

"Holy Week – 2011"
 Week of April 11, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

I have been writing this weekly column now for almost 45 years. Thanks to my friend and former Graduate Assistant Kern Trembath, his two sons Alex and Cal, who are about to graduate this year from the University of California Berkeley, his step-daughter Emily, and, of course, my own longtime (25 years and 6 months) assistant Donna Shearer, all of these columns are now saved electronically and can be retrieved by subject matter at www.richardmcbrien.com.

I regularly consult the Web site as I approach key topics, like anniversaries or major liturgical feasts, such as Christmas and Easter, liturgical seasons, such as Advent and Lent, and major annual observances, such as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

I am surprised, however, by how few times I have devoted entire columns to Holy Week, even though there have been over 275 references to Holy Week since this column began in July, 1966.

For those who might wonder about the column's origin many years ago, it was thanks to an invitation from the late Msgr. John S. Kennedy, then editor of *The Catholic Transcript*, the weekly paper of the Archdiocese of Hartford. The Archdiocese also happens to be my own ecclesiastical home.

I have written only two full columns on Holy Week, in 2005 and again last year. For both columns I was indebted to the work of my colleague at the University of Notre Dame, Professor Nathan Mitchell, a liturgical scholar of the first rank.

Prof. Mitchell did an entry on Holy Week in a work for which I served as General Editor, the one-volume *HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, published in 1995.

Holy Week is observed during the final week of Lent (technically Lent ends at Mass on Holy Thursday evening), beginning on Palm Sunday and reaching its liturgical climaxes at the Easter Vigil and on the feast of Easter itself.

Holy Week commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), his Last Supper with his closest disciples, including the one who would betray him (Holy Thursday), his Passion and Crucifixion (Good Friday), and his Resurrection (the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday).

The final four liturgies of Holy Week—the evening Mass on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday—are called the Easter Triduum, three days leading up to and including Easter Sunday itself.

The key venue for the early celebration of Holy Week was in the city of Jerusalem, and the earliest record we have of this celebration is a fourth-century travel diary kept by a European woman whose name, Egeria, is known by all liturgical scholars and their graduate students. She had been part of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the year 383.

According to Egeria, the Palm Sunday liturgy began in the afternoon with an elaborate procession which started outside of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. The bishop reenacted the role of Jesus, while children waved palm branches as the procession wound its way through the entire city.

On Holy Thursday night, after the Eucharist had been celebrated in the afternoon, the events of Jesus' Passion were reenacted: his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest there, and his trial before Pontius Pilate.

On Good Friday there were four hours of veneration of the cross, beginning just before noon, followed by a solemn afternoon Liturgy of the Word that concluded with a reading of the Passion according to John.

The Easter Vigil began in mid-afternoon on Holy Saturday, with the final preparation of the catechumens. That night, while the catechumens were being baptized, the rest of the faithful kept vigil. As soon as the newly baptized were led into the church, the celebration of the Easter Eucharist began.

According to Nathan Mitchell, these Jerusalem-centered liturgies eventually caught on throughout the then-Christian world. By the fifth and sixth centuries the highly influential churches of Rome and Constantinople (modern Istanbul) had adopted these Holy Week liturgies, which were subsequently spread to other local churches within their vast jurisdictions, both in the West and the East.

Unfortunately, the linkage between the liturgies of Holy Week and the original times and places of the sacred events became obscured in the medieval West, as any former altar boy can attest if he ever served on Holy Saturday morning, with its long readings in Latin and very few worshippers.

The situation was not remedied until the restoration of Holy Week mandated by Pope Pius XII in 1956, and the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council a few years later.

The restoration of Holy Week remains one of Pope Pius XII's greatest achievements. We can thank him and the liturgists he wisely consulted for the spiritually meaningful ceremonies which we will celebrate at the end of this month.

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"Easter, 2011"
 Week of April 18, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

It is difficult, year after year, to write something original about the feast that is the most important in the Church's liturgical year. But even popes have the same challenge.

Every Easter the Bishop of Rome is expected to deliver a spiritual message about the meaning of the Lord's Resurrection before wishing people throughout the world a "Happy Easter" in many of their native languages.

Belief in the Resurrection, as I have written in so many Easter columns in years past, is at the heart and center of Christian faith. St. Paul declared that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

But at Easter, homilies, pastoral letters, columns like this, and, yes, even papal addresses "Urbi et Orbi" (Latin, "To the City and to the World") reaffirm that historic faith—so much so, and in such familiar, almost redundant, terms, that they unwittingly run the risk of reducing faith in the Resurrection to a kind of religious boilerplate.

What does it mean, after all, to say that Jesus, who was crucified on Good Friday, rose from his tomb on Sunday morning? Did the Resurrection really happen? Does it make any difference to us, removed from the actual event by almost twenty centuries, whether it really happened or not?

The New Testament indicates that something did happen. Jesus' tomb was found empty on that first Easter morning, and as many as five hundred subsequently claimed to have seen the risen Lord. Many of these were dramatically transformed by the experience.

The earliest Christians were convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, in spite of the fact that not even his closest disciples had expected it to happen. That was evident from what transpired later that same day.

Two of the disciples were on their way to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from the city of Jerusalem, conversing "about all the things that had occurred" (Luke 24:14). The risen Lord came alongside and began to walk with them. Luke writes that "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him" (v. 16).

He asked the two disciples what they had been discussing. They were dumbfounded. "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?"

"What sort of things?" Jesus asked them.

The two disciples, one of whom was named Cleopas, told him how the chief priests and rulers had handed over Jesus the Nazarene, "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people," to be crucified (vv. 19-20).

The two disciples acknowledged with regret their hopes that this Jesus "would be the one to redeem Israel." They were also disturbed, however, by reports that some of the women in their group who had gone to the tomb early that morning had found it empty.

These same women reported seeing a "vision of angels" who announced that Jesus was actually alive. Some of the other disciples had rushed to the tomb and "found things just as the women had described" (v. 24).

At which point the risen Lord chastised the two disciples for their slowness to believe what the prophets had spoken. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then he proceeded to interpret for them Moses and the other prophets.

As the three approached Emmaus, the risen Lord gave the impression that he intended to go on by himself. Since it was almost evening, the two disciples urged him to stay and to share some food with them.

Luke reports that, as they were about to eat, "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (vv. 30-31). But then he immediately vanished from their sight.

As the two disciples reflected on their fleeting experience of the risen Lord, they acknowledged that their "hearts [were] burning" as he opened the Scriptures for them.

They returned to Jerusalem at once to tell the Apostles what had taken place on the road to Emmaus and "how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (vv. 33, 35).

While they were still recounting the events of the early evening, the risen Lord stood in their midst, greeting them with the salutation, "Peace be with you" (v. 36).

Luke describes the Apostles and the other disciples as "startled and terrified," as if "they were seeing a ghost" (v. 37), so unprepared were they for the reality of the Resurrection.

Are we prepared this Easter? Or are we awash in Easter boilerplate?

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