

The Paschal Service

The Midnight Office, Matins, Hours and the Divine Liturgy of Pascha

Introduction by the Very Rev. Paul Lazor

Enjoy ye all the feast of faith; receive ye all the riches of loving-kindness.

(Sermon of St. John Chrysostom, read at Paschal Matins)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the center of the Christian faith. St. Paul says that if Christ is not raised from the dead, then our preaching and faith are in vain (*1 Cor. 15:14*). Indeed without the resurrection there would be no Christian preaching or faith. The disciples of Christ would have remained the broken and hopeless band which the Gospel of John describes as being in hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. They went nowhere and preached nothing until they met the risen Christ, the doors being shut (*John 20:19*). Then they touched the wounds of the nails and the spear; they ate and drank with Him. The resurrection became the basis of everything they said and did (*Acts 2-4*): "...for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (*Luke 24:39*).

The resurrection reveals Jesus of Nazareth as not only the expected Messiah of Israel, but as the King and Lord of a new Jerusalem: a new heaven and a new earth.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...the holy city, new Jerusalem. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people . . . He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (*Rev. 21:1-4*).

In His death and resurrection, Christ defeats the last enemy, death, and thereby fulfills the mandate of His Father to subject all things under His feet (*1 Cor. 15:24-26*).

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing (*Rev. 5:12*)

The Feast Of Feasts

The Christian faith is celebrated in the liturgy of the Church. True celebration is always a living participation. It is not a mere attendance at services. It is communion in the power of the event being celebrated. It is God's free gift of joy given to spiritual men as a reward for their self-denial. It is the fulfillment of spiritual and physical effort and preparation. The resurrection of Christ, being the center of the Christian faith, is the basis of the Church's liturgical life and the true model for all celebration.

This is the chosen and holy day, first of sabbaths, king and lord of days, the feast of feasts, holy day of holy days. On this day we bless Christ forevermore (*Irmos 8, Paschal Canon*).

Preparation

Twelve weeks of preparation precede the "feast of feasts." A long journey which includes five pre-lenten Sundays, six weeks of Great Lent and finally Holy Week is made. The journey moves from the self-willed exile of the prodigal son to the grace-filled entrance into the new Jerusalem, coming down as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband (*Rev. 21:2*). Repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and study are the means by which this long journey is made. Focusing on the veneration of the Cross at its midpoint, the lenten voyage itself reveals that the joy of the resurrection is achieved only through the Cross. "Through the cross joy has come into all the world,"

we sing in one paschal hymn. And in the paschal troparion, we repeat again and again that Christ has trampled down death - by death! St. Paul writes that the name of Jesus is exalted above every name because He first emptied Himself, taking on the lowly form of a servant and being obedient even to death on the Cross (*Phil. 2:5-11*). The road to the celebration of the resurrection is the self-emptying crucifixion of Lent. Pascha is the passover from death to life.

**Yesterday I was buried with Thee, O Christ. Today I arise with Thee in Thy resurrection.
Yesterday I was crucified with Thee: Glorify me with Thee, O Savior, in Thy kingdom** (*Ode 3, Paschal Canon*).

The Procession

All the texts for the divine services of the night of Pascha are contained in this booklet. These services commence near midnight of Holy Saturday. At the Ninth Ode of the Canon of Nocturne, the initial service of the booklet, the priest, already vested in his brightest robes, removes the Holy Shroud from the tomb and carries it to the altar table, where it remains until the leave-taking of Pascha. The faithful stand in darkness. Then, one by one, they light their candles from the candle held by the priest and form a great procession out of the church. Choir, servers, priest and people, led by the bearers of the cross, banners, icons and Gospel-book, circle the church. The bells are rung incessantly and the angelic hymn of the resurrection is chanted.

The procession comes to a stop before the principle doors of the church. Before the closed doors the priest and the people sing the troparion of Pascha, "**Christ is risen from the dead...**", many times. Even before entering the church the priest and people exchange the paschal greeting: "Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!" This segment of the paschal services is extremely important. It preserves in the experience of the Church the primitive accounts of the resurrection of Christ as recorded in the Gospels. The angel rolled away the stone from the tomb not to let a biologically revived but physically entrapped Christ walk out, but to reveal that "He is not here; for He has risen, as He said" (*Matt. 28:6*).

In the paschal canon we sing:

Thou didst arise, O Christ, and yet the tomb remained sealed, as at Thy birth the Virgin's womb remained unharmed; and Thou hast opened for us the gates of paradise (*Ode 6*).

Finally, the procession of light and song in the darkness of night, and the thunderous proclamation that, indeed, Christ is risen, fulfill the words of the Evangelist John: "The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (*John 1:5*).

The doors are opened and the faithful re-enter. The church is bathed in light and adorned with flowers. It is the heavenly bride and the symbol of the empty tomb:

Bearing life and more fruitful than paradise, Brighter than any royal chamber: Thy tomb, O Christ, is the fountain of our resurrection (*Paschal Hours*).

Matins

Matins commences immediately. The risen Christ is glorified in the singing of the beautiful canon of St. John of Damascus. The paschal greeting is repeatedly exchanged. Near the end of Matins the paschal verses are sung. They relate the entire narrative of the Lord's resurrection. They conclude with the words calling us to actualize among each other the forgiveness freely given to all by God:

This is the day of resurrection. Let us be illumined by the feast. Let us embrace each other. Let us call "brothers" even those who hate us, And forgive all by the resurrection ...

The sermon of St. John Chrysostom is read by the celebrant. The sermon was originally composed as a baptismal instruction. It is retained by the Church in the paschal services because everything about the night of Pascha recalls the Sacrament of Baptism: the language and general terminology of the liturgical texts, the specific hymns, the vestment color, the use of candles and the great procession

itself. Now the sermon invites us to a great re-affirmation of our baptism: to union with Christ in the receiving of Holy Communion.

If any man is devout and loves God, let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal feast... the table is fully laden; feast you all sumptuously . . . the calf is fatted, let no one go hungry away...

The Divine Liturgy

The sermon announces the imminent beginning of the Divine Liturgy. The altar table is fully laden with the divine food: the Body and Blood of the risen and glorified Christ. No one is to go away hungry. The service books are very specific in saying that only he who partakes of the Body and Blood of Christ eats the true Pascha. The Divine Liturgy, therefore, normally follows immediately after paschal Matins. Foods from which the faithful have been called to abstain during the lenten journey are blessed and eaten only after the Divine Liturgy.

The Day Without Evening

Pascha is the inauguration of a new age. It reveals the mystery of the eighth day. It is our "taste," in this age, of the new and unending day of the Kingdom of God. Something of this new and unending day is conveyed to us in the length of the paschal services, in the repetition of the paschal order for all the services of bright week, and in the special paschal features retained in the services for the forty days until Ascension. Forty days are, as it were, treated as one day. Together they comprise the symbol of the new time in which the Church lives and toward which she ever draws the faithful, from one degree of glory to another.

O Christ, great and most holy Pascha. O Wisdom, Word and Power of God, grant that we may more perfectly partake of Thee in the never-ending day of Thy kingdom (*Ninth Ode, Paschal Canon*).