

# UNDERSTANDING HOLY WEEK



JERRY WELTE

*See, we are going up to Jerusalem,  
and everything that is written about  
the Son of Man by the prophets will  
be accomplished.*

*—Luke 18:31*

## WATCHING AND WALKING WITH JESUS

*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness. —John 8:12*



Holy Week is a time of keeping vigil. We watch with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we stand in sorrow under his cross, and we keep vigil in hope outside his tomb. Our vigilance is a risky endeavor, for disciples may be scorned or persecuted for their faith. Keeping vigil is also arduous because we are human: “Could you not stay awake with me one hour?” Finally, it may elicit a helpless feeling. We cannot stop the crucifixion; we can only stand and watch. That takes faith in a pragmatic, utilitarian society that often feels worthless when it is not doing something.

Yet, Holy Week demands more of us than vigilance alone. The liturgies of Palm Sunday and the Triduum

also call us to walk with the Lord. We do not just stand under the cross; we also take up our cross and follow. We do not simply keep watch at the tomb; we also go into the tomb to be buried with Christ. When parents go somewhere, children often ask: “Can I go with you?” Then, when they get tired or bored, they ask to be taken home because the trip is too long or hard. Holy Week bids God’s children to follow Jesus to the very end so that we may never walk in darkness.

### **Early Celebration of Holy Week**

A review of the liturgies of Holy Week reveals the watching and walking elements of these holy days. Holy Week is filled with festive, reverent processions as well as silent, solemn vigils. Detailed descriptions of early forms of these rites are found in *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, (or *Egeria*), the account of a fourth-century woman’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In early writings, Holy Week is called *The Great Week*, or the week of the *Pasch*, which is a Hebrew word for “passage.” In 331, St. Athanasius writes: “We begin the holy week of the Great Pasch in which we should observe more prolonged prayers and fastings and watchings that we may be enabled to anoint our lintels with the precious blood and so escape the destroyer” (the Passover angel).

Some of the earliest Holy Week practices appropriately date back to ancient celebrations in Jerusalem. Around the year 388, Christians processed with the bishop

from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem bearing palm and olive branches. On Holy Thursday they partook of the Eucharist, gathered at the Mount of Olives, and kept a night vigil that continued until they returned to the city near dawn. The veneration of the True Cross—traditionally said to be found by St. Helena around the year 326—was held on Friday before noon, followed by a three hour Passion service. Another vigil followed for those young or strong enough to observe it. The Paschal Vigil, including the baptism of children and catechumens, was then celebrated on Saturday evening.

## PALM SUNDAY: ENTERING JERUSALEM

*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!” —John 12:13*



There are two distinct tones or moods to the Sunday liturgy that begins the journey of Holy Week. The bittersweet nature of the day is reflected in its two equally important names. Palm Sunday celebrates the Lord's

triumphal entry into Jerusalem, while Passion Sunday ritualizes Christ's crucifixion and death. Thus, this liturgy marks the beginning of the end in the Lord's sacred mission of redemption.

Palm Sunday services begin with a blessing of palms, the gospel reading of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and a festive procession to the Church or sanctuary. The earliest references to a procession of palms in the West are found in the Spanish *Liber Ordinum*, and in the *Gregorian Sacramentary*. European

celebrations sometimes included pulling a figure of Christ on a wooden donkey or the priest celebrant riding a real donkey. Flowers and sprays of willows were often scattered before these processions.



The retelling of Christ's Passion during the Palm Sunday and Good Friday liturgies has a long history. When the Passion was proclaimed, it was sung in parts by three deacons who played the roles of the evangelist or narrator, the person of Christ, and various speakers. This division of the Passion into three parts shows up even in very early descriptions of the rubric. These parts can be recognized in the literary structure of the gospel narratives and they survive in the modern practice of proclaiming the passion in parts during Holy Week.

## HOLY THURSDAY: COMING TO THE TABLE

*When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. —Luke 22:14*



It is an eminently human and holy experience to be called to the dinner table by loved ones, especially when we are taking leave or reuniting. As Christ calls his disciples to the Eucharistic table, he is really doing both: “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). Jesus is sharing his “Last Supper” with his disciples, but he is also giving us the “first supper,” a way of always being one with him or “re-mem-bering” him in sign and sacrament. Through the centuries, the Holy Thursday liturgy has come to celebrate three primary graces: the institution of the Eucharist, the Lord’s call to service, and the gift of the priesthood.

Holy Thursday has often been called *Maundy Thursday*. Some scholars claim that this term derives from the

English word *maundy* which in turn is taken from *mandatum*, the Latin word for commandment. This is the great commandment given to us during the discourse of the Last Supper: “I give you a new commandment,



that you love one another” (John 13:34). Others believe that the word comes from a 12th

century custom by which the King and Queen would give alms or “Maundy money” and wash the feet of the poor as a gesture of humility.

The Holy Thursday Chrism Mass dates back to early Church history. At this liturgy, the bishop of each diocese gathers with priests and faithful to consecrate the three oils needed for the administration of the sacraments: the holy chrism, the oil of the catechumens, and the oil of the sick. The Second Vatican Council added a renewal of priestly promises to the Chrism Mass. In parishes, however, the Mass of the Lord’s Supper is encouraged to be the only liturgy of the day as a sign of our unity in Christ gathered at one table.

The ritual of the washing of the feet represents a distinctive and pivotal addition to the Mass on Holy Thursday. This ritual is celebrated in various ways ac-



ording to local custom, but its essential meaning remains the same. Usually, the pastor assumes the role of Christ and washes the feet of his parishioners. Yet, this is not a theatric play or mere historical reenactment to be watched. Rather, it is a living ritual of ongoing response to Christ's call of mutual service for all disciples: "If I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:4).

Holy Thursday also marks a break from the penitential tone of Lent. White vestments are worn by the priest and the *Gloria* is sung for the first time since the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Additionally, bells are often rung while the *Gloria* is sung. After the liturgy, a tone of relative silence returns until the singing of the *Gloria* at the Easter Vigil. This is why the solemn days of the Triduum have historically been called *The Still Days*. Our walking with the Lord continues at the close of the liturgy as the Eucharist is transferred in reverent procession to a fitting altar of repose. The altar is then stripped to create a mournful, barren environment for Good Friday.



## GOOD FRIDAY: TAKING UP THE CROSS

*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. —Luke 14:27*



Early Christians observed every Friday as a feast day of Christ's cross, so the Friday of Holy Week was often called the *Great* or *Holy* or *Good Friday* to set it apart. The precise origin of its name is uncertain, but it may be a derivative of "God's Friday." From earliest times, it has been common practice for Good Friday services to be held at three o'clock in the afternoon to mark the traditional time of Christ's death. The environment and the ritual are both stripped down to their essence to reflect a somber mood and a sense of loss.

The Good Friday service is separated into three main parts: The Liturgy of the Word, the Veneration of the

Cross, and the Communion Rite. The dramatic unveiling and veneration of the Cross that inspired current liturgical practice was first introduced into the Latin liturgy in the seventh or eighth century. Early documents refer to a practice called *Creeping to the Cross*, which involved approaching the cross on one's knees and prostrating oneself the way priests and deacons prostrate themselves to begin modern Good Friday services. The faithful still venerate the cross today as a sign of reverence, but also as a rite of commitment to “take up your cross.”



Our modern day Good Friday communion service has its origin in what was initially called *The Mass of the Pre-sanctified* in the documents of the *Quinisext Council* in the year 692. This term derives from the practice of consecrating the Eucharist on Holy Thursday for subsequent adoration and then reception of communion the following day. From the earliest times it was the custom not to celebrate Mass on Good Friday as a symbol of Christ's “absence” in death.

In the Latin rite, the covering of statues and crosses has frequently been practiced during Passiontide, the last

week of Lent and Holy Week. Currently U.S. bishops advise against this covering, but suggest covering the cross during Holy Week to highlight the unveiling on Good Friday. Regardless, the church is left barren after the service in a manner that suggests the cold and darkness of the enclosed tomb. Black vestments were long used for the Good Friday liturgy, but liturgical reforms changed the color to red, the color of Christ's passion and of martyrs.

## HOLY SATURDAY: GOING INTO THE TOMB

*When you were buried with Christ in baptism, you were also raised with him. —Colossians 6:12*



The Easter Vigil beautifully combines the watching and walking elements of Holy Week by calling upon us to keep hopeful vigil outside the tomb of Christ, but also to go into the tomb with him through baptism.

Christ shows us the way through the darkness of the tomb to the light and life of resurrection, but we must be buried with him if we are to rise with him.

The Vigil Mass is comprised of four major parts: the Service of Light, the Service of the Word, the Service of Baptism, and the Communion Service. During the first six centuries of Church practice, the Easter Vigil was truly a night watch. In fact, Easter's first "alleluia" was initially meant to coincide with Sunday's dawn. For numerous reasons,

the time of the service was gradually pushed back to Saturday daytime where it no longer had the look or feel of a night watch.

In the 1950's, Pope Pius XII restored the practice of a true vigil service. In doing so, he spoke of the disruption that had resulted from moving it to daylight hours: *This disharmony was most glaring on the Saturday, which became liturgically the day of Resurrection instead of that day's eve, and a day of darkest mourning became a day of light and gladness.*



The lighting of the new fire is perhaps of Celtic or pagan origin, but is augmented and Christianized by the blessing of the Paschal Candle and the "lighting of

the lamps,” which in modern times are taper candles. Once the vigil moved to daylight, however, this ritual lost much of its force, adding unintended irony to St. Cyril’s beautiful words: “The night shall be as clear as day.” The use of the Paschal Candle dates back to very early liturgical practice, including a reference in St. Augustine’s *City of God*. The exquisite hymn called the *Exultet*, sung to the light of the new Paschal Candle, was probably composed between the fifth and seventh centuries.

In the early centuries, there were large numbers to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, especially in major churches. On Holy Saturday in Constantinople in the year 407, three thousand catechumens were baptized in one church alone. The large numbers were the result of many converts, but also the fact that baptisms took place only on Holy Saturday and the vigil of Pentecost. After a period of decline in the catechumenate, modern



times have brought a restoration of Christian Initiation as a central part of Lent and the Easter Vigil liturgy.

The renewal of baptismal vows by all the faithful has also become a vital component of Easter services. Here again, the delicate faith balance of the watching and walking is evident. We joyfully

witness the baptism of the catechumens, but we are also moved by their exuberant faith to renew our own vows. In liturgy and in life, the empty tomb teaches us to transcend the gaper's block mentality that is so common in modern times. We do not find life by passively watching good or bad news unfold, but by raising our eyes in hope and moving our feet in mission: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5).

"Faith in the resurrection of Christ never misleads us, and hope in our own resurrection never deceives us, because God the Father both restored our Lord to life and will restore us to life too by virtue of his power."

—St. Bede the Venerable

## EASTER SUNDAY: WALKING TO EMMAUS

*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road? —Luke 24:32*



Easter Sunday is a vital and glorious conclusion to the events of the Triduum. As the disciples walk to the village of Emmaus, they feel lost and frightened. Suddenly, the risen Lord is walking with them, though they do not recognize him until he is “made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” Thus, the story ends with a new beginning. Christ is risen and now all disciples are called to walk with him in faith and be witnesses in hope: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

**Understanding Holy Week** was written by Jerry Welte.

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