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Is Easter just another long weekend?

Even if you don't go to church, this holiday can still connect on a spiritual level

Easter makes me smile. It probably makes you smile, too, since it's the reason we have a long weekend coming up. But I have another reason. Whereas Christmas — as a religious holiday — was long ago bought, packaged and cleverly

marketed by the Retail Council of Canada, Easter still carries the whiff of something spiritual that our superficial, money-obsessed culture can't destroy.

All the bunnies and painted eggs in the world doesn't change the fact Good Friday isn't called that just because a majority of us get the day off. It, and the weekend that follows, stands like a sentinel of something dramatic, important and mysterious.

Easter is the culmination of the Christian story. It recalls a time when Jesus Christ, considered by most Christians to be the son of God, was executed and then restored to life.

The story is sung in ancient hymns and new pop songs, explored in speeches and re-enacted through plays around the planet.

But what about the millions who don't understand this, yet are spiritual enough to sense something is different about this coming weekend?

"I do think there's a universal message in the Easter story," says Warren McDougall, a minister at Richmond Hill United Church.

Adds Ken Davis, pastor of the Olive Branch in Markham: "Without getting into details, the fantastic message is love wins."

Mr. McDougall sees the Easter story in two parts: the horrible



Frank King

crucifixion of Jesus by political and religious opponents and his resurrection a few days later.

"(The crucifixion) is kind of the hard part, because what good can come from nailing someone to a cross?" Mr. McDougall asks.

Then he answers himself: the cross can be seen by anyone and everyone as a metaphor for giving yourself away — to your neighbour, community or world. To set aside our egos and selfishness for a greater good, which is what most Christians believe Jesus did.

"The instinct is to preserve yourself and, yet, the counter instinct is generosity, with your life and soul," Mr. Davis says.

"Jesus said if you want to be great, serve. And the people we consider truly great are those who truly serve."

He notes an amazing irony in the crucifixion, a favoured style of execution in the ancient Roman empire.

"If you reduce everything to a phrase, it's the weak becoming the new strong. How else do you explain how a perfected killing method is put on buildings and around people's necks?"

For all its blackness, Mr. McDougall notes the sacrificial theme in the crucifixion "is a healthy paradigm for our ethical choices, because I want my world to be a better place."

The resurrection, whether or not you believe it happened, is easier to understand.

"It's about good overcoming evil, life overcoming death and that transformation is possible, even from negative things," Mr. McDougall explains.

"I'm sure almost every other faith has a story or parable about transformation."

For Bob Flemming, pastor of Springvale Baptist Church in Whitchurch-Stouffville, the entire weekend can be seen through the lens of hope.

"Underneath, everybody's looking for a chance to start again, to take a golf-style mulligan. Easter is an opportunity to reflect on the fact that God is a god of second chances."

Frank King is an assistant editor with the York Region Media Group. He welcomes comments at fking@yrmg.com.

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