

Observing Holy Week Can Enrich Faith

This year as you approach Holy Week, try meditating on the whole story of Jesus' passion. Take time to listen to the voices of the crowd. Hear again the words of Jesus and ponder his days in Jerusalem.

Other Gospel writers tell us that as Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they entered Bethphage, where Jesus instructed two of his disciples to enter the village, find a donkey with her colt beside her, "*untie them and bring them to me.*" Then, riding the donkey, Jesus entered Jerusalem, as some in the crowd waved palm branches and shouted blessings and praise.

This begins the historical narrative of the week we now observe as Holy Week. All around the world, Christians of different denominations unite to reflect on the events that led to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

The observance of Holy Week seems to have been a development of the Christian East, coming out of the practice of pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Every day of Holy Week is important, but four specific days merit words of explanation: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday (or Easter).

While all believers celebrate Easter Sunday, believers from different faith backgrounds observe one or more of the other days of Holy Week.

Palm Sunday is the Sunday prior to Easter. It marks what is commonly called "the triumphal entry of Jesus" into Jerusalem. The Gospels reveal that "great crowds spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut palm branches from the trees and spread them on the road." As these crowds followed Jesus, many shouted, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" and "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

But we all know that such praise did not last the entire week. During the week, Jesus cleansed the temple of those he called thieves and robbers, he denounced the Pharisees, he told many parables, and he predicted persecution for those who would follow him.

By Thursday, Judas had arranged a transaction to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. According to the Gospels, that night Jesus spent time alone with his disciples in the upper room. There they shared somber but memorable moments together around the table before Jesus and a couple of disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. As Jesus spoke with these disciples, Judas arrived, and after Judas marked Jesus with a kiss of betrayal, Jesus was arrested.

According to John, prior to Jesus' meal with the disciples and the betrayal by Judas, Jesus had ceremonially washed his disciples' feet and given them a mandate: "I give you a new command: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:34).

We remember this day as Maundy Thursday. The word "maundy" comes from the word for "mandate." Maundy Thursday commemorates Jesus' mandate to "love one another" and his action in initiating the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper.

The following day, Jesus was interrogated behind closed doors, beaten unmercifully and eventually crucified without a legitimate trial. Yet for all of its horror, this day is remembered as Good Friday. Other terms for this day have included Day of Preparation, Day of our Lord's Passion and Day of Absolution.

English Christians who judged the consequences of this day as good (not that the act of crucifixion was good) began referring to the day as Good Friday. Eastern Christians refer to this day as Great Friday.

After Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimethea received permission to bury Jesus' body. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb that he had hewn from rock. Mary Magdelene and the other Mary witnessed the burial. Joseph placed a stone at the entrance, possibly to keep out predators

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and curiosity seekers. Prompted by the chief priests and Pharisees, Pilate ordered a guard of soldiers to secure the premises.

According to the Gospels, early on Sunday morning when Mary Magdelene and the other Mary returned to the tomb, they were greeted by an earthquake. Then an angel rolled back the stone and said, *“Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who crucified. He is not here. He is risen. Come and see the place where he lay”* (Mt 28:5). On Easter Sunday, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

In his book, *The Gift of Worship*, Weldon Gaddy underscores the personal opportunity for us to have a God-honoring celebration of Jesus’ resurrection: “Holy Week services bring into focus dimensions of discipleship that are missed completely by a simple leap from Palm Sunday to Easter. Worship services which take seriously the truths of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday please God because they challenge a greater commitment and a more comprehensive ministry of compassion among the people of God.”

This year as you approach Holy Week, try meditating on the whole story of Jesus’ passion. Take time to listen to the voices of the crowd. Hear again the words of Jesus and ponder his days in Jerusalem. Such a journey may expand your knowledge and enrich your faith.

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