One of the great questions of the Christian church always seems to be, “Why does the date of Easter change from year to year, and how do we figure it out?”
The simple answer is this: rather than being a fixed date on the civil calendar like Christmas, the date of Easter is based on the lunar and solar calendars, and so it “floats.” According to the 4th-century writings of someone by the name of Epiphanius, the Council of Nicea in 325 determined that “there must be one unanimous concord on the celebration of God’s holy and supremely excellent day.” And so the church agreed (in theory, at least) on a common method of calculating the date of Easter. Up until that time, some wanted to use the solar calendar and others the lunar calendar, and so they compromised. The date would be the first Sunday following the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. In those days, they believed that the equinox always fell on March 21, and so Easter can fall any time between March 21 and April 25, although it has in fact never fallen on March 21 – yet.

Not everyone got on board with this method initially, but for several centuries the Western church has used this method. When the Gregorian calendar came into use in 1582, however, the Eastern church did not follow suit. Since that time the Eastern churches have generally had a different date for Easter. Their Easter always falls between April 4 and May 8. A number of proposals have been made for arriving
at a fixed date of Easter. The World Council of Churches, which includes several hundred Protestant Churches as well as many Orthodox Churches, proposed a method for determining a date that would change each year but be common to both the Eastern and Western churches. This was to begin in 2001, when the date happened to be the same. However, this was not adopted.

Some have suggested we fix the date on the second Sunday in April. Another idea was to have seven Sundays after the Epiphany (January 6) be the beginning of Lent. Still others have proposed a fixed calendar date of April 9, believed to have been the actual date of the original resurrection, but such a date would mean that Easter would seldom land on a Sunday. None of these proposals have ever been taken very seriously.

The reality is that the fluctuation in the date of Easter has strong historical precedent. First, it allows for the festival always to be held on a Sunday. From the earliest days of the church, Christians gathered to worship on Sunday not because it was the Sabbath, but because it was the weekly commemoration of the day of the Resurrection. The annual celebration of Easter, therefore, should also fall on a Sunday. Second, by following the lunar calendar, the church is in keeping with our Jewish heritage, where holy days follow a calendar of months that are in keeping with the cycles of the moon.

Following a calendar that is out of step with the
rest of our daily lives may give us the opportunity to remember that following Jesus frequently challenges us to be out of step with the values and turnings of the rest of the world. As Christians, we dance to a different rhythm. The floating date of Easter can help us remember this important truth.

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