.

On Monday someone will ask, "How was your Easter?" and they will answer, "Fine."

On Sunday, people all over Baghdad will put on the best clothes they have and make their way to the 58 Christian churches in the city. Sanctuaries are decorated with rearranged funeral arrangements. As the preacher reads of the women with tears in their eyes going to the graveyard, they know exactly how that feels. They keep thinking about the people they love that they have lost.

U.S. military officials estimate that 2,320 people have been killed in Baghdad

Brett Younger

alone.

Some think about a boy who lives in the southern part of the city. Ali Ismaeel Abbas, 12, lost both arms and was severely burned as the result of a fire. His mother, father, and eight other members of his family were killed in the battle. *Time* magazine printed a picture of a broken-hearted aunt standing over the boy as though at a funeral. He looks as dead as Jesus on the cross.

As they pray, Iraqi Christians can't forget how long they have prayed for peace, and how abandoned by God they feel. The ministers are at a loss. Some thought about canceling their Easter services. What do you say when death crushes life?

But perhaps, for just a moment, during the Arabic equivalent of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" they will sing "Made like him, like him we rise . . . ours the cross, the grave, the skies," and an Alleluia light will flicker in the devastating darkness.

Easter isn't for people whose only worries are that their shoes are too tight or the line at the restaurant is too long. Easter begins with a trip to the cemetery.

The truth of this holy day is that the darkness in the world seems overwhelming, but no matter how horrible the night, light will come in the morning. For those who gather at the tomb it is hard to believe, but God offers life that overcomes even death.

Brett Younger is senior pastor at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.