

Easter Egg Symbols

SHERYL MARTIN¹

What does one talk about when Muslim friends come for dinner on Good Friday? We hadn't planned our meal together specifically to fall on this Christian day of observance—it was the only evening our families had free that week. As I planned and cooked the halal food, I messaged my friend on Facebook, and asked if it was okay to share a story about why we observe Easter. She said that would be great, so I thought and prayed and involved my family in planning something appropriate.

As I prepared for Good Friday, I was reminded of the time our family spent living overseas. While living in Afghanistan, I realized that even literate people there had an oral tradition of learning. Very few people read for pleasure or enlightenment. In fact, the verb *KhAndan*, “to read,” is the same as the verb “to study.” Mentoring and learning are done around a cup of tea, recounting proverbs, stories, and poems. Highly motivated university students “study” or read, but the rest of the population mostly depends on verbal interactions. Proverbial stories from “Mullah Nasruddin”² are chuckled over and a lesson is learned. We enjoyed many cups of tea with friends at Eid al-Fitr and heard stories of hardships and joy, and life in the midst of a country at war. Women marked time and seasons by the moon, or the birth of their children, or the government in power, or the last great earthquake.

I recalled trying to teach my very bright house helper to make chocolate cake. She herself created beautiful embroidery patterns and made complex mathematical calculations in her head for the graphs and supplies. She had recently joined an adult literacy class to supplement her third-grade education. I figured a simple recipe would be easy for her to follow. I helped her write down all the measurements for the recipe. She understood the words and the numbers, but she had a hard time grasping standard measurements and following the recipe. One day I returned home from the clinic to the smell of chocolate cake baking in the oven. My house helper was puzzled. She said, “It’s been baking for more than an hour, but it’s not getting done.” I reviewed the mea-

¹ *Sheryl Martin is a member of Eastern Mennonite Mission's Christian/Muslim Relations Team.*

² Mullah Nasruddin is a popular “wise fool” character in Middle Eastern folk stories. The stories teach morals and lessons on life.

surements with her, and we discovered she had only put in half of the correct amount of flour. Perhaps if I had shown her how to follow the steps, instead of relying on the written recipe, she might have been successful.

So I settled on the idea of a visual story, simple enough for the children to understand and participate in. As I prepared symbols to fit into plastic Easter eggs to illustrate a story about Good Friday and Easter, my ever-encouraging, and sometimes-critical teenagers listened.³ “You can’t tell the story that way, it will give the poor kids nightmares!” was their response to my symbols of a braided whip, crown of thorns, and three small spiky nails. Finally the family consensus was to start with a baby—the familiar story of Jesus’ birth. Surely Muslims living in the United States have an idea that Christmas celebrates Jesus’ birth. “Let’s connect with Jesus being the Lamb of God” was another idea. A tiny toy baby fit in the first egg, and then came a plastic lamb. A plastic dagger would prompt the story of sacrifice and how people living in the days of the Taurat (or Torah) sacrificed lambs to cover for their sins. The next object would prompt the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son until God provided a ram. Ideas for objects and parts of the story came together: disciples or friends gathering around Jesus, and the miracle of the loaves and fishes—how God multiplied the food and provided for the people. We did eventually have plastic eggs with a “soft” thorny crown and the cross, as well as a purple cloth for the royal robe that they used to mock him. A white facial tissue sufficed for the linen his body was wrapped in, and a stone from the yard would be for the barrier to the grave. A cinnamon stick and whole cloves from our kitchen represented the spices women brought on the third day, and a plastic angel was located to speak to the women.

Our friends arrived on time Friday evening and we greeted one another with hugs and inquiries about each others’ extended families. Soon we were seated at the table and we enjoyed our dinner of pilau, chicken, spinach, and eggplant. The men exchanged views on the weather and world events. My friend complimented me on my Central Asian spinach recipe which, I had to admit to her, I found by searching the Internet! Their two preschool children, with beautiful, expressive dark eyes and quick grins, found it hard to sit still as we ate our meal. After dessert and tea, it was time for the Easter egg story.

We gathered in the living room and I began the story. The children took turns opening each plastic egg and holding the object found inside. I started with the birth of Jesus, *Isa al masih*, or Messiah, and explained how he was also

³ See “Family Life Resurrection Eggs,” accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.familylife.com/find-help/key-resources/resurrection-eggs#.VJSXfABA>.

called the Lamb of God. I bit my tongue to keep the more familiar term “Son of God” from rolling off my lips. There are many descriptions of who Jesus is in the Bible, so there is no need to use the most potentially misunderstood name. Of course, the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son was easily understood, as Muslims commemorate this event each year at the Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of the Sacrifice. We moved through the story quickly, as the attention span of the children was short. I noticed my friend hanging on to each word, as though it was the first time she had heard most of these stories of Jesus’ life.

I had struggled with how to present the people who opposed Jesus and eventually sentenced him to be crucified. I used the word “friends of Jesus” for his disciples, and “those people who didn’t like him” or “soldiers” for people opposed to him and his teachings. After all, I was trying to use special English and simple ideas for our friends.

I tried not to linger very long on Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Beware of nightmares, my teenagers had told me! We moved on to Jesus’ body being placed in the tomb and sealed with a stone. His friends were sad because of his death. On the third day, the women brought spices to the tomb, as was their custom. Little noses sniffed the cinnamon stick and whole cloves, trying to name the smell. Then the egg containing the angel took an unfortunate tumble to the floor, as little fingers tried to open it. As the figure inside appeared to take flight, the boy cried, “Ninja!” with delight. We rescued the angel, and corrected the misconception about its appearance and flight to the floor. I explained that angels are God’s messengers, and that the angel had said to the frightened women, “Do not be afraid.” Finally it was time to open the last egg. As the girl’s chubby little fingers opened it, both children looked inside with surprise. There was nothing inside the last egg! “The tomb was empty,” I exclaimed, “because Jesus wasn’t there—he is alive! And that’s why we are happy and celebrate Easter.” Upon hearing this, the boy’s bright eyes gleamed; he clapped his hands and let loose with a gleeful “Hurray”!

After more cups of tea, we said our “peace be upon you” and our good-byes, mine with special gratitude and joy for having had the opportunity to share with friends who had probably never before heard the surprising, life-giving hope the Easter events hold out for each of us.