

Keeping Holy Week



ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Rites of Holy Week

Jeff Lee is currently bishop of the Diocese of Chicago. Previously, he has served in a variety of congregational settings in both the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest. In a book he wrote for “The New Church’s Teaching Series,” he tells an illustrative story for us as we prepare to celebrate Holy Week. He was a “church planter” at the time, working to plant a new congregation in a growing suburban setting. This particular new congregation met in a local school gymnasium.

As we can easily imagine, he writes that it was a challenge to do Episcopal worship in a gym ... and that it was especially challenging to celebrate the “rather elaborate, symbolically rich celebrations” of Holy Week.

He was particularly concerned about a couple who first attended on Palm Sunday. After making their acquaintance, he invited them to join the congregation in its observances of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. And then he wondered if he’d made a mistake. They had been shopping around for a church that met their needs and he didn’t know what they would make of it all.

“As it turns out,” he writes, “I didn’t need to worry about this man and woman at all. After the service that day, they came up to me as we were leaving the gym. They were moved; they were elated. I had seen them come to the cross and watched as they stayed there while others came up to it and went. ‘This is it,’ they said. ‘This is exactly what we’ve been looking for and did not know how to ask for it – something older than what the pastor thought up last week.’”¹

The liturgies of Holy Week are decidedly “older than what the pastor thought up last week” – and can, in fact, be traced back to the celebrations of the Church in Jerusalem during the 4th century. On the following pages, we will explore some of the history of these liturgies in the hopes that a deeper understanding will engender a deeper celebration.

¹ From *Opening the Prayer Book* (Cowley Publications), p. 20.

Holy Week begins with the liturgy for Palm Sunday and concludes with the celebration of the Easter Vigil. The word "holy" means set apart for the worship of God. We are called to set this week apart to worship God – by reading the passages of Scripture appointed for the days of Holy Week (at home or with our families and friends) and by participating in the liturgies of Holy Week. By participating in these rites, we take our part in a great liturgical drama, one which tells the story of our faith and celebrates our identity as the redeemed people of God.

In the 4th century, the Church in Jerusalem went to the places of our Lord's Passion and re-enacted the events of his last days. Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem used these celebrations to impress the path of our Lord upon the hearts of his people. When Christianity became a legal religion, pilgrimages to Jerusalem became possible – and fairly common. These pilgrimages allowed Christians to indulge a natural desire to re-enact the last scenes of the life of Christ.

A nun (possibly an abbess) named Egeria made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land somewhere around 381-384. Her diary of that trip records what she saw and did while there during Holy Week. After her return to her home in Spain, she began to share her experiences with her own church family. The pattern and character of the Jerusalem Holy Week observances were thereby transported to Spain and eventually from there spread throughout the Western Church.

Thus, through Egeria, we now re-enact the events of Jesus' last days, beginning with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and continuing throughout the week with the Last Supper and Foot-Washing, the veneration of the supposed real cross at the site of Jesus' crucifixion, and a service at the supposed tomb (the celebration of Baptism and the Easter Eucharist). This is still our outline for Holy Week. These acts of worship have been considered among the most holy and essential to Christians of all ages. They have been handed down to us as they were in the very first days of the Church. They are very ancient and most authentic.



The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

According to Egeria, the liturgy of the palms essentially lasted all day. After the morning Eucharist, at which the story of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11) was read, the people hastened home for a quick meal. At 1:00 PM, they met the Bishop of Jerusalem near the top of the Mount of Olives for a service of hymns, antiphons and lessons.

HOSANNA
IN THE HIGHEST!

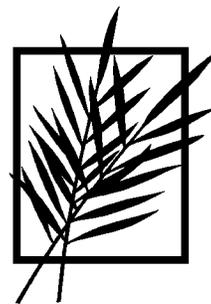


M A R K 1 1 : 1 0

At 3:00 PM, they moved to the top of the Mount for a similar service. The reading of Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was repeated at 5:00 PM, followed by a procession into the city. The procession moved slowly since it included both the very old and the very young. All the while, the people waved branches of palm or olive trees and sang psalms and shouted the antiphon "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The procession ended at the site of the Lord's tomb with an Order of Worship for Evening.

This same Liturgy is the beginning of our Palm Sunday celebration. Rather than starting on the Mount of Olives, we gather outside (weather permitting) to hear the account of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem read. And there, the palms that we will later carry in procession are blessed.

In the Holy Land, palm branches were readily available and used to strew or to carry in procession. Over time, indigenous greenery was often used instead. At St. Mark's, we use palms to make clear the connection between our time and place and the experience of the early church and the first disciples.



The Prayer Book liturgy (beginning on page 270) includes a collect, a gospel reading of the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the blessing of the psalms and the antiphon. The procession sings the traditional "All glory, laud, and honor" as we make our way into the church for the rest of the service.

When we have all gathered in the church building, the Eucharist of the Passion follows immediately. In this transition, we can see and feel that two separate and distinct liturgies form the whole of our worship on this day.

The Passion Eucharist comes to us from some of the oldest lectionaries. We experience one of the three synoptic gospel narratives (i.e., Matthew, Mark, or Luke) of the Passion. The narrative is read (or sung) in dramatic form with several readers reading various parts and the congregation being the crowd. This dramatic reading intends to enhance our involvement in the events of our Lord's passion and crucifixion. We recall that in Baptism we are dead in Christ, so that we may rise with him out of the water to a new life in his Body, the Church. The Eucharist proceeds as at any other celebration of praise and thanksgiving.

The Ordinary Days of Holy Week

Our Prayer Book prescribes no specific rites for the early days of Holy Week. The lectionary does, however, specify readings for these days, suggesting that we use these days as opportunities to continue to be immersed in the Word. These provocative readings help fill in the gap between Jesus' triumphant entry on Sunday and his rejection and crucifixion on Friday.

Monday in Holy Week

Scriptures --
Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 36:5-10
Hebrews 11:39-12:3
John 12:1-11
or Mark 14:3-9



Her many sins are forgiven because of her great love

The Gospel readings for this day give the account of the anointing of Jesus. After all of his ministry to others, Jesus lovingly receives the ministrations of a poor woman. The disciples are indignant that she would waste money in such a way, but Jesus rebukes them and sees in her gesture one of ultimate giving. She has purchased something expensive only to give it away.

How often are we tempted to give the best we have to those in need, rather than our worn-out shoes and old-fashioned clothes?

Tuesday in Holy Week

Scriptures - Isaiah 49:1-6
 Psalm 71:1-12
 I Corinthians 1:18-31
 John 12:37-38, 42-50
 or Mark 11:15-19



3rd Sunday, cycle B

Stop turning my Father's house into a market place

Mark's Gospel speaks of the cleansing of the Temple; John's Gospel of the rejection of Christ by the Jewish authorities of his day. Either of these readings reminds us of our Lord's ultimate authority, especially in contrast to those presumed to hold legitimate authority.

If Jesus were to return today, would he need to cleanse any temples? The temple of the Church? Our personal temples?

If Jesus were to return today, would the authorities receive him joyfully? Would we?

Wednesday in Holy Week

Scriptures - Isaiah 50:-4-9a
 Psalm 69:7-15, 24-28
 Hebrews 9:11-15
 John 13:21-35
 or Matthew 26:1-5, 14-25



Both Gospel readings appointed for the day portray Judas as an evil man, possessed by the devil and by the love of money. We find it hard to understand his behavior.

And yet... do we not betray our brothers and sisters in Christ with thoughtless words and actions? How often have we betrayed a friend's trust for our own advantage?

Maundy Thursday

Egeria records that the Jerusalem Church marked the night before Jesus' crucifixion by celebrating the Eucharist at 2:00 PM at a church over the site of the discovery of the true cross. This service was followed by the congregation's moving to the courtyard behind the church, where a cross was erected at the supposed site of the crucifixion for another celebration at 4:00 PM. Prayers at the tomb followed.

The congregation hurried home for a meal before returning to meet at the Garden of Gethsemane. Moving from there, they followed the path of our Lord to the site of his trial and back to the site of the crucifixion for an early morning reading of John's account of the trial before Pilate. In total, this was a service that lasted through Thursday night and into the early part of Friday.



The custom of an evening celebration of the Eucharist on this day spread throughout the Church, and at least since the 7th century, the Epistle read at this service has been Paul's account of the institution of the Eucharist (from I Corinthians 11) and the Gospel has been John's account of our Lord's washing the feet of his disciples (from John 13). The reading of this Gospel -- and in many places the ceremonial re-enactment of it -- has given this day its name.

"Maundy" comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning commandment. It refers to Jesus' commandment to his followers: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another even as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

In many places on this day, abbots washed the feet of monks, and kings washed the feet of peasants. As recently as 1560, for example, Queen Elizabeth was reported to have "kept her maundy" in the great hall at Westminster by washing the feet of twenty poor women.

Our observance of Maundy Thursday recalls that "Last Supper," a special meal that was both a time of fellowship between Jesus and his disciples and especially the occasion when he instituted (and commanded us to continue to celebrate) the Eucharist. Our *Agape Meal*, a simple supper of foods like those Jesus might have shared with his disciples, is an opportunity to enjoy one another's fellowship as well to experience a meal evocative of that last meal Jesus shared with his closest companions.



Following that meal, the proper liturgy for Maundy Thursday recalls the "Last Supper" as the basis of our weekly celebrations of the Eucharist. We celebrate this liturgy to participate with Jesus in the bittersweet context of the night in which he was betrayed - - a night filled at once with the joy and hope of Passover **and** with the certainty that within twenty-four hours he would be dead.



It was at this supper that Jesus gave his disciples the example of his self-giving love by washing their feet, and so we will re-enact it at our Maundy Thursday liturgy as well. Everyone is invited to participate in the foot-washing, a sign of reconciliation and a symbol of the servant ministry that is ours in Christ.

Note: Please wear socks and shoes that are easily removed if you intend to participate in this piece of the liturgy.

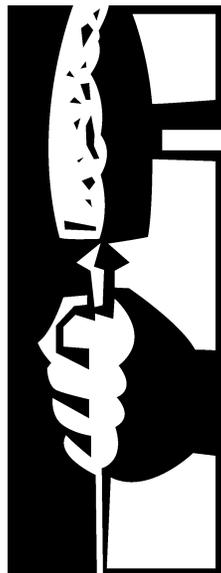
The service concludes with the stripping of the altar and sanctuary. Prior to the stripping of the altar, consecrated bread and wine will be set aside (or "reserved") for our Good Friday service the next evening.

Good Friday

Egeria's experience in Jerusalem was of a nearly continual liturgy from Maundy Thursday through the Easter Eucharist. The Good Friday liturgy comes from this ancient material and must be seen as an integral part of the celebration of a unified simple event, Jesus' death/resurrection. We tend to separate it into two or more parts and celebrate it that way. From its earliest experiences, however, the Church has known it as a one single event -- death/resurrection -- for we acclaim Jesus as Lord of both.

Egeria records that the supposed true cross was laid on a table at the site of the crucifixion, beginning at 8:00 AM until noon on Friday. The faithful came to venerate the cross through the morning hours. At noon, the people assembled in the church courtyard for a service that lasted until 3:00 PM, consisting of psalms, readings, hymns and prayers. They later went to the site of the tomb. There, the Gospel of John's account of the burial (John 19:38-42) was read.

After a time, other churches acquired "pieces of the true cross" and conducted similar rites. Eventually, still other churches picked up these rites and used crosses of their own making, thereby translating these liturgies to their own places of worship.



We have three services at St. Mark's on Good Friday, each of which is an invitation to reflect more deeply on the cross that stands at the center of this day.

The first two of these services – at noon and at 4:00 PM – follow the pattern of the “Stations of the Cross.” This liturgy has been a part of Christian tradition since the Middle Ages when pilgrims to Jerusalem commemorated Jesus' crucifixion by retracing his journey beginning with Jesus' condemnation and ending with his burial.

The noonday service stops at each of the 14 stations that are set into the exterior walls of the sanctuary. At each station, we hear a particular event in the journey described, listen to a meditation connecting the event to our lives, and pray. The 4:00 PM service was modified from this pattern with children especially in mind. It is a simplified variation, pausing at a few select stops along the way, offering less formal reflections there.

The “proper liturgy” for Good Friday is celebrated in the evening. This service incorporates the psalms and the solemn collects of the ancient Church, the reading (or singing) of the Passion from John's gospel in dramatic form, veneration of the cross, and Communion from the sacrament consecrated on Maundy Thursday.

In their own ways, each of these services point us toward Holy Saturday when we wait in silence. Thus, our Good Friday liturgies are not separate from the other services of Holy Week, but rather continue that which was begun on Maundy Thursday and will reach its consummation at the Easter Vigil.

This pattern allows us to connect with the ancient rich customs and traditions of the Church, and so opens the experience of our Lord's death and of our salvation. Participation is important because, to the extent that we identify with and enter into his death, we are also prepared to participate and enter into the celebration of his rising to new life.



Holy Saturday

On Holy Saturday, the day our Lord remained in the tomb, there is no celebration of Eucharist nor distribution from the Reserved Sacrament (except in an emergency).

A simple and quiet service of the Word of God brings together the themes of death and the questions it poses, the burial of the Lord, and the Sabbath day of rest. After the liturgy, members of the Altar Guild and others prepare the church building for our celebration of Easter, beginning with the Easter Vigil; the rest of us prepare our homes for our own celebrations of Easter.

Our Lord is in the tomb, what shall we do?



The Great Vigil of Easter

The Jewish Passover commemorated the slaying of the first-born, the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land. For the early Christians, Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of that feast. In almost every language except English, the same word is used for both the Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter -- *Pascha*. The Christian Passover or Paschal Vigil dates from at least the year 215, if not from New Testament times. It is rooted in the celebration of new converts' baptisms and the celebration of the Easter Eucharist on the day of the Lord's Resurrection.



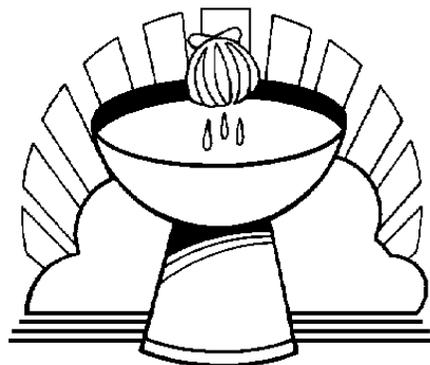
At St. Mark's, we begin the Vigil with the lighting of the new fire. The lighting of a **new** fire is deeply symbolic. Before the invention of matches, the kindling of a fire was a serious matter, and the ritual extinguishing of the old fire and kindling of a new one was an obvious act of renewal. In the dark of the night, we will strike a new fire, and from this fire, the priest lights the Paschal Candle and reads the prayers. This is the first of many symbolic acts that make up the service.

The kindling of a new fire in the darkness at the beginning of the Great Vigil is a symbol of the new life in Christ which the resurrection proclaims and ushers in. As the newly-lit Paschal Candle is carried into the church, we pause three times to sing (or say) the acclamation that we celebrate: "The Light of Christ." Candles held by members of the congregation are lit from the Paschal Candle, symbolizing the new light -- "the true light that enlightens everyone" (John 1:9) -- that spreads light over the whole body of the faithful. The Paschal Candle is placed in its stand where it provides light for the rest of the service (and the remaining 50 days of Easter).

By the light of the Paschal Candle, the Exsultet -- "Rejoice now" -- is sung. This ancient prayer celebrates the story of our salvation: "How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God" (BCP, p. 287).

At the conclusion of the Exsultet, the candles are extinguished and we hear the record of God's saving deeds in history as recorded in Scripture from the Old Covenant. Each passage tells another chapter in the ongoing story of God's reaching out to save. The passages are interspersed with song and prayer. In the early Church, the lessons extended from sunset to the "cockcrow" of Easter morning.

At cockcrow, in the early Church, the waters of baptism would have been blessed. In our baptism -- as in everything that we have done in the course of Holy Week -- we enter into Christ's death/resurrection. Baptism is the climax of this service which is itself the climax of Holy Week. As new members pass through the waters of the baptismal font, they also pass with Christ through the grave and gate of death to be united with him in his resurrection. After the lessons, therefore, the service of Baptism is celebrated. And even if there are none to be baptized on this night, the entire congregation renews its baptismal vows.



At the conclusion of the Baptism, the altar candles are lit from the Paschal Candle and the Easter proclamation is made: "The Lord is risen!" The singing of hymns and alleluias combine to create a "pandemonium" (a holy noise) that recalls the victory of all life.

The celebration of the Easter Eucharist follows ... with many alleluias and much joy. Thus, the service begins in darkness and ends in light, begins in silence and ends amidst pandemonium, begins without adornment and ends with the beauty and glory of Easter lilies and other decorations. It is the premier celebration of all Christians as it sums up the death/resurrection of our Lord -- and sums up all of our participation in that event throughout Holy Week!

*This is a night in which
heavenly things are
united to those of earth
and things divine to
those which are human.*

Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia

