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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
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Mark 1: 9–15  
Genesis 9:8–17

## PASCHAL MOONS

The point of this sermon is that the cycle of darkness is giving way to the budding of new life. The point of this sermon is that our reliability does not limit our partner, God, in accomplishing God's purposes.

The good news is that God acts toward us and for us no matter how much we misunderstand. The Bible is full of references to specific events: calendar events, real historical activities.

The date of Easter is one of those most important events. But in typical fashion, the date of Easter changes every year. The change each year of the date, simply put, is because we want Easter to always occur on Sunday. If you select a calendar date, this would not be possible. Just like your birthday—if you wanted it always to occur on Friday, the date would have to change every year. Easter is always the first Sunday after a Paschal moon. But we don't talk about Paschal moons. Some of you may—those of you who are really smart mathematicians.

Long ago at the Council of Nicaea, it was decreed that Christians, at least in the west, would celebrate Easter on the same Sunday. Imagine how difficult that was since the calendars were very diverse.

Paschal moons were developed—invented, if you will. Imaginary moon phases were invented based on mathematical tables based on an observation by a Greek astronomer, Meton of Athens. He discovered the relationship between the sun being in the same position over earth's equator in spring and fall (1 calendar year) and the phases of the moon. Meton discovered that the total number of days in 19 calendar years equals the total days of 235 moon phases—roughly, 6,939.6 days.

Now all of this matters to us because Meton's observations led to the development of Ecclesiastical moon. And since the resurrection of Christ was observed at the same season every year, they needed to find out what day that would be.

Does it matter for us what day Easter takes place? The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the most important event in our lives, so it does matter when we celebrate this, and if we celebrate with other Christians.

What do we know about Easter? We know it happened after Christ's death. We know Christ's death happened toward the end of the Passover. But the Passover is observed based on a Jewish calendar. And we know very little about that; except that when things get out of sync, an extra month is thrown in, which really makes it hard to calculate Easter.

Traditions developed which stipulated:

1. Easter should be on a Sunday. It should occur when spring is coming, when the days are getting longer, when the world is being resurrected, if you will.
2. Easter should occur after the spring equinox.
3. Easter should occur after the Passover.

So how do you get all three of those things to take place?

Easter occurs on the first Sunday after the Ecclesiastical new moon, which falls between March 8<sup>th</sup> and April 5 (inclusively); after that date, when we have equal night and day, roughly: an equinox—a spring equinox. This special date is the first full moon after the vernal (spring) equinox. Well, really, it's the first Sunday after that day. If you are a math whiz, you already computed how the earth cycle of dates begins to repeat after exactly 5,700,000 years.

Thankfully, God establishes a renewal of God's promises more frequently than a repeat of Easter dates and even of earth dates, or Ecclesiastical moons or Paschal moons, or garden numbers, or any thought or deed of humans. No matter how wise we become or how crafty at calculations, God has established a promise which gives humans a unique position in this world. We are the gardener of God's creation.

Last year I missed by one day the deadline for turning over the soil in my community garden plot. And as I went out the next day to take care of the problem, I was threatened with the loss of my garden plot if I ever let that happen again. You think Presbyterians are strange, go join a community garden.

God promises all God's creatures that we are safe. As God keeps his covenant with us, we are benefactors of God's goodness and God's relationship with the earth.

Lent occurs in late winter and early spring (at least in northern climates) as the cycle of darker nights gives way to the budding of this world, and spring is unmistakably a time we recognize, again, God at work all around us. We remember how reliable our partner is. How powerful our partner is. And the good news is that God has acted not only to redeem us, but God has acted to redeem all the world.

No matter what calendar we use or how deftly we make calculations, we cannot deny God's promise to be our covenant maker. And every time we look up and see a rainbow, we are reminded that God is in charge. Every time we come in the sanctuary and see the hues of the rainbow in these windows, we remember that Bush Hill Presbyterian Church belongs to God and not to us, and that God has determined what God will fulfill in our midst.

The good news is that God keeps God's covenant. And we cannot out-figure our loving God. And I'm glad that my teacher and yours and my children's teacher can be trusted to such a loving creature.

Amen.