

Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday

Summary: Lent is a period of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. It is a time of penitence and preparation, during which many Christians strengthen their faith through study, prayer, fasting or abstinence. The restriction and solemnity of Lent contrast with the joys of Easter, the Sunday celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead, and the most important holy day for Christians.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The priest or minister speaks these words, inscribing a small cross of ashes on the forehead of each person who comes to the special Ash Wednesday service at the beginning of Lent. The season of Lent lasts for forty days (Sundays are not counted), from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. It is a solemn drama in which Christians prepare themselves through fasting and prayer to accompany Christ in the events of Holy Week, including his betrayal, crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

Lent is the church's great season of penitence, abstinence, and preparation. It is said to correspond to the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness before launching his public ministry. In the early church, this was the initiatory season in which new Christians were prepared through instruction and catechism for the initiation of baptism, which took place on Easter Sunday. Today, Lent is still a time of preparation for baptism. It is also a time for all Christians to strengthen their faith through study and reflection, fasting and abstinence. In Protestant and Catholic churches, some form of fasting or daily practice of prayer is encouraged during Lent. Christians of Orthodox churches often observe a strict Lenten fast including abstinence from all meat, fish, and dairy products.

The last week of Lent is known as Holy Week. Over this period, worshipers repeat, step by step, the central drama of Christianity. It begins on Palm Sunday, marking Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, when the populace spread palm branches before him and hailed him as the long-expected redeemer. In churches throughout the world, palm branches are distributed and the congregation holds them high in victory and hope. On “Maundy Thursday” of Holy Week, many churches observe the “Last Supper” of Jesus with his disciples. In some traditions, it is the last time the elements of bread and wine can be consecrated for the Eucharist until Easter Sunday. In Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant churches, Holy Thursday is also celebrated with the priest washing the feet of community members, just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples prior to the Last Supper.

On Good Friday, many churches observe a three-hour vigil from noon until three p.m., the hours Christ hung on the cross before his death. In Catholic churches, the cross is venerated on Good Friday and is sometimes carried in procession through the streets. St. Jerome's Church in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, with its old English-speaking congregation and its newer community of Mexican and Haitian immigrants, holds an annual *Via Crucis* or "Way of the Cross" pilgrimage through the streets. Those who follow the cross on this pilgrimage stop for prayer at places in the community where people are involved in projects to help one another.

In many churches, after the Good Friday service, the altar cloth is stripped from the altar and the cross is shrouded with a cloth. On either Thursday or Friday night, some churches observe a service called *Tenebrae*, the "Shadows." It consists of a series of readings, often from the Book of Lamentations. Candles are extinguished one by one, and people leave the church in darkness. The church bells cease to ring and remain silent until Easter morning, when the lamentations turn to joy.

Easter Sunday is the greatest festival of the Christian year. Three days after Jesus' death, a few of the women who followed him went to his tomb and found it empty. Today, the priest or pastor leading the Easter service echoes the women's discovery by exclaiming, "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" The congregation responds, "He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

American Christians greet Easter in many ways. Catholic, Episcopal, and Orthodox churches observe the Great Vigil late Saturday night or early in the still-dark hours of Sunday morning. Harking back to some of the most ancient traditions of the church, the congregation gathers in the darkened church where no candle has been lit since Thursday night. The priest kindles a new fire at the door and says, "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds." Carrying the Paschal candle into the dark sanctuary, the celebrants proclaim, "The Light of Christ!"

In Eastern Orthodox churches, the bells begin to ring at midnight. The Easter Matins service begins with a procession around the darkened church, representing the tomb of Christ. Finally, the church doors are opened and the priest greets the people with "Christ is risen!" The people respond: "He is indeed risen."

Many Protestant churches also celebrate Christ's resurrection at the first light of dawn. Easter sunrise services are usually held outdoors, where the sun can be seen as it rises. They often provide an opportunity for ecumenical worship with other churches. For Christians, the dawning of a new day and

of new life symbolizes the power of Easter. Later in the morning, worshippers fill churches to overflowing. They sing, “Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!” a hymn composed by Charles Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist tradition, beloved by Christians of many denominations.

Easter is a celebration of resurrection, rebirth, and the renewal of life. Easter services often include rites of baptism and confirmation for new Christians. The theme of renewal has also infused the wider culture. Easter eggs, which many do not consider a religious aspect of Easter, are actually part of the heritage of the early church, which considered the egg to be a symbol of rebirth. Today, America’s Easter is a medley of Christian themes and secular expressions, such as the national Easter egg roll on the lawn of the White House, the tradition of receiving new clothes for Easter, and the local Easter parade. But record church attendance is a clear signal that the religious observance of Easter is still a dominant aspect of the season.