On Easter Sunday, two time-honored rituals rush headlong into each other. Both are called Easter but they look like two entirely different events. In Christian households that are filled with small children, there is the generational debate about which comes takes priority - the celebration of the anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus, or scampering about the house looking for celluloid "grass" nests filled with brightly colored eggs and candy treats - searching the house for colored eggs (even though so many kids don't even like hard-boiled eggs).

Did you ever stop to think how bizarre the customs surrounding Easter truly are? First, there is the Easter Bunny himself. A big male rabbit that carries a basket with a nest of eggs. Yes, rabbits are extremely good at carrying out that "be fruitful and multiply" mandate. And yes, eggs are perfect little encapsulated symbols of new life to come (or, at least fresh eggs are). But rabbits don't lay eggs nor make nests. Especially male rabbits. What's that all about? How did it all get started?

Sociologist Cindy Dell Clark has researched what she calls the "trinity" of characters in children's most important ritual systems -- Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. Clark's conclusion, after interviewing thousands of children, is that of these "big three" so-called "children's celebrations," only the Easter Bunny is a wholly child-centered, child-controlled symbol. As such, the Easter Bunny is one of the most mis-understood and befuddling creatures adults have ever tried to figure out ("Leaps of Faith, Flights of Fancy" [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]).

What adult doesn't get a bit anxious about the pre dominance of Santa Claus over the baby Jesus at Christmastime? We know that our society has tried to co-opt Christmas and make it about something other than a religious celebration - and done a very good job of it. As Christians we are conflicted. We want the Christmas the world says we should have but we want to be faithful to the celebration of Jesus' birth, too. ...But who has ever felt particularly threatened by or theologically suspicious of the Easter Bunny? Adults dismiss the Easter Bunny as a leftover legacy from earlier nature-based celebrations of spring's arrival and as an innocuous symbol of the new life that is abundant in springtime. But still, to even most children (ones old enough to know what's what anyway), Easter is about Jesus raising from the dead. The Easter Bunny comes in there, too, but it's like two separate holidays that happen to be on the same day.

Kids love the Easter Bunny! Perhaps because the Easter Bunny doesn't keep lists of who has been "naughty or nice" like Santa Claus. Or perhaps because he is quiet and soft and huggable and speechless that children eagerly flock to the sides of mall Easter bunnies. Sitting on Santa's lap is often a terrifying experience for small children. But hugging the Easter Bunny - a guaranteed "warm fuzzy."

All the strange and seemingly nonsensical (to adults) traditions that go along with the Easter Bunny are kept alive and reinvented each year by children. How many households without children color eggs and hide nests around their living rooms? How many households with children would color eggs and hide nests if children didn't insist on these messy and bothersome rituals? In our house we stopped all that as early as possible... and miss it a bit.

The Easter Bunny's appeal is illogical. Santa fits neatly into adult-centered systems of rewards and punishments. Be nice -- get presents. Be naughty -- get nothing. Santa Claus has a job -- he employs elves to work for him, crafting all those gifts we receive. Santa is a successful guy. In many ways he is one of us... Hard working, self-motivated, benevolently holding the purse strings, asking hard questions and demanding that the kids toe the line...

How different is the Easter Bunny! He comes to children without a set policy for behavior. His egg tokens are left everywhere -- easily accessible to even the smallest child or the worst "seeker." The mute Easter Bunny doesn't appear to espouse any particular system for punishments and rewards, and his symbols - plastic grass - baskets - colored eggs - don't seem to make any sense.

But here is the thing... We maybe ought to take a cue from our kids. The empty tomb on Easter morning presents Christians with a vision that has much more in common with the illogical and ironical Easter Bunny than the easily comprehensible and familiar Santa Claus. The abandoned burial site is itself mute -- a visual testimony to the power of life over death. On that first Easter morning, the women came early to the tomb. The birds hadn't even started singing for the day yet. It was silent. The only sound was the crunch of their sandals on the path... Like the Easter Bunny's ridiculously incongruous basket of eggs, the very place that surely seems to be a dead end (dead end because by the time the eggs are
finally found, there's a good chance salmonella may have set in - it may not be a good idea to eat them - they may still be beautiful but may be poisonous.) -- Jesus' tomb - a place of death and decay -- suddenly becomes the symbol of birth and new life.

Paul's counsel to the Colossians is to "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." It's like the hints mom and dad give to the kids when they don't find certain eggs - "Look higher - no, more to your right..." It is as "seekers" that Christians come to know that their lives are fulfilled in the resurrection of a Christ who is "now" but "not yet," whose work is "complete" but yet "incomplete." Christian life is, in this sense, one long Easter egg hunt. We search for it, we seek it, we want it... and, as our lives go on and righteous acts and lifestyles emerge, we find the beauty of Christ in us.

On Christmas morning, the point of presents is to unwrap them and see what wonderful gifts you have received. The point of the Tooth Fairy is a tangible, spendable reward under the pillow of a child who has lost a tooth. But on Easter morning, the reason for rising early is to go on a hunt -- to seek out the nests of colorful eggs that have been hidden throughout that most familiar of all places, our own home. The fun, the fulfillment, is in the search, not in stock-piling a cache of hard-boiled eggs - eggs that we, ourselves, boiled and colored just yesterday.

On Easter morning, Jesus mother and the other Mary and Silome go on a little search - like our kids on Easter morning - looking for something that has had the life boiled out of it, knowing that it is as dead as dead can be. They wanted to get to Jesus' body for the ritual cleansing and perfuming before decay set in. They had a dilemma, however. They realized on the way that the three of them couldn't possibly roll the huge stone disk away from the entrance. And it didn't seem likely that the Roman soldiers guarding it would help them. They felt a bit foolish. But when they got there, the guards were gone. The stone had already been rolled away. They couldn't come up with a good explanation for either of those. They cautiously approached the tomb and were startled to find someone inside. Not a grave robber. Not one of the guards. Not Jesus. They saw a young man (or so it appeared) dressed in a white robe sitting there where Jesus has been laid. He said to them, "Sorry for startling you. You are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He is risen. Look - this is the place they laid him." And they saw the shroud that he had been wrapped in laying there, obviously without Jesus in it.

Our girls, on Easter morning, almost always failed to find at least one egg. They looked under the sofa - not there - behind the music stand on the piano - not there - on top of the TV - not there. Sue always knew exactly how many we made so we'd be sure to find them all and not have a rotting egg found weeks later because of the smell. Eventually they'd find it... and then keep looking, just in case there were more that mom forgot about - until we told them plainly, "There are no more to find. The big event is over."

But, of course, for Mary and Mary and Salome NOT finding Jesus meant the big event had just begun. The angel told them not to be afraid but they were. They knew that NOT finding Jesus in that tomb would change everything. Something unimaginable had happened. The Roman guards were gone. These were men who would be executed if they abandoned their post - yet they did. The stone was rolled away - a ton of limestone mysteriously moved. Jesus' body was gone - who would have taken it and why? The stranger sitting inside - Why was he there and who was he? They went home in deepest distress. They expected to wipe away the blood and anoint the body, but instead they found ...nothing...

Somewhere, later that morning, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene - can you imagine the shock? She saw Jesus die. She saw the nails and the speared side and the blood everywhere. But she knew it was him when she saw him and when he spoke to her. As soon as he left she went straight to the disciples. "Foolish woman. We know that what you say isn't so. Go home." That hurt. But she was just a woman. You can't tell a man anything...

Still later Jesus appeared to two of His followers and THEY went and told the disciples gathered there in that upper room. "No way. That can't be. Either you're lying or you're delusional. Jesus is dead. We saw him die. We watched him be buried. Dead men don't come back from the grave. It would be nice, but even Jesus can't do that with all his miracles."

That first Easter wasn't filled with joy, it was filled with unbelief and accusations. It was filled with doubt and fear and uncertainty. It was filled with distrust and harsh words - so unlike every Easter that followed for the next two thousand years... It wasn't until later in the day that Jesus paid those eleven gathered there a visit. "What's wrong with you
guys? Didn't you understand anything I said about my death? Why wouldn't you give Mary the benefit of the doubt? Why would you even doubt the two I talked with earlier? I'm so disappointed in you all.

"If you believe that I am alive now, here is what you need to do: Go into all the world and tell others that I live. Many won't believe you any more than you believed Mary or the other two, but some will and they will be saved from their sins."

"Mom! Look what I found! I found the blue and yellow egg!"
"Of course you did dear. Isn't it beautiful? Go show your dad."

And thus the gospel of Jesus Christ begins. It begins with doubt and questioning, but ends in discovery of something beautiful - too beautiful to keep to oneself - it is something intended to be shared.

Turn to your neighbor and say it: Say "He is Risen!" And when you hear it, say "He is Risen, indeed!" ... Now go out and tell your world.