

Explanations of the Holy Week and Paschal Services

Eve of Lazarus Saturday

Following the typical Orthodox pattern, this is the preparation for the beginning of Holy Week. This ancient canon (poetic hymn in nine sections) is sung in the context of Little Compline. It was written by St. Andrew of Crete, the composer of the penitential "Great Canon", also sung in Lent, and is a very moving meditation on Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead, in preparation for Lazarus Saturday.

Lazarus Saturday

(See John 11:1-45) In a real sense, Holy Week begins here. On this day we commemorate Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. One of the most poignant moments in the ministry of Jesus takes place on this day. His friend Lazarus has died, and Jesus comes to the tomb. Looking around, He sees the friends and family of Lazarus and shares their sorrow. He enters into the experience of loss that is known by all of us in such moments. And He, too, weeps. Why? Because death is our ultimate enemy. By it we are separated from one another, and shown to be separated from what God originally intended for us. To Lazarus' sister, Martha, Jesus declares, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in me, though he may die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." And as if to underscore the truth of His statement, He calls, "Lazarus, come forth." His friend, dead four days, walks out of the tomb. Death can have no dominion over Christ, for He is the Lord of life and of death. So Holy Week begins with a foreshadowing of its end. The cross and death will be followed by the triumph of Him Who is the Resurrection and the Life. This assurance gives us hope through the darkest moments of the Passion of Christ.

Palm Sunday

(See John 12:1-18) On Palm Sunday we commemorate the triumphal entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem. Christ came in humility, riding on a donkey, reminding us of the humility we Christians must have. Even though He was a King, and was hailed by the masses, He showed that His Kingdom is not of this world. He was not looking for worldly influence. He came to triumph over sin and death. The world's praises are fleeting. On Sunday, all acclaimed Him; on Friday the crowd shouted, "Crucify Him!"

After Palm Sunday, the world turns upside down, and as a reminder of this, the morning services are celebrated in the evening and the evening services in the morning. Holy Monday therefore begins with a service Sunday night.

Holy and Great Sunday, -Monday, -Tuesday

Bridegroom Matins

In the beautiful Bridegroom Matins services, the hymns and readings remind us that Christ, the Bridegroom who gives His life for His beloved, will come again to judge the living and dead. We must repent of our sins, and keep our baptismal garment clean so that we may be ready for the great feast. "Thy bridal chamber I see adorned, O my Savior, but I have no wedding garment that I may enter. O Giver of Light, enlighten the vesture of my soul and save me."

Holy and Great Wednesday

Service of Holy Unction

All of us are in need of the healing Grace of Jesus Christ. Our sins have wounded us, body and soul. In this service, really the Matins of Holy Thursday, the promises and experiences of healing in the Scriptures are read, and oil is blessed by the priest. Then those prepared are anointed with the consecrated oil for the healing of soul and body. We are readied for the most holy way of the Cross. (Since this anointing is a holy Mystery (Sacrament) of the Church, only those Orthodox Christians who have prepared themselves through prayer and confession may be anointed.)

Holy and Great Thursday

Vesperal Divine Liturgy w/ Foot Washing

(See John 13:1-17) This service commemorates the gift to the Church of the Holy Mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ, the commandment to love one another exemplified by Christ's washing of His disciples' feet, and prepares us for the Passion Gospels to be read this evening. We hear chanted the verses which tell of Judas' betrayal and are reminded of our own betrayals by the chilling words "Let no one, O believers, remain uninitiated in the Lord's Supper; let no one at all approach the table, like Judas, with deceit. . ." The service concludes with the foot-washing, so be sure to dress appropriately.

7 PM Passion Gospels

In the context of the Matins service, twelve different readings from the several Gospels are heard amidst hymnody that is at once poetically beautiful and deeply theological. In words more powerful and dramatic than any movie, the Evangelists portray the sufferings of Christ our Lord, His betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion as the narratives unfold the distressing truth of the cost of our redemption. And in the darkened church, the Cross of Christ is carried in procession, lowered to the ground, and the icon of the Crucified is nailed to it. Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.

Holy and Great Friday

9 AM Royal Hours

Served before the Cross/Icon of the Crucified Jesus in the nave, 1st, 3rd, 6th, and 9th Hour prayers are combined with hymns and readings from the prophet Isaiah and the Gospels.

Vespers of the Taking Down from the Cross

During Vespers the icon of Christ is taken down from the Cross, and the Holy Epitaphion (winding, or burial, sheet) is processed and placed in the bier (tomb). We mourn the death of Him Who has Life in Himself, and thank God for the tremendous love He has for us. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16

Service of Lamentations and Procession of the Bier

At this service we gather around the bier (tomb) to sing the beautiful Lamentations. Rose water is sprinkled and we process with the flowered bier around the outside of the church singing the hauntingly-beautiful "Holy God", returning for hymns and to venerate the Epitaphion, as one would "pay one's respects" to a dead loved one. How can our Creator and God be laid in a tomb? How can death be victorious? And yet, we know that death cannot hold Him. Life cannot finally die. Death is trampled down by the death of the Son of God. So we begin, in the midst of our sorrow, to look ahead to the victory that is to come, to the Resurrection on the morning of the third day.

(After the Lamentations Service, an all-night vigil, during which the four Holy Gospels are read, will be kept before the bier, ending before the Holy Saturday services.)

Holy and Great Saturday

Vesperal Divine Liturgy of St Basil

We know that Christ has won the victory, that salvation is ours, that our sins are forgiven, and that the devil has no hold on us. But evil and sin are all around us. How long, O Lord, will you wait? How long until evil is finally crushed and the righteous exalted? How long, O Lord, until we are delivered from the bondage of sin, and the powers of this age? In this Liturgy we begin to see and know the power of the Resurrection. Our mourning is beginning to turn to the anticipation of joy. Gone are the purple vestments of Great Lent. The priest vests in bright colors, anticipating the joy which is to come, and casts bay leaves (ancient signs of victory) about the church. "Weeping may last for the night; but joy comes in the morning."

Holy Pascha/Feast of the Resurrection

Nocturnes, Procession, Matins, Divine Liturgy, Paschal Feast

And then it happens!! In the dark we come to the church to pray. The priest takes a candle and comes out among the people proclaiming, "Come, take light from the Light that is never overtaken by night. Come, and glorify Christ, risen from the dead!" The Faithful light their candles and then, singing, all begin the procession to the tomb. Returning to the door of the church we are startled to find an angel declaring news of incomparable goodness to us: "He is not here. He is risen as He said." Joyfully we sing, "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life." Our glorious Paschal celebration begins as we enter, the Paschal Greeting and Holy Kiss are exchanged, the beautiful Matins hymns are sung, the sermon of St. John Chrysostom is heard, and at long last our Lenten exile ended, we eat and drink the most holy Body and precious Blood of the Resurrected Christ, the medicine of immortality. "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Our celebration continues with our long-anticipated Paschal feast in the parish hall, along with the blessing of Pascha baskets. "Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!"

Holy Pascha

Agape Vespers

The Day of Resurrection continues with the Vespers of Love. This service begins with the joyous strains of the Paschal verses and the Gospel story of doubting Thomas is read in many languages, reminding us that the proclamation of the Gospel is for the whole world, and that Christ still lives even amongst in the doubts and trials of this world. After the procession we conclude with the sharing of the Paschal Kiss, mirroring and completing the experience of mutual forgiveness that began the Great Lent.

Bright Monday

Divine Liturgy

Our celebration continues as we repeat the Paschal Liturgy, then relax with an Easter Egg hunt, food (grilled meats!) and fellowship.