

Holy Week Explained

From the Book of Common Worship, Revised Edition

The events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter are best understood as one service, unfolding over the course of three days. Through this profound and transforming experience at the heart of the Christian year, we are immersed in the holy mystery of Christ's death and resurrection and the great story of God's saving love.

Maundy Thursday (from *mandatum*, Latin for commandment) proclaims Jesus' new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. It celebrates Christ's example of humble service and self-offering, represented by the washing of feet and the sharing of communion. The liturgy begins with an emphasis on confession and forgiveness, concluding the penitential season of Lent. It ends with the stripping of the church in preparation for worship on Good Friday.

Good Friday proclaims the good news of salvation through the paradoxical suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The center of this liturgy is the reading of the passion narrative from the Gospel of John, in which Christ is lifted up on the cross as a sign of God's great love for the world. In the Solemn Intercession, we join Jesus' prayer for the church and world, as he reaches out with compassion from the cross. Through the Solemn Reproaches of the Cross, we hear Christ's anguished lament: My people, my church, why have you forsaken me?

The Great Vigil of Easter proclaims God's victory over sin and death through Christ's resurrection. Traditionally, the Easter Vigil begins at sunset, in keeping with the ancient Jewish/Christian understanding of evening as the start of a new day. The Easter Vigil consists of four movements: the *Service of Light*, rejoicing in the coming of Christ as the light of the world; the *Service of Readings*, remembering the story of God's mighty acts through history, leading up to Jesus' resurrection; the *Service of Baptism*, welcoming new members of Christ's body and reaffirming God's covenant with us; and the *Service of Eucharist*, giving thanks for new life in Christ and anticipating the joyful feast of the realm of God.

The liturgy for the Three Days encompasses the end of Lent and the beginning of Easter. Like the threshold of a door, it stands between the two seasons—as through the suffering and sorrow of Jesus' death we enter into God's promise of abundant and everlasting life. Thus the Great Vigil begins the great fifty days of Easter, the church's joyful celebration of the new thing God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ.

COLORS: purple or red for Maundy Thursday (until the sanctuary is stripped), no color for Good Friday, and white and gold for the Easter Vigil