

# holy week

*Be quiet, for this day is holy. ~ Nehemiah 8:11*

**H**OLY WEEK IS THE HEART of the Church year. It is a week unique and most holy in the annual

cycle of sacred time for Christians. The liturgies of the Church observed during this week remember and *make present again* the passing of Jesus from life to death to new life, and all of creation along with him.

## Palm Sunday

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday today because the theme of Jesus' suffering and death begins with the reading of the Passion. Parish liturgies begin with the blessing of palms somewhere outside the usual assembly area, in imitation of the triumphant entrance of Jesus from Bethany to Jerusalem (see Mt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19:29-45; Jn 12:12-19). The Gospel of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem is read, followed by a procession into church, with people holding blessed palms and singing festive songs. Immediately afterwards, the theme of triumph changes radically with the reading of the Passion narrative from one of the four Gospels. The Palm Sunday liturgy is therefore devoted more to the suffering of Christ than to his triumphant reception by the people. On Palm Sunday, the Church celebrates

*"Holy Week is the heart of the Church year."*

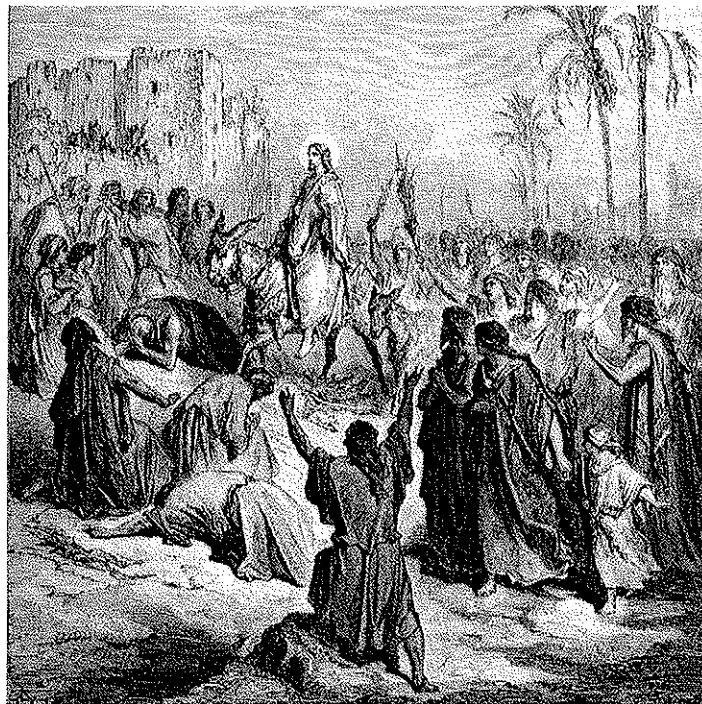
the beginning of Jesus' passage from life to death to new life: the Paschal Mystery.

## Preparation Days

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week are preparation days, both spiritually and physically, for the holy days to come later in the week. The tradition of receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation during these days is reminiscent of ancient practices. During early centuries, repentant sinners were absolved from their sins on Holy Thursday, after six weeks or more of public penance. This day was chosen so that all could participate in the solemnities of the *Triduum* (three days) and Easter. Today, many parishes conduct communal penance services during the early part of Holy Week.

## Holy Thursday

Holy Thursday begins the Triduum. The oldest and still official name of this day is "Thursday of the Lord's Supper." It commemorates the historical Gospel events surrounding the Last Supper and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. "Maundy Thursday," a popular title in English-speaking countries, comes from the solemn ritual of washing of feet in imitation of Jesus at his Last Supper. The name



*Christ's entry into Jerusalem, by Gustave Doré, 1835-1883*

*"Palm Sunday celebrates the beginning of Jesus' passage from life to death to new life."*

is a corruption of *mandatum* (Latin for "commandment") from the words of Jesus sung as the washing begins: "A new commandment I give to you" (Jn 13:34).

Parish liturgies take place in the evening, with joyful overtones. Bells ring and festive colors are used for vestments and decorations. The Gloria, not prayed since Ash Wednesday (except for solemnities such as the Feast of the Annunciation), returns for this brief moment. The tabernacle is empty so that all might receive the Eucharist from bread consecrated at this Mass.

The Holy Thursday ritual has included a ceremonial washing of feet by the presider since the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This ritual imitates Jesus' Last Supper action of humility and service. Appropriate songs are sung during this symbolic washing. Usually, twelve participants are chosen from the parish at large or from those in parish leadership positions.

At the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy, consecrated Hosts are carried in procession, with incense and song, to a chapel of adoration. These Hosts will be received the next day in Communion. After placing the Hosts in the tabernacle, an atmosphere of quiet watching with the Lord begins. It is common for people to spend a Holy Hour sometime before midnight in the adoration chapel.

### Good Friday

The second day of the Triduum is the Passion of the Lord, known as Good Friday, the anniversary of the death of Jesus on the cross just outside the walls of Jerusalem. The origin of the term "Good" for this day is unknown, but probably emphasizes the saving value of the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus. The theme of this day throughout history has been one of quiet sadness and mourning for the crucified and dead Jesus.

On this one day of the entire year, the Mass is not celebrated. The Church's Good Friday liturgy takes place in the evening. The

emphasis of the liturgy is on Scripture readings and prayers, the veneration of the cross, and the reception of the Eucharist from the Hosts consecrated on Holy Thursday.

### Holy Saturday

The daytime hours of Holy Saturday continue the atmosphere of Good Friday, and have been observed as a time of quiet and fasting from the earliest centuries. The day has no liturgy or religious traditions of its own. There is an atmosphere of anticipation for the coming of night and for the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection.

Adults preparing for Baptism or reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil often spend some time in a mini-retreat, with fasting and prayer as the hours of the Easter Vigil approach.

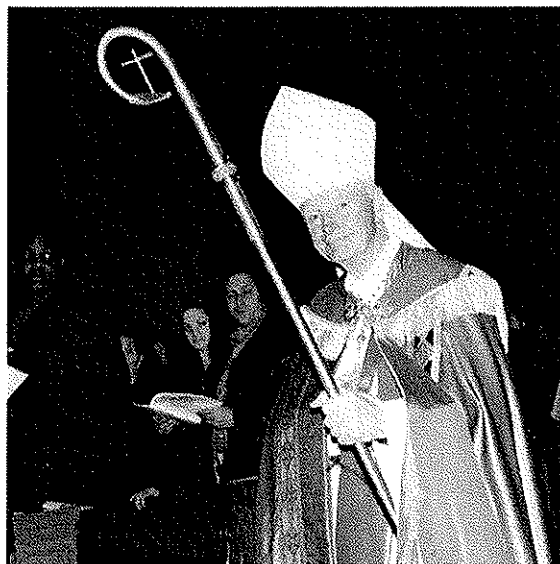
### Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil on the evening of Holy Saturday is the night of all nights and the primary celebration of Jesus' Resurrection. The late 20<sup>th</sup>-century restoration of the adult catechumenate (RCIA) first developed in the early Church has added an important feature to the Easter Vigil that had not existed for centuries: the public Baptism of adults, and reception of the other sacraments of initiation by them and by already-Baptized adults being received into full communion with the Church.

The elaborate and beautiful ritual of the Easter Vigil calls for extensive preparation by the parish team and many other parishioners. The church is decorated; sacramentals of oil, incense, water, and fire are readied; and the liturgy is rehearsed. Adult Elect and Candidates begin their final hours of preparation.

The Easter Vigil has four clearly-defined parts: the service of light, the Liturgy of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, and the Eucharist. The service of light be-

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*His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick,  
Archbishop of Washington, DC from 2001-2006*

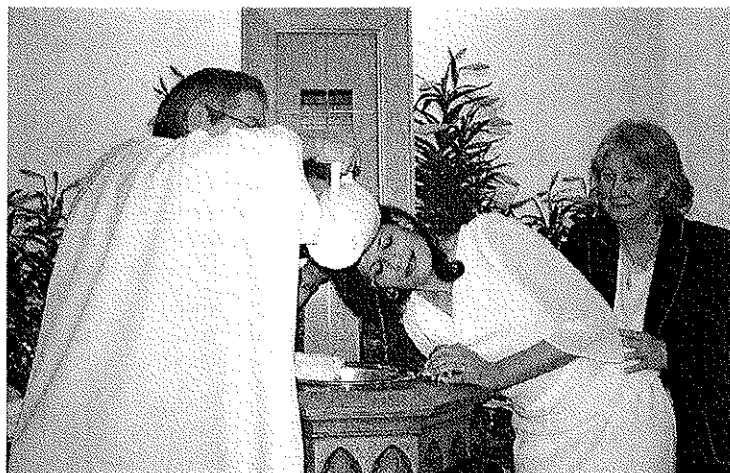
gins with a fully darkened church. The presider and other celebrants begin outside or at the back of the church, striking the Paschal flame and lighting the Paschal candle (the symbol of Christ's Resurrection), which is inscribed and adorned with appropriate symbols. Once the Paschal candle is lit to the chant of *Laumen Christi* ("light of Christ"), its flame is used to light small candles held by those in the congregation. The Paschal candle is processed to the altar, during which *Laumen Christi* is sung twice more at intervals.

Following the arrival of the procession, the *Exultet*, a recounting of the saving actions of Christ, is sung, without musical accompaniment. Then the readings of the Mass, several from the Old Testament, are interspersed with responsorial Psalms and prayers by the celebrant. The Liturgy of the Word is far lengthier than in any other Mass of the Church, consisting of as many as seven readings that recapitulate God's saving action throughout history. The prayer at the end of this part of the Liturgy of the Word is the Easter Proclamation, immediately after which the lights are turned on suddenly, and the Gloria is sung with the maximum amount of musical instruments, bells, and choir available to the parish.

Following the proclamation of the Gospel and the preaching of the homily, the celebration of Baptism of the Elect begins, followed by a rite to receive already-baptized Candidates, and Confirmation of all those just received into the Church. The Mass concludes with the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

#### Easter

The theme of Easter morning continues the triumphant joy of the Easter Vigil. It remembers and celebrates the very foundation of Christianity: Jesus is raised from the dead, and is Lord. Those who believe and are



*An adult Baptism during the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday*

baptized share in this resurrection to new life. This theme will continue for the next fifty days of the Easter Season, which does not end until Pentecost Sunday.

It was natural that the very first followers of Jesus would hold the moment of Jesus' Resurrection sacred. It was the anniversary of that won-

derful time when they experienced him risen and still among them. His death had occurred on the most important of all Jewish feasts: the Passover. His Resurrection fulfilled all that the Passover had meant to them as Jews. It was an *exodus*, or passage, from the old times and the oppression of slavery to spiritual freedom. Jesus himself was the Paschal Lamb, slain to achieve this freedom.

Christ's Resurrection was the sign of new beginnings: a springtime. This theme was part of the evolution of the Passover long before the Exodus from Egypt. The ancestors of the Jews had celebrated a springtime festival of the first fruits of their planting with a sacrifice of grains and breads, and the first fruits of their flocks with a sacrifice of lambs. Under the direction of Moses, these feasts were combined as an annual memorial of the mystery of their escape from Egypt, and the "passing over" of them by the angel of death. For 3,000 years, and still today, Jews celebrate this drama of miraculous salvation by repeating the ancient story with song, Scripture readings, and symbolic foods: the Seder meal. Now, as throughout history, the ritual is observed in the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Nisan on the Jewish lunar calendar.

It was the Seder meal of this Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night before His crucifixion, with the command that it be celebrated in a new way as a memorial — an unbloody re-presentation — of his sacrificial and salvific death on the cross.

(CCC 1168-1169)

*"Easter remembers and celebrates the very foundation of Christianity:  
Jesus is raised from the dead, and is Lord."*

# The Paschal Mystery

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ... destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth. ~ Ephesians 1:3, 5-10*

**T**HE TERM "PASCHAL MYSTERY" takes us back into the Old Testament. The word "Paschal" comes from the Hebrew word *pasch*, or "passover." The Passover was the defining event that led to the liberation of the Israelites from their slavery to the Egyptians. God "passed over" the Israelite homes, whose doorposts were smeared with the blood of a perfect, sacrificed lamb, but took the lives of the firstborn of the Egyptians. This terrible act of God's justice caused Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt (see Ex 12:1-31).

The word "mystery" in this context refers to something knowable, that is, known to us by God's rev-

elation, but which is beyond our full understanding. St. Paul writes that *"the mystery was made known to me by revelation"* (Eph 3:3). But even though we can be made aware of divine things, in no way does this mean that we can completely understand them, because they come from God, who is infinite and whose ways are beyond our comprehension.

The term "Paschal mystery" refers to a new Passover — the liberation of all humanity for all time from the slavery of sin by the Son of God, *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn 1:29) doing his Father's will in a plan of salvation actually carried out as part of human history. The Paschal mystery,

*"Paschal mystery" refers to a new Passover — the liberation of all humanity for all time from the slavery of sin by the Son of God."*



COURTESY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE FOR THE MILITARY SERVICES, USA

*The Paschal mystery is the triumph of Christ in a world torn by sin and suffering*

then refers to the saving events of Christ's Passion, death, burial, descent into Hell (that is, the abode of the dead), Resurrection, and Ascension. When St. Paul refers to the mystery which God "*set forth in Christ*" (see beginning verses above) or "*God's mystery, of Christ*" (Col 2:2), he is referring to the Paschal mystery. When we profess in the Apostles' Creed that Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried ... descended into Hell ... rose again ... [and] ascended into Heaven" we are referring to the Paschal mystery. Because these events accomplished our salvation, Holy Week, the Solemnity of Easter, and the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord constitute the highest holy season in the Church's liturgical year. Every Sunday is itself a celebration of the Paschal mystery, as is every holy sacrifice of the Mass. In these events, the Church is mindful of Christ's words: "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (Lk 22:19).

### Sin

The Paschal mystery encompasses three major elements: sin, the Father's love for us, and the life and work of Jesus Christ. Original sin and all subsequent transgressions of humanity deliberately upset the plan of God. He originally intended us to enjoy his creation and to spend our unending sojourn on earth in peace and his companionship. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey the Father's only prohibition. They sinned (see Gn 3:1-7). In so doing, they lost all that God had planned for them and for us. The relationship between God and humanity had been broken, tenure in the Garden of Eden was terminated, preternatural gifts were surrendered, supernatural life was ended, continued life on earth was burdened with travail, sorrow, difficulties, conflict, temptation, and the withdrawal of the friendship of God, and death with an uncertain after-life became inevitable (see Gn 3:14-19, 23-24). No matter how we describe sin and its consequences, it is humanly impossible to comprehend its grievous-

## *"Notwithstanding the enormity of sin, God would salvage us."*

ness, its horrendous gravity, its impact on all humanity and on God. Not only was Paradise lost, but Heaven itself was now closed. By sin, our first parents had brought about their own condemnation. By sin, Adam and Eve had destroyed their own happiness, and that of their children. By sin, we had torn ourselves from the arms of God.

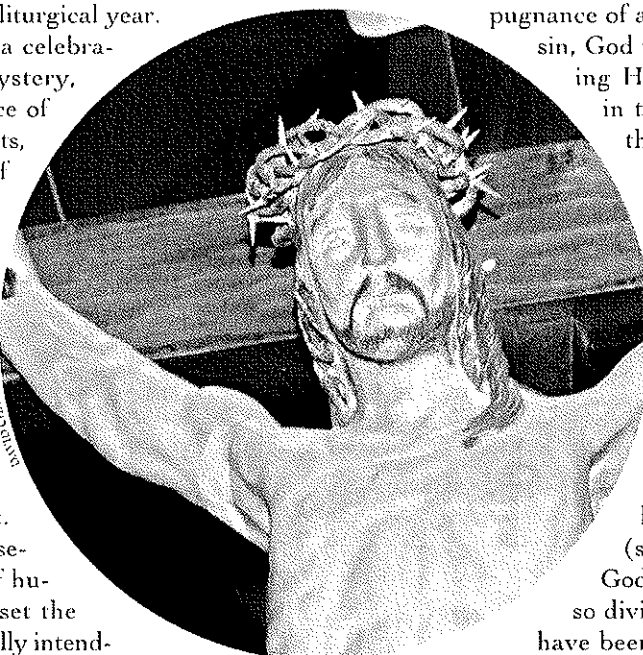
### The Father

Yet our God is a God of love. He *is* love (see 1 Jn 4:8). In the immensity of his love, God had created us and, apparently, no matter what we did, God would not cease to love and care for us. And so, notwithstanding the enormity of sin and the repugnance of a humanity corrupted by sin, God would salvage us. During Holy Week, the Church, in the Exsultet, shouts out these unbelievable words about original sin: "O happy fault!" O happy fault that the Father used as a reason to turn his will to plan the salvation, the eternal redemption of his beloved creatures.

Certainly, sin abounded, but grace in the form of the Father's love abounded far more (see Rom 5:20). Only God could have conceived of so divine a plan; only he could have been so magnanimous as to send his only Son. He gave of himself to bring back, to restore as sons and daughters, the creatures he had created. He gave a Son to restore men and women to sonship (see Gal 4:4-5).

### Christ Jesus

Christ's whole life is a mystery (see 1 Tm 3:16). His whole life is the mystery of redemption. Whatever Jesus did in his earthly life is a revelation of his Father's will: "*I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me*" (Jn 5:30). All that Jesus did, especially what he did at the climax of his life — his Suffering, death, burial, Resurrection, and Ascension — was exactly what his Father wanted from him for us. His life was an offering of himself to his Father in





DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

*A First Communion with the Risen Savior*

atonement for sin and to reconcile us to the Father. As Christ's institution of the Holy Eucharist was to be a memorial of his life of sacrifice in fulfillment of his Father's will, so, too, his redemptive Passion was the very reason for the Incarnation. Christ yearned to complete his redemptive work (see Lk 12:49; Jn 12:27; Jn 18:11).

Sin, not the Jewish leaders and the Romans, was the real cause of Christ's suffering and death (see Heb 12:3). At Gethsemane, his agony was so intense because Christ was the only one who could take on all the sins of us all (see 2 Cor 5:21). He was the innocent lamb, perfect and unblemished, who, as St. John tells us, was condemned to death on the day of preparation for Passover, at about the sixth hour (see Jn 19:14), at the very time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. He knew, as he hung upon the cross, that we all were responsible for the nails that held him. Yes, all of us, Pharisees and elders, Sanhedrin and Romans, apostles and Gentiles, and each and every one of us contributed to his agony and death. He knew we were all included in his redemptive surrender when he declared, "*It is finished*" (Jn 19:30).

***"We all were responsible for the nails  
that held him."***

Christ *really died*. There was on the cross and in the tomb a dead Christ. On Calvary, for us and for his Father, his earthly, purely human existence ended. The Paschal mystery includes the death and burial, but also the glorious Resurrection — the proof that he who redeemed us was truly God. This was the crowning truth of his life, and is the definitive proof of our faith (see 1 Cor 15:14; CCC 651).

The final act of the Paschal mystery is the Ascension of the risen Christ into Heaven. Before his death, Jesus prays to the Father: "*Father, glorify me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made*" (Jn 17:5). At the Ascension, Jesus kept his own body and it was glorified and resides in Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father (see Mk 16:19).

The body of Christ that rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven was the same body that was tortured and crucified. Once risen from the tomb, that glorified body could go and be wherever he willed (see Mt 28:10; Mk 16:12; Lk 24:13-31; Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:19-20; Jn 20:26-27; Jn 21:4-14). His humanity was no longer confined to earth, but belonged to his Father's divine realm. His body was not to return to earth to die again, as was that of Lazarus (see Jn 11:43-44) and the daughter of Jairus (see Mk 5:40-42).

Through the Paschal mystery, Christ brings about our redemption and reconciliation with the Father. "*While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*" (Rom 5:10), and "*in him we have redemption through his blood*" (see beginning verses above). Lastly, because Christ is "*the firstborn of all creation ... [and] all things were created through him and for him*" (Col 1:15-16), everything is redeemed by him. The Paschal mystery reunites all things in Christ, and places them under the Lordship of Christ.

What an astonishing wonder is the Paschal mystery! In this mystery we have clear evidence of the tragedy of sin, the infinite goodness of a God of pure love, and the willing obedience of a Son who sought only to do the Father's will. The Paschal mystery is a gift from God that gives us promise of forgiveness for our sins, of resurrection in glory of our souls and body, and an eternity of joy so great that "*no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Cor 2:9).

(CCC 512-513, 571-591, 595-618, 624-628, 631-635, 638-655, 659-664)

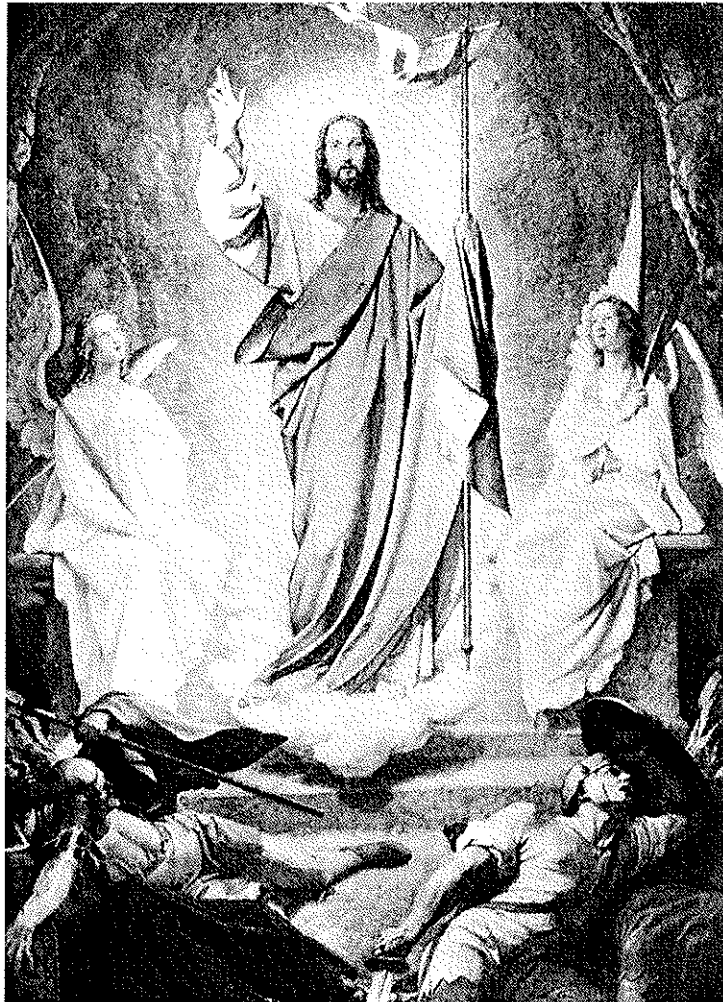
# Resurrection

*Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. ~ Matthew 28:5-7*

**S**T. PAUL SAYS, "If Christ has not been raised [from the dead], then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14): no Resurrection, then no faith. Anyone who says, "If the bones of Jesus were discovered tomorrow, my faith would not be affected," is speaking heresy of the most dangerous kind. Why? Why is it so important that Jesus rose from the dead? Why does it matter to us two thousand years later whether his tomb is empty or not?

The Resurrection represents the crowning victory of Jesus over sin and death. It is in Christ's Resurrection that God the Father has exercised "the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe" (Eph 1:19). The Resurrection is recorded in all four Gospels, handed on as a fundamental truth in Sacred Tradition and believed everywhere throughout the early Church.

While it is true that no one witnessed the Resurrection of Jesus, two historical facts make it impossible to deny it. First, when the disciples ran to the tomb on Easter morning, they discovered it empty. "He is not here, for he has risen" (see beginning verses). When the beloved disciple saw the empty tomb, he believed that Jesus had indeed risen like he said he would: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again" (Jn 10:17). Second, the appearances of the Risen Christ attest to the reality of his Resurrection. He appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other women, to the apostles, to his disciples, and, on one occasion, to a crowd of more than five hundred



*The Resurrection, late 19th century lithograph*

people. People touched him; he ate food. Given all these witnesses, it is impossible to believe that the Resurrection of Jesus is merely a "spiritual" truth produced by the faith of the early Church, and to

deny that it was a historical and physical reality. On the contrary, the early

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Church's "faith in the resurrection was born, under the action of divine grace, from [the apostles'] direct experience of the reality of the risen Jesus" (CCC 644).

Thus the Church has always taught the historical and physical truth of the Resurrection. However, because Jesus is the Son of God, his Resurrection transcends or goes beyond time and history, making it more than a fact of history. The reality of this event was Jesus' passage from earthly existence to a glorified Heavenly existence. This change cannot be perceived apart from faith, and so in its essence it is an event that surpasses history and remains at the very heart of our faith.

What does Jesus' Resurrection mean for us? St. Paul, as quoted above, explains that without it our faith is in vain. Jesus' Resurrection constitutes the fulfillment of all that he promised while he walked on this earth. To all those who believe in him, it is the definitive proof of his divine authority. Jesus is the great "I Am," the name revealed to Moses when

God called him to lead his people Israel from the slavery of Egypt into the Promised Land of Canaan: "Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I Am who I am.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I Am has sent me to you"' (Ex 3:13-14).

Jesus' Resurrection confirms that he is God, "I Am Who Am" himself whom Israel has worshipped from the time of Abraham (see Gn 12:1-8) and who gave his name to Moses. Lastly, his Resurrection opens the way to a new life and gives us the promise of future resurrection. "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, [so that] we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). His Resurrection completes the work of justification, and he alone is the source of our future resurrection. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22).

(CCC 272, 638-655)

*"Jesus' Resurrection is the definitive proof of his divine authority."*



*Jesus as Judge, by Fra Angelico, 1387-1455*