



Holy Week and Pascha



A Guide for Holy Week

In a few days the feasts of the Raising of Lazarus and the Entrance of the Lord into Jerusalem will be upon us. Following them, Holy Week will begin. In our parish, church services will be conducted daily, morning and evening, throughout this whole period. All of these services are very beautiful, but there are very many of them. It may be hard for some of you to decide when to come, since few of you will be able to attend every service. There is also the question of what services to bring children to. Some of the services are very simple in their form, i. e. they don't have any entrances, the lights are not turned on, there are only the texts and hymns of the service, which children are unable to understand. At such services they will be unengaged. Other services are very long. These notes are short and are written only to help guide you in better orienting yourselves. If you are interested delving more deeply into the events of Holy Week, it would be good to thoroughly read or follow along with the texts and Gospel readings of the church services.

Although we have church every day morning and evening, one mustn't think that in our parish we follow the liturgical rubrics to the letter. We skip some of the services and others we shorten. The rubrics are followed more closely in monasteries and in cathedrals of large cities.

General notes on the church services of Holy Week

You could say that the main elements of the services of Great Lent are Psalter readings and other excerpts from the Old Testament. Although these are present at the services of Holy Week, especially during the first three days, the main element at practically all the services is now the reading of the Gospel. The Gospel reading at each service sets the tone for everything else that is read and sung. There is a pious custom that throughout Holy Week everyone holds a lit candle during the reading of the Gospel.

Holy Week is a transitional period when we slowly pass from lent to feast. There is no abrupt change from fasting to Pascha.

Throughout the whole week, the spirit or atmosphere of the services gradually changes. The Psalter, lenten melodies, prostrations, and dark vestments steadily give way to festive melodies, bright vestments, etc. It's interesting to follow these changes and also to engage children in this.

The liturgical day usually begins not at midnight or in the morning, but in the evening. Therefore, Monday begins Sunday evening, and so on.

*Lazarus Saturday (The raising of Lazarus)
(evening of April 15th, morning of April 16th)*

Matins on Friday night has many resurrectional hymns, i. e. those that are usually only sung on Saturday evening. "Having beheld the resurrection of Christ" and "Holy is our Lord God" are sung. This all emphasizes that fact that the raising of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of Christ's resurrection.

Saturday morning at Liturgy, instead of "Holy God" we sing "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ: Alleluia," because in the past, baptisms would take place on this day.

The fasting rules allow for caviar or roe, i. e. small eggs, to be eaten this day. Eggs are a symbol of the resurrected Christ, while on this day caviar is a symbol not of Christ's resurrection, but of Lazarus'.

*Palm Sunday (The Entrance of the Lord into Jerusalem)
(evening of April 16th, morning of April 17th)*

Palms and pussy-willows are blessed and handed out on Saturday evening, in emulation of the Jews, who in such fashion greeted Christ when He entered into Jerusalem. Branches are also a symbol of Christ's victory over hell and death. (In the ancient world, palm branches were a symbol of victory. Victorious emperors and generals were greeted by the people with branches.)

On this day, along with the troparion (the main hymn of the feast), we repeat many times the stichira "Today the Grace of the Holy Spirit has gathered us together..." because on this day, the Palestinian monastics would return from the desert to their monasteries, and, for the first time in many weeks, would pray all together in church. For us these words can have the same meaning: God has gathered us all together so as to pass the days of this holy week in church.

On Sunday the fasting rules are relaxed. Fish is allowed.

*Holy Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday
(evening of April 17th, all of Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday morning)*

The liturgical rubrics of all three days are identical. At matins (which is served in the evenings), a beautiful troparion ("Behold the Bridegroom") and exopostilarion ("I see Thy bridal chamber") are sung and the Gospel is read. Although these services are not very popular, they are magnificent, and therefore some thought should be given to attending at least on evening.

The hours are read in the mornings. According to the liturgical rubrics, throughout these three days the four Gospels are to be read in their entirety. In our parish, we read one of the evangelists from start to finish; this year we'll read Mark. This reading helps tremendously in gathering one's thoughts and preparing to meet the second half of Holy Week. For those who will not be attending these services, it might be good to read one the Gospels completely. This won't take you more than a couple of hours. You won't regret it.

Wednesday morning the final Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts is served. After the Liturgy, the prayer of St. Ephraim is said for the final time, lenten melodies are no longer used, prostrations are no longer made (although there is a custom in the Russian Church to make prostrations before venerating the shroud). The Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts is interesting for children.

Holy Thursday (evening of April 20th, morning of April 21st)

Great Thursday is a small feastday in the middle of Holy Week. We remember the establishment of the Eucharist at the Mystical Supper, when the Lord blessed bread and wine, made them His Body and Blood, and, for the first time, communed His apostles with these live-giving Gifts. It is customary for everyone to receive Communion on this day.

Holy Friday (evening of April 21st, morning and afternoon of April 22nd)

On this day we remember Christ's death on the Cross. Twelve Gospel excerpts about the passions of Jesus Christ, from all four evangelists, are read on Thursday night in front of a large crucifix in the centre of the church. You could say that this is one of the main services of Holy Week, and therefore it should not be missed. It is long, so children should be brought only for part of this service.

The hours are read on Friday morning, at which Gospel readings about the Lord's passion are repeated; this time, there are four of them, one from each evangelist. Although few people attend these hours, they are wonderful. If someone cannot come the previous evening for the reading of the Twelve Gospels, this service is a good alternative.

At 1 P. M. vespers is served, at which the shroud, an icon of the Saviour in the tomb, is brought out of the altar to the middle of church in a solemn procession. This is one of the main services of Holy Week, and should not be missed. In the past, no one would go to work on this day, nor would children be sent to school. The service is short, and so even small children can be brought for the whole service.

Immediately after vespers compline is read. Few people stay for this short service. This is a shame, because during it a wonderful canon is read about all that the Mother of God experienced while seeing her Son die on the Cross.

This day is an especially strict fast day. In the past people would abstain from all food and drink throughout the whole day. Today it is customary to fast completely at least until the end of vespers.

Great Saturday (evening of April 22nd and April 23)

In my opinion, the most beautiful church services of the whole year are performed on this day. They are long and full of meaning. The transition from fasting and the sadness of Great Friday to the feast of Pascha is especially felt.

At matins (served on Friday evening) the 117 (118) psalm is sung, that same psalm that is read at funerals. Between each verse of the psalm a short troparion about the passions, burial, and the awaited resurrection of the Saviour is read. After this psalm the resurrectional troparia "The assembly of the angels" is sung. These troparia are usually only sung on Saturday evenings. At the end of the service a procession around the church is performed. This procession represents Christ's movement through hell, where he freed the Old Testament saints and prepared to lead them out of that place into paradise. After the procession an Old Testament prophecy about the general resurrection is read to a particularly beautiful melody.

Saturday morning vespers and the Liturgy are served. At vespers we hear many Old Testament readings containing prophecies and prefigurements of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Two of them are read with singing in a very festive manner. All the entrances are performed not in front of the iconostasis, as is the usual case, but in the middle of church in front of the shroud. In the past, this service took place late in the evening and afterwards, people would not go home, but would stay in church until the paschal service. Therefore after the Liturgy it became customary for bread and wine are blessed, so that people could strengthen themselves before the night service. It's good to receive Communion on this day. This service should not be missed, although children should be brought later.

At midnight the paschal matins service begins and is followed immediately by the Divine Liturgy. The service starts out with a procession, in which we portray the myrrh-bearing women coming to the tomb and receiving from the angel the joyous message of Christ's resurrection. On this night almost all the prayers are sung, not read. One should receive Communion at this service as well. Afterwards, the fast can be broken. Small children should not be brought to the whole service, but only for part of it, perhaps just to the Liturgy.





A Few Words About Paschal Baskets

It is customary on Pascha to bring beautifully decorated baskets church to be blessed. These are usually filled with a kulich (a tall cylindrical shaped sweet bread baked with eggs and butter), cheese or 'cheese pascha' (also usually a sweet, soft cheese made in the form of a pyramid), eggs and meat, to. It's understandable that after a long fasting period, everyone want to eat these types of food. It is also natural that on such a holy day as the day of our Saviour's resurrection everything is done with God's blessing. It would be good to remember that there is a spiritual meaning to the foods found in our paschal baskets.

The kulich is a symbol of our risen Christ. Christ Himself, in the Gospel according to John, calls Himself the living bread. That fact that the kulich bread is tall, that it rose in the oven, reminds us that the Lord arose from the dead. It is sweet, naturally because the resurrection of our Saviour is the sweetest event in the history of mankind.

Cheese pascha reminds us of the Old Testament Passover, which of course is a prefiguration of the New Testament Passover, Easter. The Jews passed from Egyptian slavery to freedom, while we pass from sin and death to eternal blessedness. The pyramidal shape of cheese pascha reminds us of Egypt, while the cheese itself, which is curdled or thickened milk, reminds us of the passage of the Jews through the Red Sea when the water separated and thickened to form walls on either side of them. (This image is much clearer in the Slavonic translation of Exodus than it is in the English.)

Eggs are an ancient symbol of the resurrection. Just like the shell hides a living chick inside itself, so the tomb hides the life-giving body of Christ the Saviour.

Let's strive to keep these images of our risen Saviour in our minds and hearts throughout the holy day of Pascha, even when we're eating!

Canons about Pascha

Canon 20 from the First Ecumenical Council
Forasmuch as there are certain persons who kneel on the Lord's Day [Sunday] and in the days of Pentecost [from Easter until Pentecost], therefore, to the intent that all things may be uniformly observed everywhere (in every parish), it seems good

to the holy Synod that prayer be made to God standing.

Canon 90 from the Council Trullo

We have received from our divine Fathers the canon law that in honour of Christ's resurrection, we are not to kneel on

Sundays. Lest therefore we should ignore the fullness of this observance we make it plain to the faithful that after the priests have gone to the Altar for Vespers on Saturdays (according to the prevailing custom) no one shall kneel in prayer until the evening of Sunday, at which time after the entrance for compline, again with bended knees we offer our prayers to the Lord. For taking the night after the Sabbath, which was the forerunner of our Lord's resurrection, we begin from it to sing in the spirit hymns to God, leading our feast out of darkness into light, and thus during an entire day and night, we celebrate the Resurrection.

Canon 66 from the Council Trullo

From the holy day of the Resurrection of Christ our God until the next Lord's day, for a whole week, in the holy churches the faithful ought to be free from labour, rejoicing in Christ with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; and celebrating the feast, and applying their minds to the reading of the holy Scriptures, and delighting in the Holy Mysteries; for thus shall we be exalted with Christ and together with him be raised up. Therefore, on the aforesaid days there must not be any horse races or any public spectacle.



How should we pray during Bright Week?

The liturgical order of the church services during Bright Week, the week after Pascha, is very different from the rest of the year. During this week there are no mournful prayers for the reposed, no readings from the Psalter, nor are the usual morning and evening prayers used. Instead of the usual prayers, everything is replaced with the joyful Paschal hymns. Therefore, you can use the following guidelines for prayer during this week:

In our parish, every day of Bright Week vespers and one paschal hour are served. If you will be attending these services, they take the place of our usual evening prayers.

If not, you can sing the paschal hour at home. In the mornings, instead of the usual prayers, you can once again read or sing the paschal hour. The text for this can be found below. If you have a desire to pray more, you can always sing or read the paschal canon and the stichira of Pascha. Before eating, we sing the troparion of Pascha, "Christ is risen," three times, and after eating we sing "Shine, shine."



Paschal Hour

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us. Amen.

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. (*Thrice*)

Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, * let us worship the holy Lord Jesus, * the only sinless One. * We worship Thy Cross, O Christ, * and Thy holy Resurrection we hymn and glorify. * For Thou art our God, * and we know none other beside Thee; * we call upon Thy name. * O come, all ye faithful, * let us worship Christ's holy Resurrection, * for, behold, through the Cross joy hath come to all the world. * Ever blessing the Lord, * we hymn His Resurrection; * for, having endured crucifixion, ** He hath destroyed death by death. (*Thrice*)

Foretelling the dawn, the women came with Mary, * and found the stone rolled away from the sepulcher, * and heard from the angel: Why seek ye among the dead, * as though He were mortal, * Him Who liveth in everlasting light? * Behold the grave-clothes. Go quickly and proclaim to the world * that the Lord is risen * and hath slain death. * For He is the Son of God Who saveth mankind.

Though Thou didst descend into the grave, O Immortal One, * yet didst Thou destroy the power of Hades. * And didst arise as victor, O Christ God, * calling to the myrrh-bearing women: Rejoice! * and giving peace unto Thine apostles: ** Thou Who dost grant resurrection to the fallen.

In the grave bodily, but in hades with Thy soul as God; * in Paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit ** wast Thou Who fillest all things, O Christ the Inexpressible.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

How life-giving, how much more beautiful than Paradise, * and truly more resplendent than any royal palace was Thy tomb shown to be, O Christ, ** the source of our resurrection.

Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages, amen.

O sanctified and divine tabernacle of the Most High, * rejoice! For through thee, O Theotokos, joy is given to them that cry: ** Blessed art thou among women, O all-immaculate Lady.

Lord, have mercy. (*Forty times*)

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages, amen.

More honorable than the Cherubim, * and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim, * who without corruption gavest birth to God the Word, ** the very Theotokos, thee do we magnify.

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. (*Thrice*)

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us.

Prayer After Eating During Eastertide

Shine, shine, O new Jerusalem, * for the glory of the Lord hath arisen upon thee; * dance now and be glad, O Zion, * and do thou exult, O pure Theotokos, * in the arising of Him Whom thou didst bear.

