

Back in the old days, Lent was hard on Catholics. We used to fast and abstain every day for six weeks. Nowadays we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent. But it's nothing like the rigorous season we used to have. If we weren't holier back in those days, at least we were thinner.

I still think a lenten fast is a good thing, and a lot of people take it on in some way. They'll give up something for the season: sweets, drinks, or smokes. The question always comes up about Sundays. If you give something up for Lent do you get Sundays off? There are two schools of thought. One is yes. The other is no. Those who say yes say Sunday is always the day of Jesus' resurrection, even during Lent. You don't fast all day Sunday because that's the day we celebrate eucharist. Me, I lean toward the no side. I think taking Sundays off from your fast is Lent for wimps. Though it's not as bad as giving up watermelon for Lent.

For a lot of Catholics, the reasons for the old lenten fast were simple: the pope said so, and it seemed to be a good Catholic you had to experience pain.

Now Lent is easier. We don't have all those rules. But in a way Lent is harder, because the Church asks us to choose on our own some form of penance this season. The reasons are these: not because we love pain, but because we believe in resurrection. We look forward to Easter with such anticipation that we spend six weeks in preparation for that great day acknowledging our sin and confessing our belief in Christ. During these days we purify ourselves; we die with Christ, to rise with him as new people on Easter day.

St. Paul says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Paul sums up the core Christian belief in three words: Jesus is Lord. That formula appears again and again in the New Testament. When Moses asked the burning bush for its name, God answered, "Yahweh." That name was so sacred, that many Jews never spoke it out loud. Instead, whenever the word "Yahweh" appeared in the scriptures, Jewish readers usually substituted the title "Lord". In our own Catholic liturgy we rarely use the name Yahweh. Check your bible at home; it probably substitutes the word "Lord". So when Paul says to the Romans, "Jesus is Lord," he says Jesus is God, the God who appeared to Moses and who led us from slavery to freedom. That's who Jesus is. Paul says keep those words on your lips and you will experience the nearness of God. In your heart, he says, believe in the resurrection and you will be saved.

The belief we hold in our heart we express in many ways, especially during Lent. We pray. We fast. We give alms. But it's good to remember Paul's other expectation. We profess our faith with our lips. We tell people what we believe: Jesus is Lord.