



# Holy Week

‘A Liturgical Explanation of Holy Week’ by the  
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Originally published by the ‘Department of Religious education, Orthodox Church in America’.

## Lazarus Saturday

### The Beginning of the Cross: Saturday of Lazarus

*Having fulfilled the Forty Days we ask to see the Holy Week of Thy passion.* With these words sung at Vespers of Palm Friday, Lent comes to its end and we enter into the annual commemoration of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection. It begins on the Saturday of Lazarus. The double feast of Lazarus’ Resurrection and the Entrance of the Lord to Jerusalem is described in liturgical texts as the ‘beginning of the Cross’ and is to be understood, therefore, within the context of the Holy Week. The common troparion of these days explicitly affirms that ‘by raising Lazarus from the dead Christ confirmed the truth of general resurrection.’ It is highly significant that we are led into the darkness of the Cross by one of the twelve major feasts of the Church. Light and joy shine not only at the end of Holy Week but also at its beginning; they illumine darkness itself, reveal its ultimate meaning.



All those familiar with Orthodox worship know the peculiar, almost paradoxical character of Lazarus Saturday services. It is a Sunday, i.e., a Resurrection service on a Saturday, a day usually devoted to the liturgical commemoration of the dead. And the joy which permeates these services stresses one central theme: the forthcoming victory of Christ over Hades. Hades is the Biblical term for Death in its universal power, for that inescapable darkness and destruction that swallows all life and poisons with its shadow the whole world. But now “with

Lazarus’ resurrection” ‘**death begins to tremble.**’ For there the decisive duel between Life and Death begins and it gives us the key to the entire liturgical mystery of Pascha. In the early church Lazarus Saturday was called ‘announcement of Pascha’: it announces and anticipates, indeed, the wonderful light and peace of the next - the Great and Holy Saturday, the day of the Life giving Tomb.

### Lazarus, the Friend of Jesus

Let us first of all understand that Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, personifies the whole mankind and

also each man, and Bethany, the home of Lazarus the Man, is the symbol of the whole world as home of man. For each man was created friend of God and called to this Divine friendship: the knowledge of God, the communion with Him, the sharing of life with Him. **'In Him was life and Life was the light of men.'** (John 1:4) And yet this Friend whom God loves, whom in love He has created, i.e., called to life, is destroyed and annihilated by a power which God has not created: death. God encounters in His own world a power which destroys His work and annihilates His design. The world is but lamentation and sorrow, tears and death. How is this possible? How did this happen? These are the questions implied in John's slow and detailed narrative of Jesus' coming to the grave of His friend. And once there, 'Jesus wept.' (John 11:35) Why does He weep if He knows that in a moment He will call Lazarus back to life? The Orthodox Church teaches that all actions of Christ are 'theandric,' i.e., both Divine and human, are actions of the one and same God-Man. But then His very tears are Divine. **Jesus weeps because He contemplates the triumph of death and destruction in the world created by God.**

### Love, the Power of Life

'It stinketh,' say the Jews trying to prevent Jesus from approaching the corpse, and this awful warning applies to the whole world, to all life. God is Life and the Giver of Life. He called man into the Divine reality of Life and behold 'it stinketh' ... The world was created to reflect and proclaim the glory of God and 'it stinketh.' At the grave of Lazarus God encounters Death, the reality of anti-life, of destruction and despair. He meets His Enemy, who has taken away from Him His World and become its prince. And we who follow Jesus, as He approaches the grave, enter with Him into that hour of His, which He announced so often as the climax and the fulfillment of his whole work. The Cross, its necessity and universal meaning are announced in the shortest verse of the Gospel: 'and Jesus wept' ... We understand now that it, is because He wept, i.e., loved His friend Lazarus, that Jesus had the power of calling him back to life. **The power of Resurrection is not a Divine 'power in itself,' but power of love, or rather love as power.** God is Love and Love is Life, Love creates Life - It is Love that weeps at the grave and it is Love that restores life. This is the meaning of the Divine tears of Jesus. In them love is at work again - recreating, redeeming, restoring the darkened life of man: 'Lazarus, come forth!' - And this is why Lazarus Saturday is the beginning of both: the Cross, as the Supreme sacrifice of love, the Resurrection, as the ultimate triumph of love.

*"Christ the Joy, the Truth and the Light of all the Life of the World and the resurrection has appeared in His love to those on earth.*

*He has become the Image of our resurrection,*

*Granting divine forgiveness to all."* - Lazarus Saturday Kontakion

## Palm Sunday

### Hosannah: The Palm Sunday

The Saturday of Lazarus from the liturgical point of view is the Pre-feast of Palm Sunday - the Entrance of Our Lord into Jerusalem. Both feasts have a common theme: triumph and victory. **Saturday reveals the Enemy, which is Death; Palm Sunday announces the meaning of victory as the triumph of the Kingdom of God, as the acceptance by the world of its only King, Jesus Christ.** In the life of Jesus the solemn entrance in the Holy City was the only visible triumph. Up to that

day, He consistently rejected all attempts to glorify Him. But six days before the Passover, He not only accepted to be glorified, He Himself provoked and arranged this glorification by doing what the prophet Zecharias announced: *'behold, Thy King cometh unto thee . . . lowly and riding upon an ass . . .'* (Zecharias 9:9) He made it clear that He wanted to be acclaimed and acknowledged as the Messiah, the King and the Redeemer of Israel. And the Gospel narratives stress all these messianic features: the Palms and the Hosannah, the acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David and the King of Israel. The history of Israel is now coming to its end, such is the meaning of this event, for the purpose of that history was to announce and to prepare the Kingdom of God, the advent of the Messiah. And now it is fulfilled. **For the King enters His Holy City and in Him all prophecies, all expectations find their fulfillment. He inaugurates His Kingdom.**

The Liturgy of Palm Sunday commemorates this event. With palm branches in our hands, we identify ourselves with the people of Jerusalem, together with them we greet the lowly King, singing Hosannah to Him. But what is the meaning of it today and for us?

### **Citizenship In the Kingdom**

First, it is our confession of Christ as our King and Lord. We forget so often that the Kingdom of God has already been inaugurated and that on the day of our baptism we were made citizens of it and promised to put our loyalty to it above all other loyalties. We must remember that for a few hours Christ was indeed King on earth in this world of ours, for a few hours only and in one city. But as in Lazarus we have recognized the image of each man, in this one city we acknowledge the mystical center of the world and indeed of the whole creation. For such is the biblical meaning of Jerusalem, the focal point of the whole history of salvation and redemption, the holy city of God's advent. Therefore, the Kingdom inaugurated in Jerusalem is a universal Kingdom, embracing in its perspective all men and the totality of creation. For a few hours - yet these were the decisive time, the ultimate hour of Jesus, the hour of fulfillment by God of all His promises, of all His decisions. It came at the end of the entire process of preparation revealed in the Bible: it was the end of all that God did for men. **And thus this short hour of Christ's earthly triumph acquires an eternal meaning. It introduces the reality of the Kingdom into our time, into all hours, makes this Kingdom the meaning of time and its ultimate goal.** The Kingdom was revealed in this world - from that hour - its presence judges and transforms human history. And at the most solemn moment of our liturgical celebration, when we receive from the priest a palm branch, we renew our oath to our King and confess His Kingdom as the ultimate meaning and content of our life. We confess that everything in our life and in the world belongs to Christ, nothing can be taken away from its sole real Owner, for there is no area of life in which He is not to rule, to save and to redeem. We proclaim the universal and total responsibility of the Church for human history and uphold her universal mission.

### **The Way of the Cross**

We know, however, that the King whom the Jews acclaimed then, and whom we acclaim today, is on His way to Golgotha, to the Cross and to the grave. **We know that this short triumph is but the prologue of His sacrifice.** The branches in our hands signify, therefore, our readiness and willingness to follow Him on this sacrificial way, **our acceptance of sacrifice and self-denial as the only royal way to the Kingdom.**

And finally these branches, this celebration, proclaim our faith in the final victory of Christ. His Kingdom is yet hidden and the world ignores it. It lives as if the decisive event had not taken place, as if God had not died on the Cross and Man in Him was not risen from the dead. But we, Christians, believe in the coming of the Kingdom in which God will be all in all and Christ the only King.

In our liturgical celebrations we remember events of the past. But the whole meaning and power of Liturgy is that it transforms remembrance into reality. **On Palm Sunday this reality is our own involvement in, our responsibility to, the Kingdom of God.** Christ does not enter into Jerusalem any more. He did it once and for all. And He does not need any 'symbols,' for He did not die on the Cross that we may eternally 'symbolize' His life. He wants from us a real acceptance of the Kingdom which He brought to us. . . And, if we are not ready to stand by the solemn oath, which we renew every year on Palm Sunday, **if we do not mean to make the Kingdom of God the measure of our whole life, meaningless is our commemoration and vain the branches we take home from the Church.**

## Great & Holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

### Holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday: The End

These three days, which the Church calls Great and Holy have within the liturgical development of Holy Week a very definite purpose. They place all its celebrations into the perspective of End; they remind us of the *eschatological meaning of Pascha*. So often the Holy Week is considered one of the 'beautiful traditions' or 'customs,' a self-evident 'part' of our calendar. We take it for granted and enjoy it as a cherished annual event which we have 'observed' since childhood. We admire the beauty of its services, the pageantry of its rites and, last but not least, we like the fuss about the paschal table. Then, when all this is done, we resume our normal life. But do we understand that when the world rejected its Savior, when 'Jesus began to be sorrowful and very heavy . . . and his soul was exceedingly sorrowful even unto death', when He died on the Cross, 'normal life' came to its end and is no longer possible. For there were 'normal' men who shouted, 'Crucify Him!' who spat at Him and nailed Him to the Cross. They hated and killed Him precisely because He was troubling their normal life. It was indeed a perfectly 'normal' world which preferred darkness and death to light and life. **By the death of Jesus, 'normal' world, 'normal' life were irrevocably condemned, or rather, they revealed their true and abnormal nature:** their inability to receive the Light and the terrible power of evil in them - 'Now is the judgment of this world.' (John 12:31) **The Pascha of Jesus signified its end to 'this world' and it has been at its end since then.** This end can last for hundreds of centuries; this does not alter the nature of time in which we live as the 'last time.' 'The fashion of this world passeth away . . .' (I Corinthians 7:31)

### The Ultimate Passage

**Pascha means passover, passage.** The feast of Passover was for the Jews the annual commemoration of their whole history as salvation, and of salvation as passage from the slavery of Egypt into freedom, from exile into the promised land. It was also the anticipation of the ultimate passage - into the Kingdom of God. And Christ was the fulfillment of Pascha. He performed the ultimate passage - from death into life, from this 'old world' into the new world, into the new time of the Kingdom. And He opened the possibility of this passage to us. **Living in 'this world' we can**

already be ‘not of this world,’ i.e., be free from slavery to death and sin, partakers of the ‘world to come.’ But for this, we must also perform our own passage, we must condemn the old Adam in us, we must put on Christ in the baptismal death and have our true life hidden in God with Christ, in the ‘world to come.’

And thus Easter is not an annual commemoration - solemn and beautiful - of a past event. It is this Event, itself shown, given *to us*, as always efficient, always revealing our world, our time, our life as being at their *End*, and announcing the *Beginning* of the new life. And the function of the three first days of Holy Week is precisely to challenge us with this *ultimate* meaning of Pascha and to prepare us for the understanding and acceptance of it.

**1. This eschatological - and it means ultimate, decisive, final - challenge is revealed, first, in the common *troparion* of these days:**

“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 thou be given up to death, and lest thou be shut out of the Kingdom.  
But rouse thyself, crying: ‘Holy! Holy! Holy! art Thou, O our God,  
Through the Theotokos, have mercy on us!’ ”

Midnight is the moment when the old day comes to its end and a new day begins. It is thus the symbol of the time in which we live as Christians. **For, on the one hand, the Church is still *in* this world, sharing in its weaknesses and tragedies. Yet, on the other hand, her true being is not of this world, for she is the Bride of Christ and her mission is to announce and to reveal the coming of the Kingdom and of the new day.** Her life is a perpetual watching and expectation, a vigil pointed at the dawn of this new day. But we know how strong is still our attachment to the ‘old day,’ to the world with its passions and sins. We know how deeply we still belong to ‘this world.’ We have seen the light, we know Christ, we have heard about the peace and joy of the new life in Him, and yet the world holds us in its slavery. This weakness, this constant betrayal of Christ, this incapacity to give the totality of our love to the only true object of love are wonderfully expressed in the *exapostilarion* of these three days:

“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 same theme develops further in the *Gospel readings* of these days.** First of all, the entire text of the four Gospels (up to John 13:3 1) is read at the Hours (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup>). This recapitulation shows that the Cross is the climax of the whole life and ministry of Jesus, the Key to their proper understanding. Everything in the Gospel leads to this ultimate *hour* of *Jesus* and everything is to be understood in its light. Then, each service has its special Gospel lesson:

**On Monday:**

At *Matins*: Matthew 21:18-43. The story of the fig tree, the symbol of the world created to bear spiritual fruits and failing in its response to God.

*At the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts:* Matthew 24:3-35. The great eschatological discourse of Jesus. The signs and announcement of the *End*. 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away'.

### **On Tuesday:**

*At Matins:* Matthew 22:15-23:39. Condemnation of the Pharisees, i.e., of blind and hypocritical religion, of those who think they are the leaders of men and the light of the world, but who in fact 'shut up the Kingdom of heaven to men.'

*At the Presanctified Liturgy:* Matthew 24:36-26:2. The *End* again and the parables of the *End*: the five wise virgins who had enough oil in their lamps and the five foolish ones who were not admitted to the bridal banquet; the parable of the talents '... Therefore be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh'. And, finally the Last Judgment.

### **On Wednesday:**

*At Matins:* - John 12:17-50. The rejection of Christ, the growing conflict, the ultimate warning: 'Now is the judgment of the world ... He that rejects my words has one that judges him, the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last days'.

*At the Presanctified Liturgy:* - Matthew 26:6-16. The woman who poured the precious ointment on Jesus, the image of love and repentance which alone unites us with Christ.

**3. These Gospel lessons are explained and elaborated in the hymnology of these days:** the *stichera* and the *triodia* (short canons of three odes each sung at Matins). One warning, one exhortation runs through all of them: the end and the judgment are approaching, let us prepare for them:

*"As the Lord was going to His voluntary passion, He said to the Apostles on the way, 'Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man shall be delivered up, as it is written of Him.' Come, therefore, let us also go with Him, purified in mind. Let us be crucified with Him and die through Him to the pleasures of this life. Then we shall live with Him and hear Him say: 'I go no more to the earthly Jerusalem to suffer, but to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God, I shall raise you up to the Jerusalem on high in the Kingdom of Heaven.' "* (Monday Matins)

*"Behold, the Master has entrusted thee with the talent, O my soul. Receive the gift with fear, Repay the One who gave by giving to the poor, and gain the Lord as thy friend, so that when He comes in glory, thou mayest stand at His right hand and hear His blessed voice: 'Enter, my servant, into the joy of thy Lord', Though I have gone astray, make me worthy of this, O Savior, through Thy great mercy."* (Tuesday Matins)

**4. Throughout the whole Lent the two books of the Old Testament read at Vespers were *Genesis* and *Proverbs*. With the beginning of the Holy Week they are replaced by *Exodus* and *Job*.** Exodus is the story of Israel's liberation from slavery to the Egyptians, of Israel's Passover. It prepares us for the understanding of Christ's exodus to His Father, of His fulfillment of the whole history of salvation. Job, the Sufferer, is the Old Testament icon of Christ. This reading announces the great mystery of Christ's sufferings, obedience and sacrifice.

5. **The liturgical structure of these three days is still of the Lenten type.** It includes, therefore, the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian with prostration, the augmented reading of the Psalter, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts and the lenten liturgical chant. We are still in the time of repentance, for repentance alone makes us partakers of the Pascha of Our Lord, opens to us the doors of the Paschal banquet. And, then, on Great and Holy Wednesday, as the last Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is about to be completed, after the Holy Gifts have been removed from the altar, the Priest reads for the last time the prayer of St. Ephraim. **At this moment, the preparation comes to an end. The Lord summons us now to His Last Supper.**

## Holy Thursday

### Thursday: The Last Supper

Two events shape the liturgy of the Great and Holy Thursday: The Last Supper of Christ with His disciples and the betrayal by Judas. The meaning of both is in love. **The Last Supper is the ultimate revelation of God's redeeming love for man, of love as the very essence of salvation. And the betrayal by Judas reveals that sin, death and self-destruction are also due to love, but to deviated and distorted love, love directed at that which does not deserve love.** The mystery of this unique day, and its liturgy where light and darkness, joy and sorrow are so strangely mixed, challenges us with the choice on which the eternal destiny of each one of us depends, 'Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour was come ... having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end . . .' (John 13:1) **To understand the meaning of the Last Supper, we must see it as the very end of the great movement of Divine Love which began with the creation of the world and is now to be consummated in the death and resurrection of Christ.**

### Love, Life, Communion

**God is Love.** (1 John 4:8) And the first gift of Love was life. The meaning, the content of life was *communion*. To be alive man was to eat and to drink, to partake of the world. The world was thus Divine love made food, made Body of man. And being alive, i.e., partaking of the world, man was to be in communion with God, to have God as the meaning, the content and the end of his life. **Communion with the God-given world was indeed communion with God.** Man received his food from God and making it his body and his life, he offered the whole world to God, transformed it into life in God and with God. **The love of God gave life to man, the love of man for God transformed this life into communion with God.** This was the paradise. **Life in it was, indeed, eucharistic.** Through man and his love for God the whole creation was to be sanctified and transformed into one all-embracing sacrament of Divine Presence and man was the priest of this sacrament.

**But in sin man lost this eucharistic life.** He lost it because he ceased to see the world as means of Communion with God and his life as eucharist, as adoration and thanksgiving. **He loved himself and the world for their own sake; he made himself the content and the end of his life.** He thought that his hunger and thirst, i.e., his dependence of his life on the world, can be satisfied by the world as such, by food as such. But world and food, once they are deprived of their initial sacramental meaning - as means of Communion with God, once they are not received for God's sake, and filled with hunger and thirst for God, once, in other words, God is no longer their Real

‘content,’ can give no life, satisfy no hunger, for they have no life in themselves. **Thus by putting his love in them, man deviated his love from the only object of all love, of all hunger, of all desires. And he died.** For death is the inescapable ‘decomposition’ of life cut from its only source and content. **Man thought he would find life in the world and in food, but he found death.** His life became communion with death, for instead of transforming the world by faith, love and adoration into communion with God, he submitted himself entirely to the world, ceased to be its priest and became its slave, And by his sin the whole world was made a cemetery, where people to death partook of death and ‘sat in the region and shadow of death.’ (Matthew 4:16)

**But if man betrayed God, God remained faithful to man.** He did not ‘turn Himself away forever from His creature whom He had made, neither did He forget the works of His hands, but He visited him in diverse manners, through the tender compassion of His mercy.’ (Liturgy of St. Basil) **A new Divine work began that of redemption and salvation. And it was fulfilled in Christ, the Son of God, Who, in order to restore man to his pristine beauty and to restore life as communion with God, became Man, took upon Himself our nature, with its thirst and hunger, with its desire for and love of life.** And in Him life was revealed, given, accepted and fulfilled as total and perfect Eucharist, as total and perfect communion with God. He rejected the basic human temptation: to live ‘by bread alone.’ **He revealed that God and His kingdom are the real food, the real life of man.** And this perfect eucharistic Life, filled with God, and therefore Divine and immortal, He gave to all those who would believe in Him, i.e., find in Him the meaning and the content of their lives. Such is the wonderful meaning of the Last Supper. He offered Himself as the true food of man, because the Life revealed in Him is the true Life. **And thus the movement of Divine Love which began in paradise with a Divine ‘take, eat . . .’ (for eating is life for man) comes now ‘unto the end’ with the Divine ‘take, eat, this is My Body’ - (for God is life of man . . .)** The Last Supper is the restoration of the *paradise* of bliss, of life as Eucharist and Communion.

**But this hour of ultimate love is also that of the ultimate betrayal.** Judas leaves the light of the Upper Room and goes into darkness. ‘And it was night.’ (John 13:30) Why does he leave? Because he loves, answers the Gospel, and his fateful love is stressed again and again in the hymns of Holy Thursday. It does not matter, indeed, that he loves the ‘silver.’ Money stands here for all the deviated and distorted love which leads man into betraying God. It is, indeed, love *stolen* from God and, therefore, Judas is the *Thief*. **When he does not love God and in God, man still loves and desires, for he was created to love and love is his nature, but it is then a dark and self-destroying passion and death is its end.** Each year, as we immerse ourselves into the unfathomable light and depth of Holy Thursday, the same decisive question is addressed to each one of us: **do I respond to Christ’s love and accept it as my life, or do I follow Judas into the darkness of his night?**

### The Services of Thursday

The liturgy of Holy Thursday includes: a) *Matins*, b) *Vespers* and, following *Vespers*, the *Liturgy of St. Basil the Great*. In the Cathedral Churches the special service of the Washing of Feet takes place after the Liturgy; while the Deacon reads the Gospel, the Bishop washes the feet of twelve priests, reminding us that Christ’s love is the foundation of life in the Church and shapes all relations within it. It is also on Holy Thursday that Holy Chrism is consecrated by the primates of autocephalous Churches, and this also means that the new love of Christ is the gift we receive from the Holy Spirit on the day of our entrance into the Church.

At Matins the Troparion sets the theme of the day: the opposition between the love of Christ and the ‘insatiable desire’ of Judas.

*“When the glorious disciples were enlightened at the washing of their feet before the supper, then the impious Judas was darkened, ailing with avarice, and to the lawless judges he betrays Thee, the Righteous Judge. Behold, O lover of money, this man who because of money hanged himself. Flee from the greedy soul which dared such things against the Master. O Lord who art good towards all men, glory to Thee!”*

After the Gospel reading (Luke 12:1-40), we are given the contemplation, the mystical and eternal meaning of the Last Supper in the beautiful canon of St. Cosmas. Its last ‘Irmos’ (9<sup>th</sup> Ode) invites us to share in the hospitality of the Lord’s banquet:

*“Come, O faithful, let us enjoy the Master’s hospitality: the banquet of immortality. In the upper chamber with uplifted minds, let us receive the exalted words of the Word, whom we magnify.”*

At Vespers, the stichera on ‘Lord, I have cried,’ stress the spiritual anticlimax of Holy Thursday, the betrayal by Judas:

*“Servant and deceiver, disciple and betrayer, friend and devil, Judas has been revealed by his deeds. While following the Master, he plotted His betrayal ...”*

After the entrance, three lessons from the Old Testament are read:

1. Exodus 19:10-19. **God’s descent from Mount Sinai to His people as the image of God’s coming in the Eucharist.**
2. Job 38:1-23; 42:1-5. **God’s conversation with Job and Job’s answer: ‘. . . who will utter to me what I understand not? Things too great and wonderful for me, which I knew not . . .’ – and these ‘great and wonderful things’ are fulfilled in the gift of Christ’s Body and Blood.**
3. Isaiah 50:4-11. **The beginning of the prophecies on the suffering servant of God.**

The Epistle reading is from I Corinthians 11:23-32: St. Paul’s account of the Last Supper and the meaning of communion.

The Gospel reading (the longest of the year) is taken from all four Gospels and is the full story of the Last Supper, the betrayal by Judas, and Christ’s arrest in the garden. The Cherubic hymn and the hymn of Communion are replaced by the words of the prayer before Communion:

*“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.”*

## Great & Holy Friday

### Friday: The Cross

From the light of Holy Thursday we enter into the darkness of Friday, the day of Christ’s Passion, Death and Burial. In the early Church this day was called ‘Pascha of the Cross,’ for it is indeed the beginning of that Passover or *Passage* whose whole meaning will be gradually revealed to us, first, in the wonderful quiet of the Great and Blessed Sabbath, and, then, in the joy of the Resurrection day.



## The Destruction of Death

**And, finally, His death is a saving death because it destroys the very source of death: evil.** By accepting it in love, by giving Himself to His murderers and permitting their apparent victory, Christ reveals that, in reality, this victory is the total and decisive defeat of Evil. **To be victorious Evil must annihilate the Good, must prove itself to be the ultimate truth about life, discredit the Good, and, in one word, show its own superiority. But throughout the whole Passion it is Christ and He alone who triumphs.** The Evil can do nothing against Him, for it cannot make Christ accept Evil as truth. Hypocrisy is revealed as Hypocrisy. Murder as Murder. Fear as Fear, and as Christ silently moves towards the Cross and the End, as the human tragedy reaches its climax, His triumph, His victory over the Evil, His glorification becomes more and more obvious. And at each step this victory is acknowledged, confessed, proclaimed - by the wife of Pilate, by Joseph, by the crucified thief, by the centurion. **As He dies on the Cross, having accepted the ultimate horror of death: absolute solitude (My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me!?), nothing remains but to confess that ‘truly This was the Son of God! . . .’** And, thus, it is this Death, this Love, this obedience, this fullness of Life that destroys that which made Death the universal destiny. ‘And the graves were opened . . .’ (Matthew 27:52) Already the rays of resurrection appear . . .

Such is the double mystery of Holy Friday, and its services reveal it and make us participate in it. On the one hand there is the constant emphasis on the Passion of Christ as the sin of all sins, the crime of all crimes: throughout Friday Matins [served Thursday evening] during which the twelve Passion readings make us follow step-by-step the sufferings of Christ, and at the Hours (which replace the Divine Liturgy: for the interdiction to celebrate Eucharist on this day means that the sacrament of Christ’s Presence does not belong to ‘this world’ of sin and darkness, but is the sacrament of the ‘world to come’). Finally, at Vespers, the service of Christ’s burial, the hymns and readings are full of solemn accusations of those, who willingly and freely decided to kill Christ, justifying this murder by their religion, their political loyalty, their practical considerations and their professional obedience.

### Now is the Son of Man Glorified

**On the other hand, the sacrifice of love which prepares the final victory is also present from the very beginning.** From the first Gospel reading (John 13:31) which begins with the solemn announcement of Christ: ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified and God has glorified Himself in Him,’ to the stichera as the end of Vespers - there is the increase of light, the slow growth of hope and certitude that “death will trample down death”.

*“Hell shuddered when it beheld Thee, The Redeemer of all who was laid in a tomb. Its bonds were broken; its gates were smashed! The tombs were opened; the dead arose. Then Adam cried in joy and thanksgiving: Glory to Thy condescension, O Lover of man!”*

And when, at the end of Vespers, we place in the center of the Church the image of Christ in the tomb, when this long day comes to its end, we know that we are at the end of the long history of salvation and redemption. The Seventh Day, the day of rest, the blessed Sabbath comes and with it - the revelation of the Life-giving Tomb.

### Saturday: This is the Blessed Sabbath

The ‘Great and Holy Sabbath’ is the day which connects Good Friday, the commemoration of

**the Cross with the day of His Resurrection.** To many the real nature and the meaning of this connection,- the very necessity of this ‘middle day,’ remains obscure. For a good majority of churchgoers, the ‘important’ days of Holy Week are Friday and Sunday, the Cross and the Resurrection. These two days, however, remain somehow ‘disconnected.’ There is a day of sorrow, and then, there is the day of joy. In this sequence, sorrow is simply replaced by joy ... but according to the teaching of the Church, expressed in her liturgical tradition, the nature of this sequence is not that of a simple replacement. **The Church proclaims that Christ has ‘trampled death by death.’ It means that even before the Resurrection, an event takes place, in which the sorrow is not simply replaced by joy, but is itself *transformed into joy.*** Great Saturday is precisely this day of transformation, the day when victory grows from inside the defeat, when before the Resurrection, we are given to contemplate the death of death itself ... all this is expressed, and even more, all this really takes place every year in this marvellous morning service, in this liturgical commemoration which becomes for us a saving and transforming present.

### Psalm 118 - Love for the Law of God

On coming to the Church on the morning of Holy Saturday, Friday has just been liturgically completed. [Matins of Holy Saturday is celebrated on Friday evening]. The sorrow of Friday is, therefore, the initial theme, the starting point of Matins of Saturday. It begins as a funeral service, as a lamentation over a dead body. After the singing of the funeral troparia and a slow censuring of the church, the celebrants approach the Epitaphion, the tomb. We stand at the grave of our Lord, we contemplate His death, His defeat. Psalm 118 is sung and to each verse we add a special ‘praise,’ which expresses the horror of men and of the whole creation before the death of Jesus:

*“O all ye mountains and hills, and all ye gatherings of men, Mourn, weep and lament with me, the Mother of your God ...”*

And yet, from the very beginning, along with this initial theme of sorrow and lamentation, a new theme makes its appearance and will become more and more apparent. We find it, first of all, in Psalm 118 - ‘Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.’ In our liturgical practice today this psalm is used only at the funeral services, hence its ‘funeral’ connotation for the average believer. But in early liturgical tradition this psalm was one of the essential parts of the Sunday vigil, the weekly commemoration of Christ’s Resurrection. Its content is not ‘funeral’ at all. This psalm is the purest and the fullest expression of love for the law of God, i.e., for the Divine design of man and of his life. The real life, the one which man lost through sin, consists in keeping, in fulfilling the Divine law, that life with God, in God and for God, for which man was created.

*“I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies, as much as in all riches ...”* (v. 14)

*“I will delight myself in Thy statutes ...”* (v. 16)

And since Christ is the image of the perfect fulfillment of this law, since His whole life had no other ‘content’ but the fulfillment of His Father’s will, the Church interprets this psalm as the words of Christ Himself, spoken to His Father from the grave.

*“Consider how I love Thy precepts. Quicken me, O Lord, according to Thy loving kindness ...”* (v. 159)

The death of Christ is the ultimate proof of His love for the will of God, of His obedience to His

Father. It is an act of pure obedience, of full trust in the Father's will; and for the Church it is precisely this obedience to the end, this perfect humility of the Son that constitutes the foundation, the beginning of His victory. The Father desires this death, the Son accepts it, revealing an unconditional faith in the perfection of the Father's will, in the necessity of this sacrifice of the Son by the Father. Psalm 118 is the psalm of that obedience, and therefore the announcement that in obedience the triumph has begun.

### The Encounter With Death

But why does the Father desire this death? Why is it necessary? The answer to this question constitutes the third theme of our service, and it appears first in the 'praises,' which follow each verse of Psalm 118. **They describe the death of Christ as *His descent into Hades*. 'Hades' in the concrete biblical language means the realm of death, which God has not created and which He did not want; it also signifies that the Prince of this world is all powerful in the world. Satan, Sin, Death - these are the 'dimensions' of Hades, its content.** For sin comes from Satan and Death is the result of sin - 'sin entered into the world, and death by sin.' (Romans 5:12) 'Death reigned from Adam to Moses' (Romans 5:14), the entire universe has become a cosmic cemetery, was condemned to destruction and despair. And this is why death is 'the last enemy,' (I Corinthians 15:20) and its destruction constitutes the ultimate goal of the Incarnation. This encounter with death is the 'hour' of Christ of which He said that 'for this hour have I come.' (John 12:27)

Now this hour has come and the Son of God enters into Death. The Fathers usually describe this moment as a duel between Christ and Death, Christ and Satan. For this death was to be either the last triumph of Satan, or his decisive defeat. The duel develops in several stages. **At first, the forces of evil seem to triumph. The Righteous One is crucified, abandoned by all, and endures a shameful death. He also becomes the partaker of 'Hades,' of this place of darkness and despair . . . but at this very moment, the real meaning of this death is revealed.** The One who dies on the Cross has Life in Himself, i.e., He has life not as a gift from outside, a gift which therefore can be taken away from Him, but as His own essence. **For He is the Life and the Source of all life. 'In Him was Life and Life was the light of man.'** The man Jesus dies, but this Man is the Son of God. **As man, He can really die, but in Him, God Himself enters the realm of death, partakes of death.** This is the unique, the incomparable meaning of Christ's death. In it, *the man who dies* is God, or to be more exact, the God-Man. **God is the Holy Immortal; and only in the unity 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation' of God and Man in Christ can human death be 'assumed' by God and be overcome and destroyed from within, be 'trampled down by death.'**

### Death is Overcome by Life

Now we understand why God desires *that* death, why the Father gives His Only begotten Son to it. He desires the salvation of man, i.e., that the destruction of death shall not be an act of His power, 'Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?' (Matthew 26:53), not a violence, be it even a saving one, but an act of that love, freedom and free dedication to God, for which He created man. **For any other salvation would have been in opposition to the nature of man, and, therefore, not a real salvation.** Hence the necessity of the Incarnation and the necessity of that Divine death. **In Christ, man restores**

**obedience and love. In Him, man overcomes sin and evil.** It was essential that death were not only destroyed by God, but overcome and trampled down in human nature itself, by man and through man, **‘For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.’** (I Corinthians 15:21)

Christ freely accepts death; of His life He says that ‘no man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself.’ (John 10: 18) He does it not without a fight: ‘and He began to be sorrowful and very heavy.’ (Matthew 26:27) **Here is fulfilled the measure of His obedience and, therefore, here is the destruction of the moral root of death, of death as the ransom for sin.** The whole life of Jesus is in God as every human life ought to be, and it is this fullness of Life, this life full of meaning and content, full of God, that overcomes death, destroys its power. For death is, above all, a lack of life, a destruction of life that has cut itself from its only source. **And because Christ’s death is a movement of love towards God, an act of obedience and trust, of faith and perfection - it is an act of life - “Father! Into Thy hands I commend my spirit”** (Luke 23:46) - **which destroys death.** It is the death of death itself. Such is the meaning of Christ’s descent into Hades, of His death becoming His victory. And the light of this victory now illumines our vigil before the Grave.

*“O Life, how liest Thou dead? How dwellest Thou in a tomb? Albeit Thou didst unbind the power of death and raised the dead from Hades.”*

*“Christ the Life, Thou hast been placed in a Tomb. By Thy death Thou hast abolished death, bringing forth life to the world.”*

*“What joy! O what abounding delight, wherewith Thou didst fill those who are in Hades, when Thou didst rise as a light in its dark abyss . . .”*

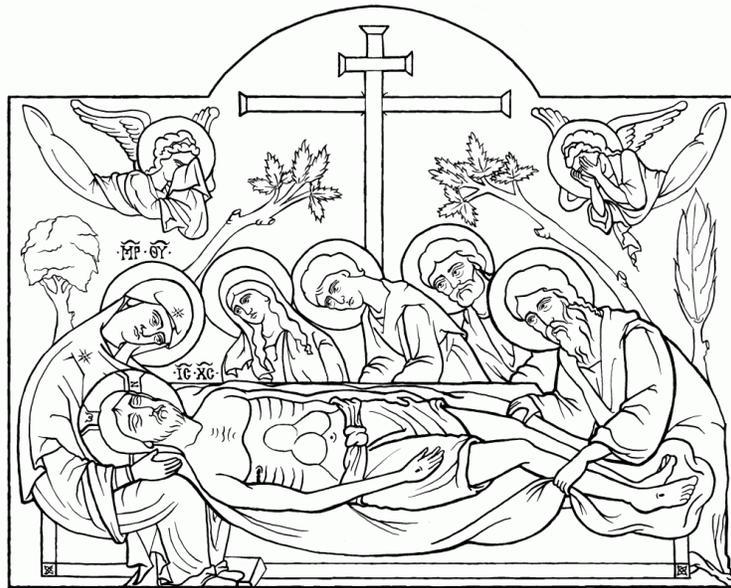
**Life enters the Kingdom of death.** The Divine Light shines in its terrible darkness. It shines to all who are there, because Christ is the life of all, the only source of every life. Therefore He also dies for all, for whatever happens to His life - happens in Life itself . . . This descent into Hades is the encounter of the Life of all with the death of all:

*“Thou hast come down to earth to save Adam, and having not found him on earth, Thou hast descended, searching him, even into Hades . . .”*

**Sorrow and joy are fighting each other and now joy is about to win.** The ‘praises’ are over. The dialogue, the duel between Life and Death comes to its end. And, for the first time, the song of victory and triumph, the song of joy resounds. It resounds in the troparia on Psalm 118,- sung at each Sunday vigil, at the approach of the Resurrection day:

*“The angelic host was filled with awe when it saw Thee among the dead! By destroying the power of death, O Savior, Thou didst raise Adam and save all men from Hades!”*

*“In the tomb the radiant angel cried to the myrrhbearers, ‘Why do you women mingle myrrh with your tears? Look at the tomb and understand: the Savior has risen from the dead!’ ”*



## The Life-giving Tomb

Then comes the beautiful Canon of Great Saturday, in which once more all the themes of this service - from the funeral lamentation to the victory over death - are resumed and deepened, and which ends with this order:

*“Let creation rejoice! Let all born on earth be glad! For hateful hell has been despoiled. Let the women with myrrh come to meet me; for I am redeeming Adam and Eve and all their descendants, and on the third day shall I arise!”*

‘And on the third day shall I arise!’ From now on paschal joy illumines the service. We are still standing before the Tomb, but it has been revealed to us as the life-giving Tomb. Life rests in it, a new creation is being born, and once more, on the Seventh Day, the day of rest - the Creator rests from all His work. ‘The Life sleeps and Hades trembles’ - and we contemplate, this blessed Sabbath, the solemn quiet of the One who brings life back to us: ‘O come let us see our life, resting in the grave . . .’ The full meaning, the mystical depth of the Seventh Day, as the day of fulfillment, the day of achievement is now revealed, for:

*“The great Moses mystically foreshadowed this day, when he said: God blessed the seventh day. This is the blessed Sabbath. This is the day of rest, on which the only-begotten Son of God rested from all His works. He kept the Sabbath in the flesh, through the dispensation of death. But on this day, He returned again through the resurrection. He has granted us eternal life, for He alone is good, the Lover of mankind.”*

**We now go around the Church in a solemn procession with the Epitaphion, but it is not a funeral procession.** It is the Son of God, the Holy Immortal, who proceeds through the darkness of Hades, announcing to ‘Adam of all generation’ the joy of forthcoming resurrection. ‘Shining as the morning from the night,’ He proclaims that ‘all the dead will raise again, all those in the graves will love, and all those created will rejoice . . .’

## Expectation of Life

**We return to the Church. We know already the mystery of Christ’s life-giving death. Hades is**

**destroyed. Hades trembles.** And now the last theme appears - the theme of Resurrection. Sabbath, the seventh day, achieves and completes the history of salvation, its last act being the overcoming of death. But after the Sabbath comes the first day of a new creation, of a new life born from the grave. The theme of Resurrection is inaugurated in the Prokeimenon:

*“Arise, O Lord, help us and deliver us, for the glory of Thy name O God, we have heard with our ears . . .”*

It is continued in the first lesson: the prophecy of Ezekiel on the dry bones, <sup>(ch. 37)</sup> “... There were very many in the open valley, and, behold, they were very dry.’ It is death triumphing in the world, the darkness, the hopelessness of this universal sentence to death. But God speaks to the prophet. He announces that this sentence is not the ultimate destiny of man. The dry bones will hear the words of the Lord. The dead will live again. ‘Behold, my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of the graves, and bring you up into the land of Israel . . .’ Following this prophecy comes the second prokeimenon: with the same appeal, the same prayer:

*“Arise, O Lord my God, lift up Thine hand ...”*

How will it happen, how is this universal resurrection possible? The second lesson (I Corinthians 5:6, Galatians 3:13-14) gives the answer: ‘a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump . . .’ Christ, our Pascha, is this leaven of the resurrection of all. As His death destroys the very principle of death, His Resurrection is the token of the resurrection of all, for His life is the source of every life. And the verses of the ‘Alleluia,’ the same verses which will inaugurate the Easter service, sanction this final answer, the certitude that the time of the new creation, of the day without evening, has begun:

*“Alleluia!! Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; let those who hate Him flee from before His face ... Alleluia! As smoke vanishes, so let them vanish, as wax melts before the fire.”*

The reading of the prophecies is over. Yet, we have heard but prophecies. We are still in Great Saturday before Christ’s tomb, and we have to live through this long day, before we hear at midnight: ‘Christ is risen!’, before we enter into the celebration of His Resurrection. Thus, the third lesson - Matthew 27:62-66 which completes the service, tells us once more about the Tomb - ‘which was made secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.’

But it is probably here, at the very end of Matins, that the ultimate meaning of this ‘middle day’ is made manifest. Christ arose again from the dead, His Resurrection we will celebrate on Easter Day. This celebration, however, commemorates a unique event of the past, and anticipates a mystery of the future. It is already His Resurrection, but not yet ours. We will have to die, to accept the dying, the separation, the destruction. Our reality in this world, in this ‘aeon,’ is the reality of the Great Saturday; this day is the real image of our human condition. We believe in the Resurrection, because Christ has risen from the dead. We expect the Resurrection. We know that Christ’s death is no longer the hopeless, the ultimate end of everything. Baptized into His death, we partake already of His life that came out of the grave. We receive His Body and Blood which are the food of immortality. We have in ourselves the token, the anticipation of the eternal life. All our Christian existence is measured by these acts of communion to the life of the ‘new aeon’ of the Kingdom, and yet we are here, and death is our inescapable share.

But this life between the Resurrection of Christ and the day of the common resurrection, is it not precisely the life in the Great Saturday? Is not *expectation* the basic and essential category of

Christian experience? **We wait in love, hope and faith. And this waiting for ‘the resurrection and the life of the world to come,’ this life which is ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Colossians 3:34), this growth of expectation in love, in certitude; all this is our own ‘Great Saturday.’** Little by little everything in this world becomes transparent to the light that comes from there, the ‘image of this world’ passes by and this indestructible life with Christ becomes our supreme and ultimate value.

Every year, on Great Saturday, after this morning service, we wait for the Easter night and the fullness of Paschal joy. We know that they are approaching - and yet, how slow is this approach, how long is this day! But is not the wonderful **quiet** of Great Saturday the symbol of our very life in this world? Are we not always in this ‘middle day,’ waiting for the Pascha of Christ, preparing ourselves for the day without evening of His Kingdom?

## HOLY PASCHA

### The Feast of the Resurrection

This is the starting point for our understanding of the sanctification of time. It is the Orthodox experience, which goes back to the apostles themselves, that in the center of our liturgical life, in the very center of that time which we measure as year, we find the Feast of Christ’s Resurrection. What is the Resurrection? **Resurrection is the appearance in this world, completely dominated by time and therefore by death, of life that shall have not end.** The One who rose again from the dead does not die anymore. In this world of ours, not somewhere else, not in any “*other*” world, there appeared one morning someone who is beyond death and yet in our time. This meaning of Christ’s Resurrection, this great joy, is the central theme of Christianity; and it has been preserved in its fullness in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. **There is much truth expressed by those who say that the central theme of Orthodoxy, the center of all its experience, the frame of reference for everything else in her, is the Resurrection of Christ.**



We Orthodox living in the West are in danger of losing this resurrection spirit of Christianity. We are concerned with death much more than with resurrection, and church life sometimes is dominated by the funeral rather than the resurrection type of piety. Yet no one can understand the real structure of the liturgical cycle of the year unless he understands that the center, the day that gives meaning to all days and therefore to all time, is the yearly commemoration of Christ’s Resurrection at Pascha. **Pascha is always the end and always the beginning. We are always living after Pascha, and we are always going towards Pascha.** The whole spirit and meaning of liturgical life is contained in Pascha, together with the subsequent fifty-day period which culminates in the feast of Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. This unique Paschal celebration is reflected every week in the Christian Sunday, the day which Russians, for example, still call *Voskresenie*, “**Resurrection.**” Though it may seem strange to you, it is important to realize that every Sunday is a little Pascha. I say ‘*Little Pascha*’, but it is really ‘*Great Pascha*.’ Every week the Church comes to the same central experience: “*Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ ...*” Every Saturday night, when the Priest carries the Gospel from the Altar to the center of the Church, after he has read the Gospel of the Resurrection, the same fundamental fact of our Christian Faith is

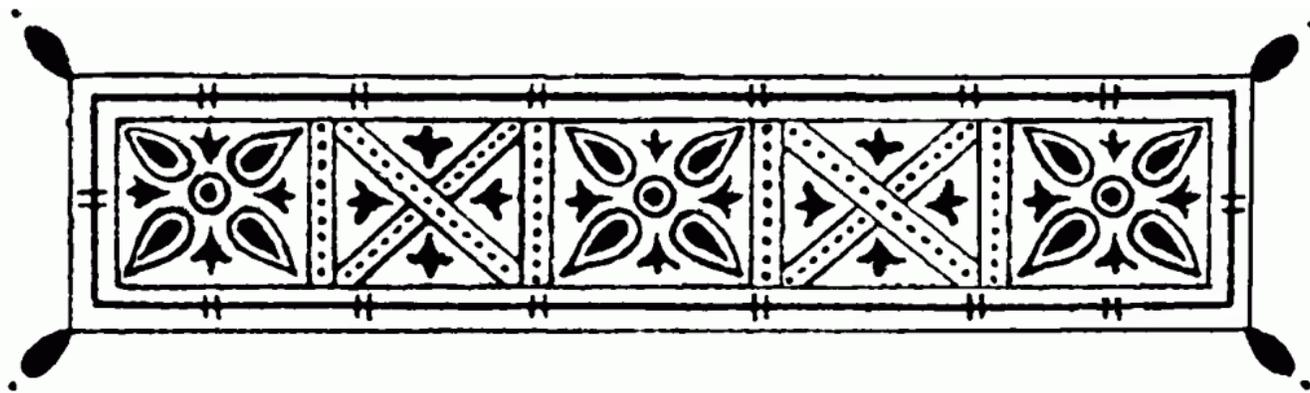
proclaimed: **CHRIST IS RISEN!** St. Paul says, *‘If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.’* (I Cor. 15:14). There is nothing else to believe. This is the heart of our Faith; and it is only the reference to Pascha, as the end of all merely natural time and the beginning of the new time, that we can understand the whole liturgical year.

### **Pentecost and Pascha**

**Pentecost is the fulfillment of Pascha.** If you open a calendar, you will find all our Sundays are called Sundays after Pentecost, and Pentecost itself is fifty days after Pascha. Pentecost is the fulfillment of Pascha. Christ ascended into heaven and sent down His Holy Spirit. When He sent down His Holy Spirit into the world, a new society was instituted, a body of people, whose took on a new meaning. This new meaning comes directly from Christ’s Resurrection. We are no longer people in meaningless time that leads to a meaningless end. We are given not only a new meaning in life, but even death itself has acquired a new significance. In the Tropicana of Pascha we say, *“trampling down death by death.”* We do not say that He trampled down death by the Resurrection, but by death. And although a Christian still faces death, being in this way similar to any other man, death has for him a new significance. It means entering into the Pascha of the Lord, into His own passage from the old into a new life. This is the key to the liturgical year of the Church. Christianity is, first of all, the proclamation in this world of Christ’s Resurrection. Orthodox spirituality is paschal in its inner content, and the real content of the Christian life is joy.

We speak of feasts, and the feast is the expression of Christianity as joy. When you teach children, you convey to them not only certain knowledge but also the spirit which is behind this knowledge. You know that the one thing a child accepts easily is joy. But we have made our Christianity so adult, so serious, so sad, so solemn, that we have virtually emptied it of that joy. Yet Christ has said, **“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it”** (Mark 10:15, and Luke 18:17). To become like a child, in Christ’s words, means to be capable of that joy of which an adult is no longer capable, to enter into communion with things, with nature, with other people, without suspicion or fear or frustration. We often use the term grace, but what is grace? *Charis* in Greek means not only grace but also joy. If I stress this point so much, it is because of my certainty that our first message must be this message of Paschal Joy. When on Pascha night we stand at the door of the Church and the Priest says, *“Christ is Risen,”* the night, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, becomes *“lighter than the day,”* Here is the strength, the real root of the Christian experience. And only within the framework of this joy can we understand everything else.

Let us keep in mind that Pascha is the real beginning of our liturgical year. The year *“officially”* begins on September 1<sup>st</sup>; but I am speaking here in terms of its spiritual principle and foundation, because Pascha truly opens our understanding of time. The world was dark, and Someone brought in light and warmth. The world was sad because it had become a cemetery, and Someone said, *“Death is no more.”* This is what Christ did in this world. It was cold and sinful and cruel, and He came and said, *‘Rejoice’* This is the way Christ addressed His disciples. ***“Rejoice! Peace be with you!”*** Paschal joy is, therefore, the beginning of Christian experience.



Re-set and distributed by St Innocent Orthodox Church, Tarzana, CA.