

Enacting Easter

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If you were to ask most people about the story of Christmas, they could likely recall it in some detail. Religious or not, people would likely name the shepherds, the Wise Men, the star, or any number of other details. Even if they were not entirely accurate, or didn't understand the theological message of the birth of Christ, many people could tell you something about the Christmas story. We have Saint Francis of Assisi to thank for that.

In the thirteenth century, Saint Francis created the first Nativity scene. He was desperately trying to move the focus away from the material practice of gift-giving that had become so central to the celebration of Christmas, so he created a staged, live display reenacting the birth of Christ to encourage people to reflect on the true meaning and purpose of Christmas. It was a stroke of brilliance.

Today, Nativity scenes can be seen almost everywhere during the months of December and January. They are on front lawns, in churches, on Christmas cards and wrapping paper, and presented in countless other ways during those months. We invite children and families to act out the Nativity as live manger scenes in religious education classes and other church programs. Throughout the Christmas season, we sing songs that tell the story of the birth of Christ, and we are able to conjure images that look a lot like familiar Nativity scenes. Is it any wonder that Christmas is so prominent?





The same cannot be said for Easter. Culturally, this holiday does not have the same importance. Schools may or may not be out during the Easter holiday, and many businesses remain open. Some schools even have events on Easter Saturday, while they would likely never consider scheduling something on Christmas Eve.

The prominence of the celebration of Christmas might be traced to the fact that there are so many visual points of reference, and many people have a personal history of acting out or participating in the live retelling of the Christmas story.



What if we employed the same methods for Easter? Although we may not bring about a large cultural shift, we do have the unique opportunity as teachers and catechists to invite children into the telling of the Easter story in a way that can have a long-lasting impact. Such interactive strategies are powerful educational tools.

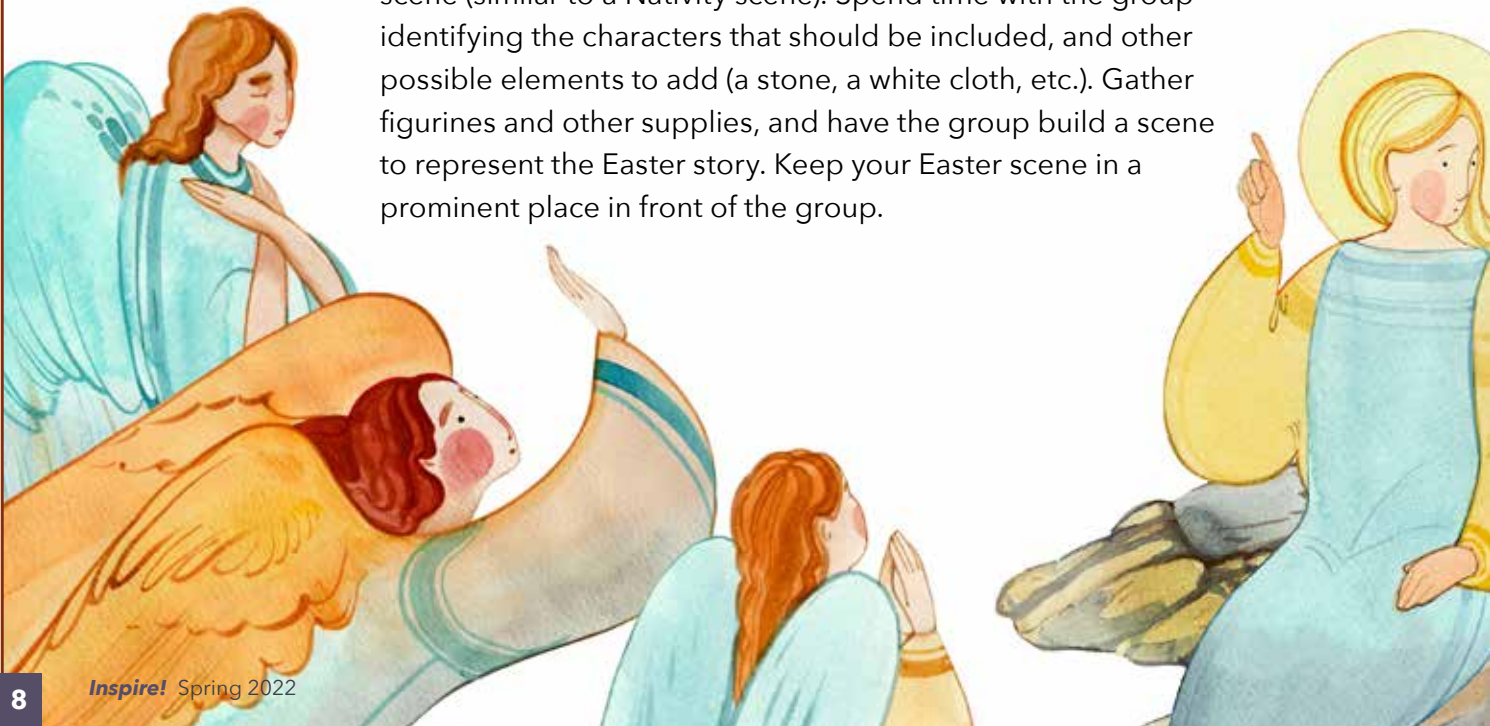
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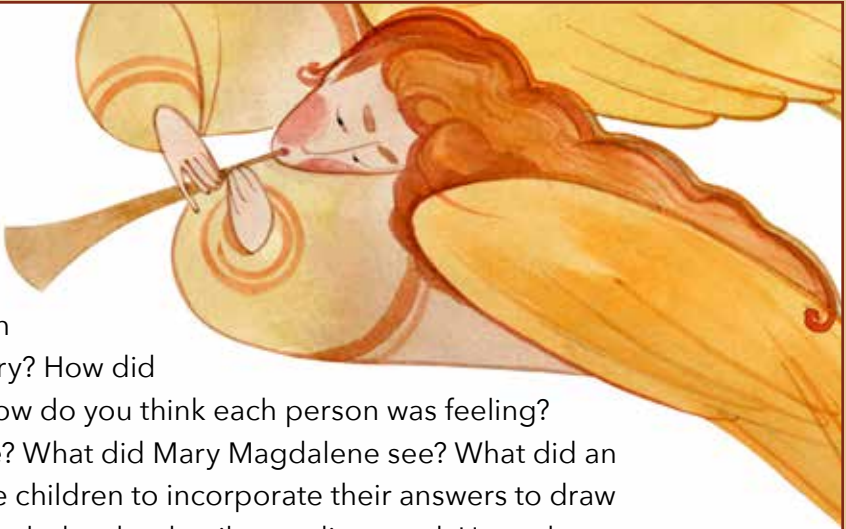
Each Gospel tells of the first Easter, but the details in each account are different (just as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke differ in their telling of the birth of Christ). The account from the Gospel of John is used liturgically and provides a great place to start. Read John 20:1-18 with the children. For older children, you may want to include verses 19-23 as well. Then invite the children to visually and physically enact the first Easter.

Act It Out: Invite the children to act out the Easter story. Read John 20:1-18, and assign the children to play characters such as Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, the other disciple, two angels, Jesus, and the rest of the disciples. With older children, expand the portrayal to include John 20:19-23 and Jesus' appearance to the disciples. Add costumes and create a simple background to enhance the portrayal. When all the children are rehearsed and ready, take your show on the road around the school or parish.

Take It to Church: Work with the pastor and parish staff to have the children act out the first Easter as part of the Easter Sunday morning Mass. Many parishes have children's masses for Christmas Eve in which the children play special roles in the liturgy (often acting out the Christmas Gospel) and the Homily is presented in a child-friendly way with age-appropriate material. Work with parish staff to expand what is usually a Christmas practice to the Easter celebration.

Build It: Work with the group to create a diorama or Easter scene (similar to a Nativity scene). Spend time with the group identifying the characters that should be included, and other possible elements to add (a stone, a white cloth, etc.). Gather figurines and other supplies, and have the group build a scene to represent the Easter story. Keep your Easter scene in a prominent place in front of the group.





Draw It: Help the children draw the Easter story. Ask some questions to help establish a visual image: Who is in the story? How did each person get to the tomb? How do you think each person was feeling? Where does the story take place? What did Mary Magdalene see? What did an ancient tomb look like? Invite the children to incorporate their answers to draw a picture of the first Easter that includes the details you discussed. Hang the images around the room when all are complete, and reference them frequently throughout the Easter season.

Show It and Stage It: Help the children stage the Easter story. Show Easter picture books and talk about the pictures. It's okay if a book is on the younger side in favor of memorable pictures. Books such as *The Easter Story*, by Juliet David, or *The Story of Easter*, by Patricia A. Pingry, have strong visuals. After talking about each picture, invite the children to create a tableau recreation of the image you just discussed. Continue through the book, having the children create a tableau for each picture in the book.

Easter is the high point of the Church year and celebrates the most important moment for our community of faith. Help the children embrace Easter and connect with the story of the Resurrection of Christ by inviting them to enact it in all or some of these various ways.

