



## THE PASCHAL TRIDUUM...WHAT'S THAT?

We are fast approaching the center of our year as Christians, the Three Days that anchor everything we do, everything we think and feel, everything we say about ourselves, everything that makes us *Church*, everything we believe about God's good world, and about what God wants for this good world.

And so, naturally, we have a couple of fancy words for this mountaintop moment. We call it "The Paschal Triduum." First, the word *Triduum*. It's just an ancient word for "Three Days," and it's pronounced TRIH-doo-um. You don't need to remember it, or use it, if you think it's a little fussy. Just know that the use of a special word helps us view these three days as special... unique, even! This is our holiest time; this is God's time; *this is it*.

But that other fancy word—*Paschal*—is well worth remembering and using, because it refers not only to these Three Days, but also to us. *Paschal* has its most ancient root in the Hebrew word *Pesach*, which in English we translate as *Passover*. It recalls the passing of the Angel of Death over the houses of the Israelite slaves on the night that Angel destroyed the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. It also recalls the passing of those same slaves over the sea from bondage into freedom. *And*, for us, Passover—*Pesach*, *Paschal*—celebrates the passing-over of Jesus from death to life, *and* our participation in that paschal mystery. ("Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us," we say most Sundays; "therefore let us keep the feast.") In our baptism, *we also* pass over from death into life. We are the Body of Christ, so this is not just a commemoration of his passion, death, and resurrection. It's not a re-enactment of something that happened thousands of years ago. It is the celebration of our own participation in Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. So... yes, we pack a lot into this word! (Oh, and it's pronounced PASS-kle.)

The Three Days also pass us over from Lent into Easter. Easter spans fifty days, which is about one-seventh of the year. This makes Eastertide, in a way, the Sunday—or Lord's Day—of our whole year, the Lord's Season that is set apart for special celebration—and rest!—just as Sunday is set apart in any typical week. Easter is also seven weeks (plus one day) long, so it is sometimes called the Week of Weeks, a

kind of über-Week that contains not just seven days but seven *weeks*.

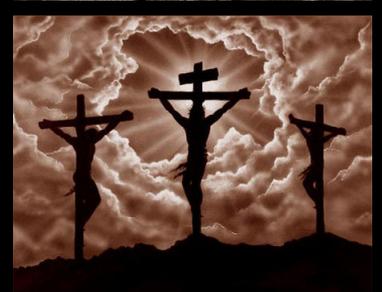
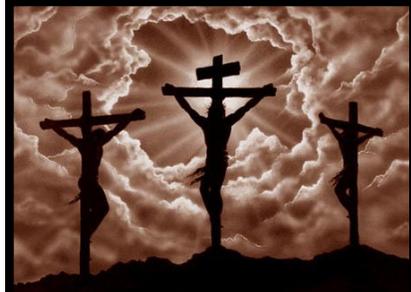
There's more. These Three Days resemble the Holy Trinity in this way: they are three days, but also one big Day, or at the very least one big liturgy. On Thursday evening, we do not end our worship the typical way, with a blessing and dismissal. Our worship continues into Friday, complete with an (optional!) all-night vigil. Then, on Friday, we once again conclude our worship without concluding it, departing in silence and prayer. Only at the end of the Great Vigil do we receive the first Easter blessing and dismissal.

The Three Days begin at sundown on Holy (or Maundy) Thursday and end at sundown on Easter Sunday. In this we are following the ancient Jewish reckoning of a day beginning at sundown the evening before. ("And it was evening and it was morning, the first day..." we hear in Genesis 1.) To experience Easter at its fullest, and participate most powerfully in the death and resurrection of Christ in our baptismal life together, consider attending the whole three-day liturgy, here at church and also at home. Let sundown on Thursday (April 18<sup>th</sup>) begin for you a time set apart, a time on God's mountain, or if you prefer, a time in God's garden, where you can learn more about yourself, this community, the world, and God.

Jesus in John's Gospel frames this all up for us. In the garden of Gethsemane, he asks the posse coming to arrest him, "Whom are you looking for?" They reply, "Jesus of Nazareth." Then, much later, at dawn on Easter Day, in yet another garden, he asks Mary Magdalene the same question. We are invited to hear this question asked of us, too. "Whom are you looking for?" Jesus asks. He asks this of everyone, including you and me. His question faintly (or not so faintly!) echoes God's question in the garden of Eden, when God walked through the garden in the cool of the evening, calling out to the human ones, "Where are you?" In these Three Days, we are also in a garden. We are here looking for Jesus. And we find him ... *at our feet*.

"We strain to glimpse your mercy seat," writes Brian Wren in a hymn for Maundy Thursday, "and find you kneeling at our feet." Maundy Thursday is our doorway into this whole celebration, and it's worth pausing for a moment to grasp how odd and surprising this doorway really is. "Maundy" is *yet another* fancy church word, related to the English word *mandate*, which comes from the Latin *mandatum*. It refers to Jesus' New Commandment, given that terrible night to his friends, that we love one another. He then showed them—and us—what this love looks like. He took off his outer clothing, all the clothing that marked his status and dignity as their teacher and lord, got down on the floor with a washbasin, and washed their filthy feet. This is what "love one another" means, Jesus teaches us.

Here's some context to help us understand what he was doing a bit better. In the ancient Near East, a desert land at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, footwashing was a routine task of necessity, but it was also an artifact of culture. First, the necessity: there of course was no asphalt then, or cement, so guests would arrive at your home with sandals and feet covered with dust, dirt, and dung. One important task of hospitality you offered was to have one of your slaves wash their feet. It would be quite rude of you to fail to do this. But it's your slave—not you!—who would do the dirty work. It would be scandalous to the point of absurdity for the disciples to expect Jesus to do this unpleasant menial task, particularly at this *Ultima Cena*, this Last Supper they were celebrating together. No, they didn't know what was coming. They didn't know





that this would be their last time with Jesus before his death, let alone that he would be resurrected and eat with them again. But they were well aware that he was in trouble; they were feeling the deepening anxiety of this night; they were anticipating conflict with the authorities and were looking to Jesus for guidance. It would never have occurred to them that their teacher and lord would disrobe, get down on the floor, and wash their feet, of all things. But this is what he does.

When we begin the Three Days down here on the floor with Jesus, we are saying that our community here and now is also a community of loving service. We are saying that to die and rise with Jesus means that we, too, turn to one another, and to the stranger, with profound—even absurd—humility and love. We, too, begin to keep the New Commandment by washing feet. If you come to church on Thursday night, you will have a chance to take part in this ritual of footwashing. Know that if you are better able to say your prayers without joining in the actual, literal washing of feet, that is not only okay, *it is warmly welcome*. Some of us are just as deeply formed as Christians when we simply remain in our seats on Maundy Thursday and contemplate this mystery of loving service. Either way, please be welcome here! Please join your friends for the whole three-day liturgy, if you can. (If you can't, that's fine too. Whenever you walk through the door, God in Christ, and Christ in us, will welcome you with gladness.)

One more word about church attendance. I sometimes like to say that if your church is worried about average Sunday attendance, you should remember that at one point in church history, there were only three congregants. And then Jesus died, leaving only two. Peter and Andrew, James and John, and many, many other disciples had run away and gone into hiding by the time Jesus was crucified. He still went searching for them after his resurrection, found them, and breathed his peace upon them. We, too, are met with God's grace no matter what we do, or do not do. But for the little clutch of women (and, in the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple, whoever he or she might have been), the whole experience was deeply transformative. They followed Jesus from start to finish. We too are invited to stand with them at the foot of the cross. We too are invited to receive this great gift in all its fullness. Whether we choose to do this or not, Jesus will come to us on Easter Sunday morning not to ask us if we came to church or did everything right. He will only ask his great, searching question: "Whom are you looking for?"

I wonder: what will be our answer?

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