

Do you know the term “Easter egg?” It means a lot of things, doesn’t it? Mary is asking for hard-boiled Easter eggs and for stickers and candies to put into plastic Easter eggs that can be hidden on the ground outside. But there’s another definition of Easter eggs. In pop culture, modern terms, an Easter egg is a hidden message, a symbol, or inside information within some form of media.

For example, Taylor Swift is famous for putting Easter eggs in her liner notes and music videos and other things. For example, in October of 2024, shortly after I arrived here, Swift posted a video in which she walked toward section A12 of a stadium holding one of her cats. She doesn’t say a word in the video. She just holds the cat and takes off her sunglasses. But ten months later, she announced her new album on August 12 (A 12) at 12:12 p.m. It was her 12<sup>th</sup> album. She’s been doing things like that for years.

Now, if you’re an average human being, and you don’t care about Taylor Swift’s mental chess game that she’s playing with the numbers 13 and 89 and clothing colors and random capital letters in her lyrics, then it’s still entirely possible for you to listen to her music and go about your day. You don’t have to obsess over the details and go back and look for clues to determine which ex-boyfriend she’s slamming. You can just take the music at face value, but I have to admit, it’s clever how she thinks so far ahead and how she leaves clues for her fans to follow.

Now, the segway, for those of you who think I’m totally off target and distracted . . . John 4 is like a Taylor Swift song. It’s full of Easter eggs. Hidden little clues, symbolism, numbers that have their own messages above and beyond the story itself. If we don’t discover these Easter eggs, we’ll still be able to appreciate the story, but if we crack them open, if we understand all the references and symbolism, we appreciate it all the more.

The story begins with these lines. “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John,”<sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee.<sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria.”

That's a lot of information in a small introduction, and these verses aren't even a part of the lectionary. The text that other churches will hear starts in verse 5, and I always find it fascinating when we are told to skip over certain parts of the Bible. It makes me care about them more for some reason. Like I want to comfort the excluded verses and say, "Don't feel ashamed. You're important, too."

Of all the interesting details in the first paragraph, the thing that really caught my attention was verse four. "4But he had to go through Samaria."

You see, that's not actually true. No Jewish person who is in Judea *has* to go through Samaria to get to Galilee. You see, geographically, Samaria is in between Judea and Galilee, but Jewish people always had a choice. They could go through Samaria, which was the most direct route, or they could go *around* Samaria, which was longer, but preferred. It took about 3 extra days of walking to go around Samaria, but most Jewish people chose to do so.

It reminds me of making road trips with my family when I was little. We had a minivan full of girls and my dad. And every time we got near a particular state line, my dad would stop, top off the gas, make sure we used the facilities and were fed, and we'd get back in the car and we wouldn't stop until we had crossed this particular state. He would have gone around it if it was practical, but since it wasn't, my dad just wouldn't pull over. Anywhere. We just put our heads down and drove through it. That's how the Jewish people felt about traveling through Samaria. They'd rather walk around it. Most of them did. But if they had to walk through it, then gosh darn it, they were not going to slow down or make eye contact with anybody.

And you deserve to know why. I want you to understand what Samaria and the adjective Samaritan means. It's not just a neutral word. It's loaded with tons of emotional implications - an Easter egg for modern readers.

About one thousand years before Jesus, the kingdom of Israel was ruled by three kings in a row - Saul, David, and David's son Solomon. But after Solomon, there was a civil war. The kingdom of Israel was made up of twelve tribes, imagine them like states, and ten of the twelve revolted during the rule of Solomon's son. The country was divided.

The northern kingdom of ten tribes kept the name Israel – even though they were the ones who broke away. And that left the southern kingdom of Judah, or Judea, as they called it during the first century, which included the capital city of Jerusalem and the temple. The bigger of the two tribes was the tribe of Judah.

For three hundred years, the northern and southern kingdoms fought with each other and the surrounding neighbors. The northern kingdom set up their government and a place of worship in the city of Samaria. Then, the Assyrian empire attacked from even farther north. They battled with the country of Israel for twenty years, finally taking the capital of Samaria. Now, the Assyrians had a strategy for holding land that they conquered. They had a massive empire. In order to make the people subservient, they imposed this unique strategy. They took about half of the population of the area and scattered them across their other lands. Then they transplanted people from all the other lands into the newly conquered areas. This intentional ethnic chaos brought in a variety of languages, skills, foods, customs, holidays, and social rules. It created a new community that had no strong core identity. The new neighbors would be less likely to communicate with each other, organize, rise up, and resist the Assyrian taxes and administrators.

The Assyrians did this to the kingdom of Israel, ten of the twelve tribes of Jacob. The bloodlines were decimated, foreign houses of worship were built alongside the temple of Yahweh. And the southern kingdom of Judah (which survived the Assyrians and were not treated the same by the Babylonians later on) despised their distant relatives because of it.

The region became known as Samaria and the people Samaritans. Really, they were distant cousins who had been conquered by a foreign power who then forcibly blended their culture with others, but the Judeans had no grace for them. Jews and Samaritans were not to engage one another in conversation, not to marry one another, and as much as possible, Jews walked around the land altogether.

But you know what really gets me. What really seems so hypocritical? We all think that the twelve tribes of Israel come from the twelve sons of Jacob. That would make sense, right? Twelve and twelve. Am I suggesting that there's some difference between the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve tribes? Am I? Well guess what? I am!

Jacob did have twelve sons. The twelve sons all were in Egypt and their families all left together. They all wandered the desert, and all entered the promised land, but they didn't each get a parcel of that land. One tribe, the tribe of Levi, were designated to become priests. The priestly tribe did not receive land to work. Their job was to serve the temple.

So, it would seem that there are just eleven tribes of Israel that get land, right? No. There are twelve. You remember Joseph and the coat of many colors? Jacob's favorite son? He was sold by his brothers into slavery and he eventually became second in command in all of Egypt and saved the country from a massive famine. As a reward, Pharaoh presented Asenath to be his wife. Tradition holds that Asenath was the daughter of the chief priest of the Egyptian temple to the sun god. Asenath even means daughter of Neith, and Egyptian goddess. Asenath bore Joseph two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. There is no tribe of Joseph. Each of the sons became heads of a tribe of Israel. Each of them. These bi-racial children. Egyptian-Hebrew children. Raised in Egypt with an extended family that professionally worshipped Egyptian gods.

Now, interestingly, these two tribes were given the land that makes up the city of Samaria and the surrounding territory. The land that was known as Samaria in Jesus' day.

It just seems ridiculous that the people of Judah would judge the people of Samaria for being ethnically and religiously diverse when Manasseh and Ephraim's tribes had been representations of diversity themselves from the very beginning. It just seems so cruel. It's like the purebloods in the Harry Potter series bullying the muggles and mudbloods. Just heartless.

But that's the background between the Jewish people and the Samaritans. Why they didn't mix. Why in verse six and seven it says, 'A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." '9The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that

you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)’ and why the disciples were stupefied when they returned and found Jesus talking to her.

But Jesus was not known for following social norms, was he?

And let’s find another Easter egg, shall we? Have you got time for one more? Verse five says, “<sup>5</sup>So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. [Again, we have reference to Joseph – Manasseh and Ephraim’s father.] <sup>6</sup>Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.”

Folks, do you know what happens in scripture when a Jewish man sits by a foreign well, at noon, and meets a woman there? No? Let me tell you!

Professor Laura Holmes of Wesley Theological Seminary reminded me in her commentary. . . “[In Genesis 24,] Abraham’s servant meets his master’s future daughter-in-law, Rebekah, at a well; [then, in Genesis 29,] Abraham’s grandson, the eponymous Jacob, [who gave Joseph the land Jesus has just plopped down on - Jacob] meets his wife Rachel at a well, at noon, and [in Exodus 2,] Moses meets his wife, Zipporah, at a well.”

This is not a coincidence! This is an Easter egg. One that Matthew’s audience would have figured out, but not your average reader!

Professor Homes says, “In all these stories, a man travels to a foreign land, meets a woman at a well, and they discuss water. [Then], the woman leaves the well to tell her community about the man. Her community offers hospitality to the man [in all of those cases we mentioned,] and the encounter concludes with their marriage. A well in a story was the equivalent to a modern romantic comedy’s meet-cute, where the two main leads encounter one another for the first time. Such scenes set up expectations for what is to come. . . . [So,] Of course, this narrative sets up the expectations of a marriage . . . , only to flout them.”

Because when Jesus brings up marriage, then comes a moment of dialogue that has been used for centuries to shame and belittle the woman – for she admits that she does not have a husband at present. And then Jesus reveals more – “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’<sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.”

This is the moment many interpreters have used to shame her. But notice what Jesus does not do. He does not condemn her. He does not tell her to repent. We truly don’t know her circumstances. Perhaps one or more died, perhaps one or more was abusive. I assume Jesus knew more than just the statistics, but he does not tell us, and yet we have judged.

With Jesus’ matter of fact statement, he simply reveals that he sees her fully — her history, her pain, her resilience, her inner strength — and he stays engaged in the conversation. He keeps talking with her, even though doing so is scandalous in the eyes of society. But Jesus is not interested in the rules that keep people apart. He is interested in the person in front of him. He honors her questions. He treats her as a theologian, a seeker, a conversation partner worthy of depth and time.

She asks him about worship — where it happens, who belongs, who is right. And Jesus answers with one of the most expansive statements in all of scripture. He says, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.<sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Spirit and truth. Not geography. Not which tribe of Israel you descend from. Not purity codes. Not who it is you love or who you live with outside of marriage. Just spirit and truth.

Then she says, almost tentatively, “I know that Messiah is coming.” And Jesus replies, “I am he.” It is the first time in this Gospel that Jesus reveals his identity so plainly — even clearer than his conversation with Nicodemus a chapter earlier, — and he reveals it not to a disciple, not to a religious leader, not to someone with status, but to a Samaritan woman at a well.

There is something about this woman that inspires him. He becomes as vulnerable with her as she has been with him. And when his disciples arrive, he is so moved that he starts speaking excitedly in agricultural metaphors that make their heads spin.

Scripture says that after she went back to tell everyone about Jesus, “Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”<sup>32</sup> But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”<sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. . . . I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ”

When Jesus tells them to look around, they look, but all they see are a people that they’ve been told are unclean and unfaithful. Jesus tells them to see the villagers as people full faith and potential, seeking the Messiah, ready to hear the good news!

And when the villagers come to the well, Jesus does the craziest thing. He accepts an invitation to stay with them! Not just one night but two more days! WHAT?!? In Sychar of Samaria?

My gosh, I love Jesus. He is so crazy. It seemed like he was on a mission to retreat from the spotlight and lay low. He was making a beeline to his old stomping ground, or, at least, I thought so, but in that moment, in her presence, she is vulnerable and honest with him, and he is vulnerable and honest with her. She reveals her truth, and so does he. She seeks the Messiah, and he tells her more plainly than almost any other time in the scriptures that he is the one she is looking for. “I am he, the one who is speaking to you. I will give you living water that will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Maybe he did have to go through Samaria after all. Maybe it wasn't an option.

Throughout history, women have been out there, often alone, often vulnerable, often scorned for reasons beyond their control, listening and watching and learning. Jane Goodall, and the nameless woman at the well, and Rahab the prostitute, and Ester the queen who stopped a genocide, and Mary of Magdalena the Apostle to the Apostles. These women heard and saw things that the world did not understand. They were entrusted with amazing news to share. It was risky, but we're better off for their curiosity and courage. Amen.