

Easter Sunday: The Holy Pascha

A little before midnight on the Blessed Sabbath the **Nocturne** service is chanted. The celebrant goes to the tomb and removes the winding-sheet. He carries it through the royal doors and places it on the altar table where it remains for forty days until the day of Ascension.

At midnight the **Easter procession** begins. The people leave the church building singing:

The angels in heaven, O Christ our Saviour, sing of Thy resurrection. Make us on earth also worthy to hymn Thee with a pure heart.

The procession circles the church building and returns to the closed doors of the front of the church. This procession of the Christians on Easter night recalls the original **baptismal procession** from the darkness and death of this world to the light and the life of the Kingdom of God. It is the procession of the **holy pass-over**, from death unto life, from earth unto heaven, from this age to the age to come which will never end.

Before the closed doors of the church building, the resurrection of Christ is announced. Sometimes the Gospel is read which tells of the empty tomb. The celebrant intones the blessing to the “holy, consubstantial, life-creating and undivided Trinity.” The **Easter troparion** is sung for the first time, together with the verses of Psalm 68 which will begin all of the Church services during the Easter season.

Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee from before his face!

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. (Troparion)

This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!

The people re-enter the church building and continue the service of **Easter Matins** which is entirely sung.

The canon hymns of Christ's resurrection, ascribed to St. John of Damascus, are chanted with the troparion of the feast as the constantly recurring refrain. The building is decorated with flowers and lights. The vestments are the bright robes of the resurrection. The Easter icon stands in the center of the church showing Christ destroying the gates of hell and freeing Adam and Eve from the captivity of death. It is the image of the Victor "trampling down death by his own death." There is the continual singing and censuring of the icons and the people, with the constant proclamation of the celebrant: Christ is risen! The faithful continually respond: Indeed he is risen!

It is the day of resurrection! Let us be illumined for the feast! Pascha! The Pascha of the Lord! From death unto life, and from earth unto heaven has Christ our God led us! Singing the song of victory: Christ is risen from the dead! (First Ode of the Easter Canon)

Following the canon, the paschal verses are sung, and at the conclusion of the Easter Matins, the Easter Hours are also sung. In general, nothing is simply read in the Church services of Easter: everything is fully sung with the joyful melodies of the feast.

At the end of the Hours, before the Divine Liturgy, the celebrant solemnly proclaims the famous Paschal Sermon of St. John Chrysostom. This sermon is an invitation to all of the faithful to forget their sins and to join fully in the feast of the resurrection of Christ. Taken literally, the sermon is the formal invitation offered to all members of the Church to come and to receive Holy Communion, partaking of Christ, the Passover Lamb, whose table is now being set in the midst of the Church. In some parishes the sermon is literally obeyed, and all of the faithful receive the eucharistic gifts of the Passover Supper of Easter night.



The **Easter Divine Liturgy** begins immediately with the singing once more of the festal troparion with the verses of Psalm 68. Special psalm verses also comprise the antiphons of the liturgy, through which the faithful praise and glorify the salvation of God:

**Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!
Sing of his name, give glory to his praise.**

**Let all the earth worship Thee and praise Thee!
Let it praise Thy name, O Most High!**

**That we may know Thy way upon the earth and
Thy salvation among all nations.**

**Let the people thank Thee, O God! Let all the
people give thanks to Thee.**

The troparion is repeated over and over again. The baptismal line from Galatians replaces the Thrice-Holy Hymn. The epistle reading is the first nine verses of the **Book of Acts**. The gospel reading is the first seventeen verses of the **Gospel of St. John**. The proclamation of the Word of God takes the faithful back again to the beginning, and announces God's creation and re-creation of the world through the living Word of God, his Son Jesus Christ.

**In the beginning was the Word and the Word was
with God and the Word was God. . . all things
were made through him . . . In him was life and
the life was the light of men. . .**

**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us
full of grace and truth. . .; we have beheld his
glory, glory of the only-begotten Son of the
Father, and from his fulness have we all received
grace upon grace. . . (John 1:1-17)**

The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom continues, crowned in holy communion with the Passover Lamb at his banquet table in God's Kingdom. Again and again the troparion of the Resurrection is sung while the faithful partake of him "who was dead and is alive again." (**Revelation 2:8**)

In the Orthodox Church the feast of Easter is officially called **Pascha**, the word which means the **Passover**. It is the new Passover of the new and everlasting covenant foretold by the prophets of old. It is the eternal Passover from death to life and from earth to heaven. It is the **Day of the Lord** proclaimed by God's holy prophets, "**the day which the Lord has made**" for his judgment over all creation, the day of His final and everlasting victory. It is the **Day of the Kingdom of God**, the day "**which has no night**" for "**its light is the Lamb.**" (Revelation 21:22-25)

The celebration of Easter in the Orthodox Church, therefore, is once again not merely an historical re-enactment of the event of Christ's Resurrection as narrated in the gospels. It is not a dramatic representation of the "first Easter morning." There is no "sunrise service" since the Easter Matins and the Divine Liturgy are celebrated together in the first dark hours of the first day of the week in order to give men the experience of the "new creation" of the world, and to allow them to enter mystically into the **New Jerusalem** which shines eternally with the glorious light of Christ, overcoming the perpetual night of evil and destroying the darkness of this mortal and sinful world:

Shine! Shine! O New Jerusalem! The glory of the Lord has shone upon you! Exult and be glad O Zion! Be radiant O Pure Theotokos, in the Resurrection of your son!

This is one of the main Easter hymns in the Orthodox Church. It is inspired by Isaiah's prophecy and the final chapters of the **Book of Revelation**, for it is exactly the **New Creation**, the **New Jerusalem**, the **Heavenly City**, the **Kingdom of God**, the **Day of the Lord**, the **Marriage Feast of the Lamb with his Bride** which is celebrated and realized and experienced in the Holy Spirit on the Holy Night of Easter in the Orthodox Church.

Post-Easter Sundays

St. Thomas Sunday: Antipascha

Every day during the week of Easter, called **Bright Week** by the Church, the paschal services are celebrated in all their splendor. The Easter baptismal procession is repeated daily. The royal gates of the sanctuary remain open. The joy of the Resurrection and the gift of the Kingdom of eternal life continue to abound. Then, at the end of the week, on Saturday evening, the second Sunday after Easter is celebrated in remembrance of the appearance of Christ to the Apostle Thomas “after eight days”. (John 20:26)

It is important to note that the number **eight** has symbolical significance in both Jewish and Christian spiritual tradition. It signifies more than completion and fullness; it signifies the Kingdom of God and the life of the world to come since **seven** is the number of earthly time. The **sabbath**, the seventh day, is the blessed day of rest in this world, the final day of the week. The “**first day of the week**,” the day “after Sabbath”; stressed in all of the gospels as the day of Christ’s Resurrection (Mark 16:1, Matthew 28:1, Luke 24:1, John 20:1, 19), is therefore also the “**eighth day**”, the day beyond the confines of this world, the day which stands for the life of the world to come, the day of the eternal rest of the Kingdom of God. (See Hebrews 4).

The Sunday after Easter, called the Second Sunday, is thus the eighth day of the paschal celebration, the last day of **Bright Week**. It is therefore called the **Anti-pascha**, and it was only on this day in the early church that the newly-baptized Christians removed their robes and entered once again into the life of this world.

In the Church services the stress is on the Apostle Thomas’ vision of Christ and the significance of the day comes to us in the words of the gospel:

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and

place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” (John 20:27-29)

We have not seen Christ with our physical eyes nor touched his risen body with our physical hands, yet in the Holy Spirit we have seen and touched and tasted the Word of Life (I John 1:1-4), and so we believe.

At each of the daily services until Ascension Day we sing the Easter Troparion. At each of the Sunday services beginning with Antipascha, we sing the Easter canon and hymns, and repeat the celebration of the “first day of the week” on which Christ rose from the dead. At all of the liturgies the epistle readings are taken from the **Book of Acts** telling us of the first Christians who lived in communion with the Risen Lord. All of the gospel readings are taken from the **Gospel of St. John**, considered by many to be a gospel written particularly for those who are newly-baptized into the new life of the Kingdom of God through death and new birth in Christ, in the name of the Holy Trinity. The reason for this opinion is that all of the “**signs**”, as the miracles in St. John’s Gospel are called, deal with sacramental themes involving water, wine and bread. Thus, each of the Sundays after Thomas Sunday with the exception of the third, is dedicated to the memory of one of these “**signs**”.

The Myrrhbearing Women

The third Sunday after Pascha is dedicated to the **myrrhbearing women** who cared for the body of the Saviour at his death and who were the first witnesses of his Resurrection. The three troparia of Holy Friday are sung once again and form the theme of the day:

The noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure body from the Tree, wrapped it in fine linen and anointed it with spices, and placed it in a new tomb.

When Thou didst descend to death, O Life Immortal, Thou didst slay hell with the splendor of Thy Godhead.

The angel came to the myrrhbearing women at the tomb and said: Myrrh is fitting for the dead, but Christ has shown himself a stranger to corruption! So proclaim: The Lord is risen, granting the world great mercy.

The Paralytic

The fourth Sunday is dedicated to Christ's healing of the paralytic. (John 5) The man is healed by Christ while waiting to be put down into the pool of water. Through baptism in the church we, too, are healed and saved by Christ for eternal life. Thus, in the church, we are told, together with the paralytic, to "sin no more that nothing worse befall you." (John 5:14)

The Feast of Mid-Pentecost

In the middle of this fourth week, the middle day between Easter and Pentecost is solemnly celebrated. It is called the feast of **Mid-Pentecost**, at which Christ, "in the middle of the feast" teaches men of his saving mission and offers to all "**the waters of immortality.**" (John 7:14) Again we are reminded of the Master's presence and his saving promise: "**If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink.**" (John 7:37) We think also once again of our death and resurrection with Christ in our baptism, and our reception of the Holy Spirit from him in our chrismation. We "look back to one, and anticipate the other" as one of the hymns of the feast puts it. We know that we belong to that kingdom of the Risen Christ where "**the Spirit and the**

Bride say, 'Come!' And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price." (Revelation 22:17, Isaiah 55:1)

In the middle of the feast, O Saviour, fill my thirsting soul with the waters of godliness, as Thou didst cry unto all: If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink! O Christ God, Fountain of life, glory to Thee! (Troparion)

Christ God, the Creator and Master of all, cried to all in the midst of the feast of the law: Come and drink the water of immortality! We fall before Thee and faithfully cry: Grant us Thy bounties, for Thou art the Fountain of our life! (Kontakion)

The Samaritan Woman

The fifth Sunday after Easter deals with the woman of Samaria with whom Christ spoke at Jacob's Well. (John 4) Again the theme is the "living water" and the recognition of Jesus as God's Messiah. (John 4: 10-11; 25-26) We are reminded of our new life in him, of our own drinking of the "living water," of our own true worship of God in the Christian messianic age "in Spirit and in Truth" (John 4:23-24) We see as well that salvation is offered to all: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, saints and sinners.

The Blind Man

The sixth Sunday commemorates the healing of the man blind from birth. (John 9) We are identified with that man who came to see and to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. The Lord has anointed our eyes with his own divine hands and washed them with the waters of our baptism. (John 9:6-11)

Jesus used clay of spittle and told the man to wash in the waters of Siloam. He did so because it was the Sabbath day on which spitting, clay-making and washing were strictly forbidden. By breaking these ritual

laws of the Jews, Jesus showed that he is indeed the Lord of the Sabbath, and, as such, that he is equal to God the Father Who alone, according to Jewish tradition, works on the Sabbath day in running his world. There is scandal over the healing of the blind man on the Sabbath day. He is separated from the synagogue because of his faith in Christ. The entire Church follows this man in his fate, knowing that it is those who do not see Jesus as the Lord who are really blind and still in their sins. (John 9:41) The others have the light of life and can see and know the Son of God, for “you have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” (John 9:37)

I come to Thee, O Christ, blind from birth in my spiritual eyes, and call to Thee in repentance: Thou art the most radiant Light of those in darkness! (Kontakion)



Ascension

Jesus did not live **with** his disciples after his resurrection as he had **before** his death. Filled with the glory of his divinity, he appeared at different times and places to his people, assuring them that it was he, truly alive in his risen and glorified body.

To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3)

It should be noted that the time span of **forty days** is used many times in the Bible and signifies a temporal period of completeness and sufficiency. (Genesis 7:17; Exodus 16:35, 24:18; Judges 3:11; I Samuel 17:16; I Kings 19:8; Jonah 3:4; Matthew 4:2)

On the fortieth day after his passover, Jesus **ascended into heaven** to be glorified on the right hand of God. (Acts 1:9-11; Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51) The ascension of Christ is his final physical departure from this world after the resurrection. It is the formal completion of his mission in this world as the Messianic Saviour. It is his glorious return to the Father who had sent him into the world to accomplish the work that he had given him to do. (John 17:4-5)

...and lifting his hands he blessed them. While blessing them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. . . (Luke 24:51-52)

The Church's celebration of the ascension, as all such festal celebrations, is not merely the remembrance of an event in Christ's life. Indeed, the ascension itself is not to be understood as though it were simply the supernatural event of a man floating up and away into the skies. The holy scripture stresses Christ's physical departure and his glorification with God the Father, together with the great joy which his disciples had as they received the promise of the Holy Spirit who was

to come to assure the Lord's presence with them, enabling them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. (Luke 24:48-53; Acts 1:8-11; Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:16-19)

In the Church the believers in Christ celebrate these very same realities with the conviction that it is for them and for all men that Christ's departure from this world has taken place. The Lord leaves in order to be glorified with God the Father and to glorify us with himself. He goes in order to "prepare a place" for us, and to take us also into the blessedness of God's presence. He goes to open the way for all flesh into the "heavenly sanctuary. . .the Holy Place not made by hands." (See Hebrews 8-10) He goes in order to send the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, to bear witness to him and his gospel in the world, by making him powerfully present in the lives of his disciples.

The liturgical hymns of the feast of the Ascension sing of all of these things. The antiphonal verses of the Divine Liturgy are taken from Psalms 47, 48 and 49. The troparion of the feast which is sung at the small entrance is also used as the post-communion hymn.

Thou hast ascended in glory O Christ our God, granting joy to Thy disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit. Through the blessing they were assured that Thou art the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world! (Troparion)

When Thou didst fulfill the dispensation for our sake, and didst unite earth to heaven, Thou didst ascend in glory, O Christ our God, not being parted from those who love Thee, but remaining with them and crying: I am with you and no one will be against you! (Kontakion)

Pentecost: The Descent of the Holy Spirit

In the Old Testament Pentecost was the feast which occurred fifty days after Passover. As the passover feast celebrated the exodus of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt, so Pentecost celebrated God's gift of the ten commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.

In the new covenant of the Messiah, the passover event takes on its new meaning as the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection, the "exodus" of men from this sinful world to the Kingdom of God. And in the New Testament as well, the pentecostal feast is fulfilled and made new by the coming of the "new law," the descent of the **Holy Spirit** upon the disciples of Christ.

When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed as resting upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. . . (Acts 2:1-4)

The Holy Spirit that Christ had promised to his disciples came on the day of Pentecost. (John 14:26, 15:26; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5) The apostles received "the power from on high," and they began to preach and bear witness to Jesus as the risen Christ, the King and the Lord. This moment has traditionally been called the birthday of the Church.

In the liturgical services of the feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit is celebrated together with the full revelation of the divine Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The fulness of the Godhead is manifested with the Spirit's coming to man, and the Church hymns celebrate this manifestation as the final act of God's self-disclosure and self-donation to the world of His creation. For this reason Pentecost Sunday is also



called **Trinity Day** in the Orthodox tradition. Often on this day the **icon of the Holy Trinity**—particularly that of the three angelic figures who appeared to Abraham, the forefather of the Christian faith—is placed in the center of the church. This icon is used with the traditional **pentecostal icon** which shows the tongues of fire hovering over Mary and the Twelve Apostles, the original prototype of the Church, who are themselves sitting in unity surrounding a symbolic image of “cosmos,” the world.

On Pentecost we have the final fulfillment of the mission of Jesus Christ and the first beginning of the messianic age of the Kingdom of God mystically present in this world in the Church of the Messiah. For this reason the **fiftieth day** stands as the beginning of the era which is beyond the limitations of this world, fifty being that number which stands for eternal and heavenly fulfillment in Jewish and Christian mystical piety: seven times seven, plus one.

Thus, Pentecost is called an **apocalyptic day**, which means the day of **final revelation**. It is also called an **eschatological day**, which means the day of the **final and perfect end** (in Greek *eschaton* means the end). For when the Messiah comes and the Lord’s Day is at hand, the “**last days**” are inaugurated in which “**God declares: . . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.**” This is the ancient prophecy to which the Apostle Peter refers in the first sermon of the Christian Church which was preached on the first Sunday of Pentecost. (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28-32)

Once again it must be noted that the feast of Pentecost is not simply the celebration of an event which took place centuries ago. It is the celebration of what must happen and does happen to us in the Church today. We all have died and risen with the Messiah-King, and we all have received his Most Holy Spirit. We are the “temples of the Holy Spirit.” God’s Spirit dwells

in us. (Romans 8; I Corinthians 2-3, 12; II Corinthians 3; Galatians 5; Ephesians 2-3). We, by our own membership in the Church, have received “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit” in the sacrament of chrismation. Pentecost has happened to us.

The **Divine Liturgy of Pentecost** recalls our baptism into Christ with the verse from Galatians again replacing the Thrice-Holy Hymn. Special verses from the psalms also replace the usual antiphonal psalms of the liturgy. The epistle and gospel readings tell of the Spirit’s coming to men. The kontakion sings of the reversal of Babel as God unites the nations into the unity of his Spirit. The troparion proclaims the gathering of the whole universe into God’s net through the work of the inspired apostles. The hymns **O Heavenly King** and **We have seen the True Light** are sung for the first time since Easter, calling the Holy Spirit to “**come and abide in us**”, and proclaiming that “**we have received the heavenly Spirit.**” The church building is decorated with flowers and the green leaves of the summer to show that God’s divine **Breath** comes to renew all creation as the “**life-creating Spirit.**” In Hebrew the word for **Spirit**, **breath** and **wind** is the same word, **ruah**.

Blessed art Thou, O Christ our God, who hast revealed the fishermen as most wise by sending down upon them the Holy Spirit: through them Thou didst draw the world into Thy net. O Lover of Man, Glory to Thee. (Troparion)

When the Most High came down and confused the tongues, he divided the nations. But when he distributed the tongues of fire, he called all to unity. Therefore, with one voice, we glorify the All-Holy Spirit! (Kontakion)

The **Great Vespers of Pentecost** evening features three long prayers at which the faithful kneel for the first

time since Easter. The Monday after Pentecost is the feast of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church, and the Sunday after Pentecost is the feast of All Saints. This is the logical liturgical sequence since the coming of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled in men by their becoming saints, and this is the very purpose of the creation and salvation of the world. "Thus says the Lord: Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I your God am holy." (Leviticus 11:44-45; I Peter 1:15-16)

