



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

Religion: [Bee Religion News](#) | [Wire Religion News](#) | [More in this section](#)

## Sermon of the year

### For Easter, pastors work hard to fill pews and then inspire those who attend the services

By Jennifer Garza - [jgarza@sacbee.com](mailto:jgarza@sacbee.com)

Last Updated 6:59 am PDT Monday, March 24, 2008

Story appeared in SCENE section, Page L3



The Rev. Canon Mary E. Hauck prepares her Easter sermon in her office at St. Michael's Episcopal Church. Autumn Cruz / [acruz@sacbee.com](mailto:acruz@sacbee.com)

[Click on photo to enlarge](#)

[See additional images](#)

Other churches have budgets to promote their Easter services. Pastor Dave Novak has a sign.

For two hours every day last week, the pastor and his wife, Lori, stood at a busy intersection in south Sacramento, waving signs advertising Streamline Church, which opened this month. Some passers-by were amused; most were indifferent. But Novak says that standing there was worth it.

"If people are going to pick one day to go to church, it's Easter," says Novak. "I want people to know we're here."

Easter Sunday has been called the Super Bowl of Sunday worship, and it is the biggest day of the year for pastors.

From preparing the sermon (many of them started months ago) to getting the word out, they know it may be their one chance all year to reach people who don't typically go to church. More people will pack the pews today, on the day Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, than any other Sunday of the year.

Some churches offer Easter specials to draw first-time visitors – First Covenant Church of Sacramento, for example, will have free family portraits and a magic show for children. Novak's church will have a spoken-word poetry performance.

Others plan to showcase their worship arts programs. Most are having Easter egg hunts.

But what keeps people coming back to a church is the sense of community they feel and what they hear from the pulpit. All this means more pressure – in a good way, pastors say.

"Like athletes, if you're not a little bit nervous, then you can be flat," says Jeff Bigelow, senior pastor of Rolling Hills Christian Church in El Dorado Hills. "A few butterflies are normal. Everyone is looking at you."

How do pastors prepare sermons that satisfy both the regular churchgoer and the infrequent visitor?

It's not easy.

The Rev. Canon Mary E. Hauck, pastor of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Carmichael, tries to find middle ground. Hauck has been thinking about her sermon for a while but didn't sit down at her computer to write – with her stack of research books nearby – until Monday.

"You're not preaching to the choir, so to speak," she says of writing her Easter sermon. "So my assumption is that people are coming to hear the under-lying message of the season ... which is a message of hope."

The message has to be hopeful, and it also has to be relevant. Churchgoers today want to hear something that applies to their lives, say pastors.

"My job as pastor is to show how what the Bible says happened in a Hebrew environment is relevant here today," says Brad Franklin, senior pastor of Lakeside Church in Folsom. "They need to make that connection."

Worship leaders are also making that relevant connection in other parts of the service. Multimedia productions – in which video clips are shown during the service to emphasize a point made in the message – are common. At many churches,

traditional Easter music has been replaced.

At Impact Community Church in Elk Grove, worshippers will hear both an instrumental of Metallica's "Sandman" and the church praise band performing Alicia Keys' "No One."

"We're postmodern, we look for innovative ways to get our message out," says Barry Smith, Impact's pastor.

And, of course, there are the incentives to get visitors to their services in the first place. Many church leaders say they spend most of their marketing money during this season – often on sending out invitation postcards.

This year, however, several churches are going to the Internet. Lakeside Church has produced three videos about the lonely life of an Easter Bunny after the holiday. EasterAftermath.com was a way of letting non-churchgoers know about Lakeside.

"It generated a little bit of flak from members who said, 'What does this have to do with Jesus?'" says Franklin. "My answer is, 'We're not out to reach Christians.' "

Most churches have doubled attendance on Easter Sunday. With that in mind – and trying to get many of the people to come back the following week – many offer creative programming, from worship dancers to skits and poetry.

"It's an opportunity to show people the kind of programs we offer," says John Plastow, worship pastor at First Covenant Church in Sacramento, where average Sunday attendance is 2,000.

First Covenant is offering family portraits by professional photographers. The photos are taken on Easter Sunday. The families have to come back the next week to pick up the photos.

"It was very popular last year," says Plastow.

All the special incentives may draw people to church on one day, say pastors, but the real goal is to keep them coming back every week.

"I think if you give away pizza to get people here, then you have to give pizza away every week to get them coming back," says Franklin. He expects about 5,000 worshippers today – typical attendance hovers near 2,500. "We want to reach people on a spiritual basis."

All the church leaders echo Franklin's words – incentives are nice, but what really matters is the message. The challenge is writing the right one.

Bigelow, from Rolling Hills Christian Church, says writing a sermon that satisfies people who have little knowledge of the Easter story and those who know it well can be difficult. So, like many pastors, he tries to use humor and refers to people – like celebrities – in the news.

"You have to reach that person who was dragged there on Easter," says Bigelow, laughing. "And we can tell who they are."

Novak, the pastor of the new church, is unsure what to expect at his church's first Easter. He's talked to other church leaders and has done his homework. He's written his sermon, planned every detail. He's prayed.

"I've gotten all kinds of advice," says Novak. "And what it boils down to is this: The important thing is to share the hopeful message of the cross."

#### About the writer:

- Call the Bee's Jennifer Garza, (916) 321-1133.



Pastor Dave Novak advertises for his newly formed church during rush hour in south Sacramento. Autumn Cruz / [acruz@sacbee.com](mailto:acruz@sacbee.com)

[Click on photo to enlarge](#)



Says Pastor Dave Novak of Streamline Church in south Sacramento: "If people are going to pick one day to go to church, it's Easter. I want people to know we're here." Autumn Cruz / [acruz@sacbee.com](mailto:acruz@sacbee.com)

[Click on photo to enlarge](#)



"You're not preaching to the choir, so to speak, so my assumption is that people are coming to hear the underlying message," says the Rev. Canon Mary E. Hauck of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Carmichael. Autumn Cruz /

[acruz@sacbee.com](mailto:acruz@sacbee.com)[Click on photo to enlarge](#)

Pastor Dave Novak and his wife, Lori, were at Freeport Boulevard and Meadowview Road on Tuesday. They hope to gain congregants - or at least visitors - during Easter services today. There's competition: Another church's banner hangs nearby. Autumn Cruz / [acruz@sacbee.com](mailto:acruz@sacbee.com)

[Click on photo to enlarge](#)

**The Sacramento Bee** Unique content, exceptional value. [SUBSCRIBE NOW!](#)

[News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Business](#) | [Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [Travel](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Cars](#) | [Homes](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Classifieds/Shopping](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Guide to The Bee](#) | [Bee Jobs](#) | [FAQs](#) | [RSS](#)  
[Contact Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Manage Your Subscription](#) | [E-newsletters](#) | [Sacbeemail](#) | [Archives](#)  
[sacbee.com](#) | [Sacramento.com](#) | [Capitol Alert](#) | [SacMomsClub.com](#) | [SacPaws.com](#)

Copyright © The Sacramento Bee

2100 Q St. P.O. Box 15779 Sacramento, CA 95816 (916) 321-1000