

## My Guide to Holy Week and the Feast of Palms

### The Feast of Palms

The Feast of Palms is a two-day celebration that falls between Great Lent and Holy Week. While they are days of celebration, they also announce the “beginning of the Cross” and Pascha (making possible the “universal resurrection”). Two events are commemorated:

- (Saturday) **The Raising of Lazarus** (John 11:1-45)
- (Sunday) **The Entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem** (John 12:1, 9-19. See also: Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-38)

During the Vespers of Lazarus Saturday, the following hymn is sung:

**We have completed the forty days which profit our souls.  
Now let us beg the lover of man;  
enable us to see the Holy Week of Thy passion,  
that we may glorify Thy mighty work,  
Thy wonderful plan for our salvation,  
singing with one heart and voice,  
O Lord, Glory to Thee!**

The **Troparion** for the feast is the same for both days

**By raising Lazarus from the dead before Thy Passion,  
Thou didst confirm the universal resurrection, O Christ God!  
Like the children with the palms of victory, we cry out to  
Thee: O Vanquisher of Death:  
Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He that comes in the  
name of the Lord!**

The hymn to the Theotokos (9<sup>th</sup> Ode of the Kanon) says:

**God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us.  
Celebrate the feast and come with gladness.  
Let us magnify Christ with palms and branches, singing:  
Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord!**

*Special things to watch for:*

1. The blessing of palms and branches during the Matins service on Saturday night (after the reading of the Holy Gospel).
2. The vestments of the clergy are in a festal color, rather than purple or black (as in Lent or Holy Week).
3. In some churches, there is a procession of children with palms and branches on Saturday (Serbian tradition) or Sunday (Middle East, Greece). It is also a local custom in other places.

**Let all mortal flesh keep silent, and in fear and trembling stand,  
pondering nothing earthly-minded. For the King of kings and  
the Lord of lords comes to be slain, to give Himself as food to  
the faithful.**

*(after the silent Entrance)*

**Before Him go the ranks of angels: all the principalities and  
powers; the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim,  
covering their faces, singing the hymn: Alleluia!**

The Holy Gifts are consecrated, then the hymn to the Mother of God:

**Do not lament me, O Mother, seeing me in the tomb,  
the Son conceived in the womb without seed.  
For I shall arise, and be glorified with eternal glory as God.  
I shall exalt all who magnify you in faith and love.**

We have several hours until the late evening to wait for the joyful news. In the meantime the church will be dark. At midnight, the light from candles begins to illumine the church. Outside in procession, the light of our candles also illumines the darkness, as we hear:

**Thy resurrection, O Christ our Savior,  
the angels in heaven sing.  
Enable us on earth to glorify Thee in purity of heart.**

Then, after circling the Church, we hear these joyful words:

**“Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by  
death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!  
And, Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!**

The joyful hymns of the Paschal Kanon are sung as the clergy cense the church over and over again. Finally, as the Matins service ends, and before the Divine Liturgy begins, the paschal verses proclaim:

**This is the day of resurrection, let us be illumined by the feast.  
Let us embrace each other. Let us call “Brothers” even those  
that hate us, and forgive all by the resurrection, and so, let us  
cry: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by  
death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!**

St. John Chrysostom’s sermon is read, ending with the words:

**O Death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory? Christ  
is risen and thou art overthrown. Christ is risen and the demons  
are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen  
and life reigns. Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the  
grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first-  
fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and  
dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.**

Note here what special things you noticed during this double feast:

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### Some Basic Characteristics of the Great and Holy Week of the Lord's Passion

1. The services of these first three days are called "The Bridegroom Services," for the theme of the two hymns that are repeated each evening refer to Christ, the Bridegroom, who comes at midnight.

**Behold! The Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching; and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless.**

**Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom.**

**But rouse yourself, crying: "Holy! Holy! Holy! art Thou, O our God, through the Theotokos, have mercy on us!"**

**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.**

2. The other major theme of the Gospel readings is the "End," the time of Judgment. The Bridegroom comes at midnight, in the darkness, to judge all people by the light of His truth. The verses call us to *be prepared and watch*, for we know not the day or the hour when the Lord will come. (John 12:31-36; Matt. 25:13).
3. During the Great and Holy Week of the Passion of Our Lord, the usual time of services is moved ahead. The Matins (Orthros) for the coming day is celebrated in the evening, while Vespers (with the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts) is celebrated in the morning. Thus, Holy Monday, for example, begins with Matins on Sunday evening.
4. The liturgical signs of Great Lent are still with us through Wednesday: the prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian, the lenten chant melodies, the longer readings (*kathismata*) from the Psalter, and the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts.

### Great and Holy Saturday<sup>3/4</sup> Vespers and Liturgy

The long Vespers-Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, celebrated on Holy Saturday, has several important parts:

1. The "Lord, I call..." verses sung at Vespers announce the battle in Hades between Christ and the power of death in Hades, and Christ's victory over death. (see the icon of the Anastasis—with Christ raising Adam and Eve from Hades).
2. After "Gladsome Light," there are 15 Readings from the Old Testament. They speak of God creating life "in the beginning." They include stories about water, light, and prophecies that reveal God's power and His desire to save people and bring them into the light. They include the crossing of the Red Sea, Jonah and the people of Nineveh, Elijah and Elisha who each brought a boy back to life, God sparing Abraham's son, Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant God makes with His people, and the Three Young Men in the Furnace.
3. The baptismal hymn is sung: "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!" followed by the Epistle lesson on Baptism that says: "Do you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...."
4. The climax of Holy Saturday comes when the Prokeimenon announces: "Arise, O God, judge the earth, for to Thee belong all the nations." At this point, all the vestments of the clergy and servers, and the cloths on the Altar and analoi are changed from black to white, for the resurrection has already begun in Hades and will soon be announced to us.
5. We have already entered into the celebration of the Divine Liturgy and we hear the Gospel reading from Matthew 28:1-20, when the news of Christ's resurrection is given to the Myrrhbearing Women at the tomb.

As the Liturgy continues, we are reminded that the tomb is still present in the center of the church. Christ's work in Hades has begun, yet we must wait to hear the Good News. In place of the Cherubic Hymn, these words are sung, and the Entrance with the Holy Gifts is done in silence, with no commemorations said.

## The Three Days Pascha

The three days Pascha is the period of time from Christ's death and descent into Hades (Hell) to the time of His resurrection from the dead. It is summarized very briefly in the 1<sup>st</sup> Ode of the Paschal Kanon:

**On this day of resurrection, be illumined O people!  
Pascha, the Pascha of the Lord!  
From death to life, and from earth to heaven,  
has Christ our God led us,  
singing the song of victory:  
Christ is risen from the Dead!**

The three days of Holy Friday, Saturday, and Sunday—the Day of Resurrection, are the days when this journey or passage “from death to life and from earth to heaven” is revealed in Christ's death, descent into Hades, and resurrection from the dead. But it also foretells our resurrection from the dead and our ascension into heaven to be with Christ forever.

## Great and Holy Saturday<sup>3/4</sup> Matins

The resurrection of Christ and the granting of new life to those in Hades begins on this middle day between the death of the Lord and the announcement of His resurrection at the empty tomb. The resurrection of the dead begins in the depths of Hades, where Christ goes to defeat the very power of death. In the Saturday Matins service (celebrated Friday evening) we hear these words in a long series of verses, sung between the verses of Psalm 118. They give us a picture of Christ coming to earth to find His friend Adam. But Adam and his descendants have died; after their expulsion from the Garden, they could no longer live forever with God. So Christ comes to save us by dying for us. He descends to the place of death itself to find Adam and to raise the dead, by destroying the very power of death. This is what we hear on Friday evening:

**Wishing to save Adam, Thou didst come down to earth.  
Not finding him on earth, O Master, Thou didst descend to  
Hades seeking him. (I.25)**

**Adam was greatly afraid when God walked in Paradise.  
Now, with joy he sees God stalking Hades' depths.  
There he fell, but here he is raised up. (II.17)**

*Holy Week<sup>3/4</sup>6*

## Great and Holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

The Gospel lessons and their themes for these days are:

	Gospels	Themes
<b>Monday</b>	<i>Matins:</i> Mt. 21:18-43  <i>Presanctified Liturgy:</i> Mt. 24:3-35	The Fig Tree that bore no fruit, a symbol of the world that was created to bear spiritual fruits and failed in its response to God  The signs and announcement of the “End”—“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”
<b>Tuesday</b>	<i>Matins:</i> Mt. 22:15-23, and 39  <i>Presanctified Liturgy:</i> Mt. 24:36-26:2	Condemning of Pharisees—of blind and hypocritical religion; those who see themselves as leaders and the light of the world, but who instead “shut up the Kingdom of heaven to men.”  Parables of the End: the Wise and Foolish Virgins; and the Talents—showing the need to be ready and prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom. Also, the parable of the Last Judgment, when we will be called to account for how we have loved and served others.
<b>Wednesday</b>	<i>Matins:</i> Jn. 12:17-50  <i>Presanctified Liturgy:</i> Mt. 26:6-16	Jesus says: “Now is the judgment of the world.” Christ came as light into the world, but those who prefer the darkness and do not believe Him, or the Father who sent Him, will face judgment by His Word.  The woman who poured the precious oil on Jesus is the image of love and repentance, which unites us with Jesus Christ. She is contrasted with Judas, who betrayed Christ out of his love for money.

Read the Bible passages each day before you go to church. Select one or two sentences that will help you remember the meaning of this day.

*Holy Week<sup>3/4</sup>3*

## Great and Holy Thursday

The main theme of Great and Holy Thursday commemorates the Lord's Supper. It is found in the major hymn of this day: *"Of Thy Mystical Supper..."* This hymn is sung many times during the Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. It replaces the Cherubic Hymn, and "Let our mouths be filled..." (sung after Communion); it is also the Communion verse of the day. The second hymn is sung just before Communion, in place of the hymn to the Theotokos.

**Of Thy Mystical Supper, O Son of God,  
accept me today as a communicant,  
for I will not speak of Thy Mystery to Thine enemies,  
neither like Judas will I give Thee a kiss;  
but like the thief will I confess Thee:  
Remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom.**

**Come, O faithful. Let us enjoy the Master's hospitality:  
the Banquet of Immortality!  
In the upper chanber with uplifted minds,  
let us receive the exalted words of the Word, Whom we magnify!**

On this last night with His disciples, Christ took bread, and blessed, and broke it. He gave it to His disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my Body." And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." After the supper, Jesus led the disciples out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It was there that Judas came and betrayed Him to the soldiers.

The Lord's Supper is commemorated during the Vespereal-Liturgy on Thursday morning. In cathedral churches, following the liturgy, the bishop washes the feet of 12 priests, following the example of Christ who, as a servant, washed the feet of His disciples.

## Great and Holy Friday - Matins

The Matins service of Great and Holy Friday consists of 12 readings from the Gospels that recall the final instructions of Jesus to His disciples during the supper. They include the accounts of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, His trials before the High Priest, and Pilate, the governor. The gospels continue with the readings about His crucifixion, death and burial. In between the readings are hymns giving the meaning of these terrible events for our life. The church bells are also tolled at each gospel, according to the number of each reading.

## Great and Holy Friday (continued)

The Cross is placed in the center of the Church during Matins. In some churches, it is carried out in procession, during the singing of a beautiful hymn for the 15<sup>th</sup> Antiphon (between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> gospel readings

**Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung on  
the tree,  
The King of the angels is decked with a crown of thorns.  
He who wraps the heavens in clouds is wrapped in the purple  
of mockery.  
He who freed Adam in the Jordan is slapped on the face.  
The Bridegroom of the Church is affixed to the Cross with nails.  
The Son of the virgin is pierced by a spear.  
We worship Thy passion, O Christ.  
We worship Thy passion, O Christ.  
We worship Thy passion, O Christ.  
Show us also Thy glorious resurrection.**

The exaposteilarion (hymn of light) tells us that it is never too late to repent and to ask for God's forgiveness, for Christ forgave the thief on the Cross who said: "Remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom." Jesus answered, saying, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

**The wise thief didst Thou make worthy of Paradise,  
in a single moment, O Lord;  
By the wood of Thy Cross, illumine me as well, and save me.**

## Great and Holy Friday - Vespers

During the Vespers service, we remember the death and burial of the Lord. Towards the end of the service, with the singing of "The Noble Joseph," the clergy bring the shroud with the image of Christ's Body (Plashchanitza) from the Altar and place it on a tomb in the center of the church. The people kneel as the procession passes by, and the choir sings these hymns:

**The noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure  
Body from the tree,  
wrapped it in fine linen, and anointed it with spices,  
and placed it in a new tomb.  
The angel came to the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb  
and said,  
"Myrrh is meet for the dead,  
but Christ has shown Himself a stranger to corruption."**