

A Pilgrim's Guide to Holy Week

Holy Week lies at the heart of the Church year and at the very center of our life in Christ. Who we are — what we are as Christians is inseparably bound up in the events these special days recount. While all times and seasons are filled with the grace of God, the anniversary of our redemption draws us into singular awareness of that grace. In it we are brought up short by the length and breadth of the Father's love.

From the earliest times, the church has kept a yearly remembrance of the Lord's passion and resurrection. This commemoration was a special occasion of thanksgiving for the blessing received in Christ. The commemoration was more than a nostalgic revisit to a dusty past, however glorious and meaningful that might be. It was, rather, a re-living of salvation-filled occurrences. Moving beyond simply an observance, the celebration involved an inner experience in which what happened to the head happened to the members...the experience of the master became the experience of the disciples.

Christianity is not simply a doctrine or way of life. It is also an event: something that happened and continues to happen. The salvation-bearing events of these blessed days that once happened to Christ now happen to us.

The rites of Holy Week are a liturgical representation of what it means to be 'in Christ.' In this spirit, then, we enter the meaning of these days of 'countdown' to Easter. We make our way not as tourists viewing an attraction, but as pilgrims passing way-markers en route to the 'abiding city' -the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Passion Sunday, 14 April

This great and holy week opens on a note of rejoicing. A festive mood surrounds the entrance into the city of Jerusalem for Christ our King. Our worship begins with the Liturgy of the Palms: a solemn procession punctuated with acclamations of triumph. However, as the Book of Common Prayer suggests, the forthcoming Passion becomes a dominant theme. The change in atmosphere from the palm procession into the reading of the Passion comes with almost whiplash suddenness. Already the cross casts its somber, serious Shadow; and the jubilant shouts of "Hosanna" give way to the angry demands of "Crucify him!" as the narrative of the Passion Gospel unfolds. The color of the day is red, symbolizing the blood shed by Jesus on the cross.

From our post-Easter vantage point, we recount the events of the day through the lens of the resurrection. What were, for the first celebrants, genuine cheers for a tragically misunderstood messiah, are for us, veiled affirmations of the Easter victory. Yet even within us, there is the poignant reminder that we, too, often fail to recognize the real Christ.

The strange interweaving of joy and sorrow, approval and rejection, loyalty and betrayal...is evident even in the palm branches we wave in procession. We save them with great care, take them home and place them behind an icon or crucifix. They are sacramentals of the costly Kingship of the One who yet reigns in the midst of our daily contradictions and compromises.

Monday and Tuesday, 15-16 April

Considering the Cross, 7:00 p.m.

Join us for an exploration of the cross and what it means for our lives. On Monday we'll examine theories and theologies around Jesus's crucifixion, moving beyond the widely known atonement theories. How do we understand and make sense of what happened on the cross? How do we see God's involvement in it? What does it mean for us? On Tuesday we'll use our understanding of the cross to make deeper sense of Holy Eucharist. When we celebrate the Eucharist, with the cross always in the foreground, what is it exactly that we're doing and what does it mean for our lives? Monday's service will take the form of Evening Prayer, and Tuesday's will culminate in Holy Eucharist.

Wednesday, 17 April

Tenebrae, 7:00 p.m.

This ancient service of Tenebrae (or darkness) is an extended meditation on the Passion, typically using Old Testament prophecies and canticles—often sung. The name comes from the tradition of gradually extinguishing candles and lights as the service progresses, ultimately ending in darkness and silence. The last light is snuffed after reading Psalm 51. A loud noise is made near the end, symbolizing the earthquake at the time of the crucifixion. No benediction is pronounced at the end. The congregation leaves in silence or remains in the Church for prayer and contemplation. It is an unhurried service with much silence.

Maundy Thursday, 18 April

10:00 a.m., 6:00 p.m. Children's Service & 7:00 p.m.

As a hidden pattern of rejection and betrayal begins to emerge, there is a momentary respite. At the close of the day, Jesus initiates the Eucharist. For a small gathering of his immediate companions in a rented upper room, he prepares a meal in conjunction with the Passover. In our liturgy, we are gathered in spirit with the disciples to receive from Jesus. At this Last Supper, when Jesus gave us the Sacrament of his love, he stated, "I stand in the midst of you as one who serves." He enacted his words by washing the feet of his disciples. Giving them and us a graphic picture of servanthood, he issued a mandate for us to follow his example. "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you." the moving scene is so imprinted on the memory of the Church that we use that gospel account and re-enact the washing of the feet. The day is known as Maundy (Mandatum-Commandment) Thursday.

The concluding acts are the stripping of the altar. The altar (being a symbol of Christ) is stripped of its adornment—recalling to us how he was stripped of his garments during the Passion. A vigil is conducted in the Church all through the night with people taking one hour shifts, recalling Jesus' words from Gethsemane, "Could you not stay awake with me for one hour?"

Our 6:00 p.m. service will be held in Tucker Hall and is designed as an instructed liturgy for younger children. So much of Holy Week, and especially Maundy Thursday, can be meaningful to elementary school aged children and younger. But our worship ritual and language goes over their heads. We will wash feet, have communion, and strip the altar with explanations and inclusion for all ages.

Good Friday, 19 April

Morning Prayer, 7:00 a.m.

Stations of the Cross, 12:00noon (Town Center)

Good Friday Liturgy, 7:00 p.m.

In ancient times, this day was called the “Friday of the Passion and Death of the Lord.” It is a day of probing recollection and prayerful contemplation of the cross on which the Redeemer of the world hung. The sorrow of Good Friday is not bereavement for a dead Christ. According to his own words from the cross, we are not to weep for him, but for ourselves. The sorrow of repentance that leads to newness of life is the sorrow of Good Friday.

The fact that this is the only day in the year that the Western Church does not celebrate the Holy Eucharist intensifies the atmosphere of desolation. We depart to ponder anew our Lord’s final words from the cross, “It is finished.”

Holy Saturday Easter Vigil, 20 April

Easter Vigil, 7:00 p.m.

The “most holy night of the year” begins in the darkness that descends from Good Friday’s events. From the darkness that covers all, a spark leaps forth. The newly kindled fire (some years out in the graveyard—symbolizing Christ’s resurrection from the tomb) visually announces the rising of Christ from the dead. With the lighting of the Paschal Candle, we begin the Great Vigil of Easter.

Initially this liturgy centers on firelight, the visible token of Christ, who proclaimed himself the “Light of the world.” As the darkness of the Church is pierced by the single shaft of light, the Paschal candle is borne forward toward the sanctuary. The deacon’s joyous acclamation, “The Light of Christ” and the people’s response, “Thanks be to God” follow as the new light is shared with each person until the church is bathed in its radiance. The ancient Paschal song, the Exsultet, is chanted, calling heaven, earth, and all people of God to rejoice in the resurrected Lord. Wondrous events of salvation history are recounted in a series of Old Testament readings.

The focus shifts to baptism, as this night was the primary time for baptisms in the early church. What better day for baptisms could there be than this, as we go under the waters of the death of our old life, so to be raised by God into new life! The climax of the service and of all Holy Week is the Holy Eucharist—the sacramental re-enactment of Christ’s Pasch (Passage or Passover) from death to life for the salvation of the world. Our response to the tremendous mystery is a resounding “Alleluia”

Easter Day, 21 April

8:00 a.m., 9:15 a.m., 11:00 a.m., 5:00 p.m.

We bring flowers from our gardens and yards to decorate the wooden cross that stood in front of the church for all of Lent. The Festival Liturgy is characterized by triumph and joy.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed!

Alleluia! Alleluia!