

Holy Week
Wholly Saved

Dear Friends,

This week, we enter into a most sacred time of year. Holy Week has for centuries been a time for the Church to mark the final days of Jesus' life, the ghastly hours of His death, and the glorious morning of His resurrection. All of history – and every eternity – hangs on these moments.

Because of the centrality of Holy Week, we have prepared a brief booklet for you, explaining the significance of the chief days in this week: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. You can learn more about the Scriptural foundations of these days as well as how the Church has traditionally commemorated these occasions in its worship life. At the end of this booklet, we have also prepared some questions for reflection, meant to help you take what you have read and apply it in your life. This document is also available electronically on our website at www.ConcordiaLutheranChurch.com.

You're invited to join us this week as we worship together and remember the great sacrifice our Lord has made for us. Our worship schedule for this Holy Week is as follows:

- **Palm Sunday:** Pageant on Saturday at 6pm, Sunday at 9:30 & 11am; Worship on Sunday at 8am
- **Maundy Thursday:** Worship at noon & 7pm
- **Good Friday:** Worship at noon & 7pm
- **Easter Sunday:** Worship on Saturday at 6pm, Sunday at 8, 9:30, & 11am; Sunrise Service on Sunday at 6:30am

We hope you will join us!

It is our prayer that God will open your heart during this special week and lead you to a deeper appreciation of Who Christ is and what He has done – because He did it for you!

God bless you!



Bill Tucker
Senior Pastor

In retail, it's the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas. In college basketball, it's the month of March. For the IRS, it's April 15. We all have months, days, and even moments which are especially poignant to us and fill our hearts with anticipation and excitement. For Christians, Holy Week is just such a time.

"Holy Week" is a term used to denote the final week of Jesus' life. It holds a special place in a Christian's heart, especially since the New Testament gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – devote more than one-third of their pages to this single week. Indeed, the gospels have sometimes been called "Passion stories with introductions." Their focus is unmistakably on Jesus' final week of life.

Holy Week began to occupy a prominent place very early in the Church's history. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (a fourth century manual of church practice for pastors and bishops) calls Holy Week the "Great Week" and calls on Christians "to fast these six days"¹ in memory of Christ's sufferings. The six days referred to here are Monday through Saturday of Holy Week.

Holy Week is highlighted by four high holy days: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. The Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday of Holy Week, although churches sometimes hold worship services on these days, are relatively minor in comparison to the others. Because of their significance in the life of Jesus, it is well worth it to consider each of the high holy days of this sacred week.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday recounts Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as He is welcomed by adoring throngs:

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet Him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." (John 12:12-15)

Palms were a symbol of Jewish nationalistic pride. In 164 BC, after the Greek tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who had persecuted and murdered many Jews, was defeated, the Jews waved palms in celebration of their victory. A history book from that time recounts Antiochus IV Epiphanes' demise: "Carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also *fronds of palm*, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success."²

When Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the Jews are being oppressed – not by Greeks, but by Romans. And so, the Jews again break out their palms in hopes that Jesus might be the One to deliver them. Even their cry of "Hosanna" betrays their strident nationalism. "Hosanna" is from two Hebrew words: *hoshana*, meaning "to save," and *nah*, meaning "please." Thus, the Jews cry to Jesus: "Save us please from our Roman oppressors!"

This scene of adoring crowds singing "Hosannas" captured the imagination of those in the ancient church. Dramatic reenactments of this scene were introduced in Spain, Gaul, and England, in the fifth, seventh, and eighth centuries respectively. Such reenactments continue in churches today, where congregants wave palm branches and sing, "All glory, laud, and honor, to You, Redeemer King!"

Maundy Thursday

The crowds of Palm Sunday may have loved Jesus, but the members of the religious establishment hated Him. Already on Palm Sunday, the religious leaders were plotting how they might silence Jesus. When they saw the palms and heard the crowds, they sniveled: *"See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after Him"* (John 12:19)!

As the week progresses, the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders rises to a fever pitch. By Thursday, *"Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love"* (John 13:1). Jesus, knowing that He would soon die, demonstrates His love for His disciples in two ways. First, Jesus washes His disciples' feet in an act of service to them (cf. John 13:1-17). Second, Jesus shares with His disciples a final meal:

Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:19-20)

On Maundy Thursday, churches throughout the world share Communion as a way of both remembering Jesus' final meal with His disciples and solemnly rejoicing in how Christ comes to us modern-day disciples with His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. As Jesus washed His disciples feet, some churches also include a foot-washing rite in their Maundy Thursday services as a reminder that our Lord *"did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45).

As Jesus has shown us love through His service to us and through the sharing of His body and blood with us, we are to show God's love to others, even as Jesus commands shortly after He washes His disciples' feet: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"* (John 13:34). The Latin word for "command" is *mandatum*, from which the name "Maundy Thursday" is derived. Thus, Maundy Thursday is a day of love – the love that Christ has for us and the love in Christ that we have for each other.

Good Friday

The apostle Paul wrote, *"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:2). Paul claims to know nothing but Christ and His cross, for he believes this is the very center of the Christian message. Good Friday, the day on which Christ was crucified, is a most sacred day.

Because Good Friday is both sacred and solemn, it is traditionally a day of reflection. It is called "*Good Friday*" not because the suffering, scourging, ridiculing, and death which Christ endured was "good" in and of itself. These things were carried out by evil men. Rather, Good Friday is called "good" because of what these terrible things accomplished – the forgiveness of our sins. As Paul writes, *"In Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins"* (Ephesians 1:7). Christ's blood, shed on the cross, forgives our sins.

Good Friday worship services take several forms. A popular late-medieval devotion known as the *Way of the Cross* has fourteen stations in which the events of Christ's Passion are acted out in the streets of local communities. Worshippers proceed from one station to the next and remember Christ's sacrifice for them. In the seventeenth century, a service spanning from noon to 3pm, the hours during which Jesus was on the cross, became popular. This service usually focuses on the so-called "seven last words"

of Jesus and includes devotions on each word. Then, in an evening service called Tenebrae, a Latin word meaning “shadows,” worshippers quietly reflect as candles are extinguished and lights are lowered over the course of the service until the sanctuary is completely blackened in remembrance of the dark day of Jesus’ death.

As somber a day as Good Friday is, it is not without a glimmer of hope. For we know that the darkness of evil and even death cannot overcome the light of hope that Christ has come to bring (cf. John 1:5).

Easter Sunday

The word “Easter” was originally a pagan word, referring to Austron, the Saxon goddess of fertility and sunrise, whose festival was celebrated in the spring. The eighth century scholar Saint Bede the Venerable explains how Saxon Christians commandeered the pagan name “Easter” and used it to refer to their celebrations of Christ’s resurrection.³ Blessedly, the Church’s use of the word “Easter” has remained, while its pagan use has long since faded into the recesses of history. It is no surprise that Christian Easter celebrations have stood the test of time. After all, the Easter story is unforgettable:

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen!”
(Luke 24:1-6)

Luke captures the excitement and unexpectedness of the scene. The women, finding Jesus' tomb empty, wonder what could have happened. Even though Jesus had foretold His resurrection on multiple occasions (cf. Luke 9:22, 13:32, 18:33, 24:7), the idea that a man could rise from the dead was so over-the-top, the women failed to call to mind our Lord's words. Indeed, they thought His body had been stolen (cf. John 20:15). But then a question from two men dressed in white snaps their attention to the reality of what has happened: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The angels accuse the women of being "walking oxymorons." Looking for the living among the dead? That's like writing an obituary instead of a birth announcement when you have a healthy, happy child. That's like taking your spouse to divorce court on your wedding day. It makes no sense!

The resurrection of Christ was central to early Christian preaching and teaching. The apostle Paul explains:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.
(1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 17-19)

Paul is crystal clear in his estimation of Christ's resurrection. It is "of first importance." It is so important, that if it is not true, all of Christianity is a ruse and we have no hope for eternity. Thus, on Easter, the Church both defends the historicity of Christ's resurrection and celebrates its significance. For Christ's resurrection is an historical guarantee of the promise that when Christ returns, we too will rise from the dead to share in eternity with our Lord.

The Church, over the centuries, has gloriously celebrated Easter. Many churches hold “Easter sunrise services” commonly beginning shortly before sunrise at approximately the time the women would have come to Christ’s empty tomb. Although not practiced by the early church, a tradition developed called an “Easter Vigil service.” This service takes place Saturday night and anticipates the coming resurrection of Christ.⁴

Traditionally, the worship services for Easter are the largest and loudest of the year. This is surely appropriate. For “*Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep...So in Christ all will be made alive*” (1 Corinthians 15:20, 22). Christ’s resurrection is the hope of our resurrections!

Questions for Reflection

Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of Holy Week and its significance in a Christian’s life. The following questions are meant to help you reflect on what you have just read and apply it to your personal walk with Christ.

1. Jesus knew that His mission was to die and rise again. He also knew that He would do so at Jerusalem (cf. Matthew 20:18-19). Where does Jesus arrive on Palm Sunday (Luke 19:28-40)? How does this add a note of solemnity to an otherwise joyful day? How does Jesus acknowledge His ultimate rejection and impending death in Luke 19:31-44? Why is He weeping? If Jesus knew He was riding to His death when He rode to Jerusalem, why did He go there (1 John 3:16, Isaiah 53:5-6, John 3:14-15)?

2. Notice how quickly Jesus’ life changes. On Sunday, crowds praise Him. By Friday, crowds shout, “*Crucify Him!*” (Matthew 27:22). Why do you think the will of the people is so fickle? How does this prompt us to live according to God’s will rather than the will of others or our own will? Where has Jesus worked for good in spite of your sinfulness?

3. The night before Jesus dies, He serves His disciples by washing their feet (cf. John 13:1-17). If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, would you be thinking about yourself or others? What is the value of continuing to serve others, even during stressful times?

4. Jesus not only serves His disciples by washing their feet, He serves His disciples with His very self – His body and His blood for the forgiveness of their sins. Read Paul's take on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and consider the following questions:

- How did the Corinthians misunderstand the mood of the Lord's Supper in their raucous revelry (verses 17-22)?
- Because we are called to "*proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*" (verse 26) as part of receiving the Lord's Supper, how can you proclaim Jesus to someone during this special week?
- Who is present at the Lord's Supper (verses 27-32)? How does this presence encourage us to examine ourselves before we participate in the meal?

5. On Good Friday, we see the death we should have died because of our sins. Christ took the wrath of God at our sin on Himself for us. An old hymn by Anne Cousin explains it well:

O Christ, what burdens bowed Thy head!
Our load was laid on Thee;
Thou stoodest in the sinner's stead,
Didst bear all ill for me.
A Victim led, Thy blood was shed;
Now there's no load for me.

Christ took the load of our sin on Himself on the cross (cf. Isaiah 53:1-6). How have you seen and experienced your burden of sin lifted by Christ?

6. Christ's resurrection is the "linchpin of history." Consider all that His resurrection accomplishes:

- Christ's resurrection gives victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).
- Christ's resurrection vindicates His identity (Acts 2:22-24).
- Christ's resurrection offers forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 15:17).
- Christ's resurrection demonstrates in His ongoing presence with us (Matthew 28:18-20).
- Christ's resurrection means that He rules and reigns over all (Philippians 2:8-11).

Which of these accomplishments of Christ's resurrection are most meaningful to you? Why?

References Cited:

¹ *Ante Nicene Fathers*, VII:45

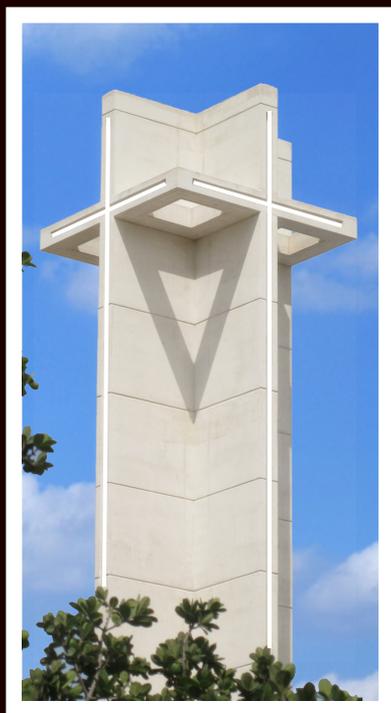
² Maccabees 10:6

³ The Venerable Bede, *De Ratione Temporum*

⁴ For more on the Easter Vigil, see Luther Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947) 462-463.

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are taken from *The New International Version of the Holy Bible*, © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

NOTES



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