

This Month in Moravian History

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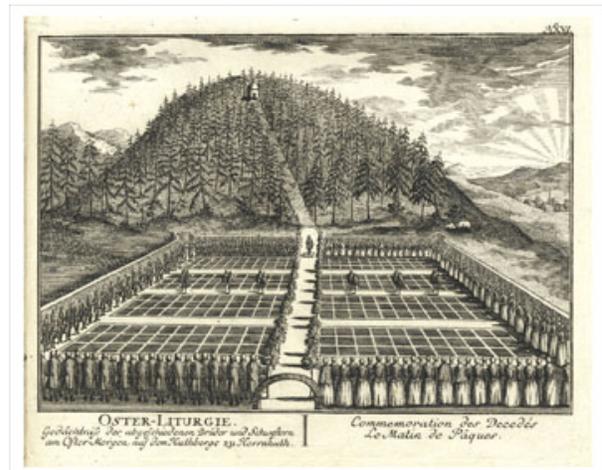
The Easter Morning Sunrise Service

In the early morning of Easter Sunday 1732 the young men of Herrnhut, Germany, gathered in the cemetery on the hill overlooking their Moravian community to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. It was the first Moravian sunrise service - 275 years ago this year. The next year the service was held for the entire congregation. The Easter morning sunrise service has become one of the characteristic liturgical traditions in the Moravian Church.

The first sunrise service seems to have been initiated by a group of single brothers. The Herrnhut diary states: "We agreed among our band [group] of young men that this Easter morning we were to go up the Hutberg early before the rise of the sun. This happened ... early before 4 o'clock. After we had spent 1 ½ hours with singing we returned to have a prayer meeting, during which we sang several hymns and read the third chapter of Peter's first letter." Zinzendorf appears to have been present that morning. In a letter to his cousin Ludwig von Castell he wrote: "This morning we had the nicest celebration among our graves".

In later years Zinzendorf attributed the origins of the Easter sunrise service to an example from the Greek Orthodox Church. Whether or not the first group of single brothers were aware of this tradition in 1732 is questionable. It seems more likely that the young men in Herrnhut followed local tradition. Until this day it is customary that young people in the Oberlausitz, the region where Herrnhut is located, stay up the night before Easter, and go round singing or making noises with firecrackers. The young men in Herrnhut apparently combined their Easter night watch with visiting the graves, the same manner the women in the Bible had done. Since the God's Acre, or cemetery, in Herrnhut had been laid out the previous fall, 1732 was the first year Easter could be celebrated there.

The typical liturgical form for the Moravian sunrise service was established during the 1740s and 1750s. The brass choir woke the congregation prior to the first part of the liturgical service, which was held in the church. The liturgy did not consist of reading the Easter accounts from the Bible, but rather took the form of a creed. During the service the congregation proceeded to the local God's Acre, where the second part of the liturgy was read while the sun rose over the graves as a symbol of the resurrection.



The sunrise service soon became an integral part of Moravian liturgical life in every congregation. In 1743 the Bethlehem congregation met at 4 o'clock in the morning. The next year the service included a visit to the graves: "The congregation arose at four o'clock in the morning and assembled in the Saal. Following the hymn *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bonds*, we all proceeded in pairs, with music playing, to the graves of our brethren, sang and played to the glory of our risen Lamb, and rejoiced that He lives and that we shall live with Him and that death has no power over us. From there we returned after sunrise to the Saal, singing as we went."

sources: Christoph Waas, "Die Liturgie am Ostermorgen" (unpubl. seminary paper, Bad Boll 1980). Adelaide L. Fries, *Customs and Practices of the Moravian Church*, (rev. ed., Bethlehem 2003). *Bethlehem Diary I* (Bethlehem 1971).

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