

A P A R E N T ' S  
T O  
G U I D E

# Holy Week & Easter

As we approach Easter, hopefully it's the time of the year that we've been waiting for and anticipating, the reason that all the other Christian seasons are significant and make sense at all. It's time for Easter—Alleluia! (If you're new to the Christian calendar and liturgical seasons and want to learn more about how they can bring us into closer communion with God, check out our other Parent Guides to Advent, the 12 Days of Christmas, and Lent [here!](#))

## — Has Easter lost its significance?

Advent and Christmas have become a big deal both within and outside of the church. Even Lent has gotten some attention recently. But Easter? We Christians know in our heads that this Easter thing is an important occasion, but do we know it in our hearts, too? Do our daily lives and our celebrations proclaim its importance to our loved ones and the world? As teacher Del Tackett asks often in his video series [The Truth Project](#), “Do you really believe that what you believe is really real?” If we do, it changes everything. The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ do—and should—change everything.

Those outside the Church ought to be looking at Christians, confusedly wondering what in the world the big deal is and why we are having the biggest party of the year. Palm Sunday through Holy Week, with its culmination of Easter morning, is truly the core, the center of our year as the Church and of our spiritual life as the body of Christ. God's story and our stories culminate in this week, *and* it's simultaneously the beginning of everything we do the rest of the year.

## — What's the history of Easter?

As seems to be the case with many of our celebrations, Easter-like spring festivals have both pagan roots—[there was possibly a festival for the Old English goddess Eostre in Springtime](#)—mixed with Christian origins, though knowing exactly how we got our current celebrations is hard to pinpoint. *Pascha* is Latin/Greek for “Passover,” and early Jewish Christians timed their celebrations of Jesus' resurrection, fittingly, with Passover celebrations. *Pascha* festivals eventually became distinctly Easter/Resurrection celebrations, which were more fully formed by the mid-second century.

## — Why do we call it “Easter”?

No one knows for sure, but [according to Christianity Today](#), “Our best bet comes from Bede (‘The Venerable’), a late-seventh-century historian and scholar from Anglo-Saxon England. He says Easter's name comes from the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre, associated with spring and fertility, and celebrated around the vernal equinox.” Most likely, Christians of the time simply moved their celebrations of the resurrection “to coincide and replace the pagan celebration of spring.” [Scholar Bruce Forbes notes](#) that “even though Christians had begun affirming the Christian meaning of the celebration, they continued to use the name of the goddess to designate the season.”

## — It's just one day, right?

The resurrection is celebrated on “[the first Sunday](#) following the full moon after the vernal equinox on March 21.” But contrary to popular belief, Easter isn't just a 1-day celebration;

rather, it's a 50-day season. Why 50 days? Because of Jesus' time on earth after His resurrection: There were 40 days between His resurrection and ascension, and 10 more days until [Pentecost](#).

## — What does Holy Week consist of?

The way we observe the week leading up to Easter *greatly* affects our Easter celebrations themselves. We can think of that week as our spiritual pilgrimage to Easter morning. If we miss Holy Week, it's harder to fully appreciate and celebrate Easter itself. Holy Week is an immersion experience, not just a time for deep thinking. It invites us into the culmination of our Lenten journeys as we walk the path Jesus walked and follow Him more deeply into the abundant life He offers us now.

Holy Week is also what sets apart our celebrations from the culture at large. The world may celebrate Easter (which is arguably a bit strange itself—what is their motivation?), but they have no reason to care about [Maundy Thursday](#) or Good Friday. You cannot truly celebrate the end of anything (Easter) without first starting at the beginning. That's why so many Christians throughout the centuries set aside time each day during Holy week to pray, fast, or attend worship in order to prepare their hearts to receive the gift of resurrection. Say yes to the invitation (not obligation) to join Jesus on the journey to the cross.

**Palm Sunday** kicks off the week as many of us wave palm branches at church to commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. [Scholars believe](#) that everyone who lined the streets that day did so for a variety of reasons: Many wanted Jesus to overthrow the Romans in violent revolution; others saw him as a great spiritual healer with greater authority than the Jewish leaders. Regardless, they were hoping to use Jesus to advance their own cause or agenda. But Jesus entered the city that day with a different purpose, one that would confound even His closest followers.

In fact, two triumphal entries took place that day. One was a peasant procession, the other a Roman imperial procession. Jesus entered the city from the east on a humble donkey, cheered by His followers. On the other side of town, Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial soldiers and cavalry with the full military power of Rome on display. Jesus' procession announced the Kingdom of God; Pilate's affirmed the control of the Roman empire. In [The Last Week](#), Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan put it this way: "Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology...the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the son of God." These two processions detail the mounting tensions that culminated in Jesus' crucifixion on Friday.

With these two processions in juxtaposition, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem feels more like a political protest, deliberately countering what was taking place on the west side of the city. Pilate's entry embodied military power, glory, and violence while Jesus represented the [humble prince of peace](#) ushering in an alternative kingdom (despite many of His followers' expectations that He'd come to topple the Roman empire).

For us in the 21st century, Palm Sunday is a good time to contemplate our own agendas and loyalties. Are we citizens of the Kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world? How might our loyalty to Christ's kingdom change the way we relate to our enemies, our neighbors, and our children? **Ask your teens:** What are they hoping and waiting for? In what ways have they felt disappointed by God? Let them open up and be honest here. Jesus almost never does what we expect Him to, but the good news is that it's always better than what we expect, even when we fight it, even when we often can't see it right now. His love and His sovereignty are

trustworthy.

**Maundy Thursday.** On this night, Jesus instituted what we now call “[The Lord’s Supper](#)” or communion, something that was not understood fully at the time but would become so significant in the lives of the first disciples and the church. It’s not insignificant that Jesus Himself directed us to continue to receive physical bread and wine as a sign of an inward, spiritual grace—we can be confident that communion is an important part of our corporate worship.

Also on Maundy Thursday, Jesus instituted a radical new commandment of love, essentially turning the social order upside-down as He washed the feet of His disciples, something that was typically only done by a lowly servant. Many churches even provide a foot washing service on Thursday night. If your home church doesn’t, be bold and seek out another local gathering to take in this unique and formative worship experience.

Whether you commemorate this day with your church family or not, your own family could have a simple meal together by only candlelight. Read [John 17](#) during the meal and [Psalm 69:1-23](#) at the end. If you think your family would be weirded out by you washing their feet, do something else that shows them that your authority over them is the kind that loves and serves. As Christians, we don’t ask, “What can you do for me?” but “What can I do for you?”

Some people choose to fast from Maundy Thursday to Easter morning, either partially or fully. You might even want to get up and pray for an hour during the night Thursday night, remembering in a very tangible way the disciples’ charge to watch and pray. In his book [Ancient-Future Time](#), Robert E. Webber writes that:

*It is important that we avoid a mere intellectual recalling of Jesus’ pain. Unless we actually subject our bodies and stomach to a meaningful discipline, the actual sense of experiencing Christ’s suffering will elude us. As our bodies become tired and our muscles begin to ache, our eyes to burn, our stomachs to hunger, and our spirits to grow dim, we begin to experience in a physical and psychological way a touch of our Lord’s pain. This physical and spiritual sadness is a way of actually entering into Christ’s death in an empathetic way, creating a sense of spiritual oneness with him.*

How far you choose to take this with your own family is totally up to you—you know them best!

**Good Friday** is one of the most powerful and emotional days of our year. It’s the ultimate representation of sorrow and joy intertwined. We want to call things either good or bad, sad or happy, but the reality is that sometimes they’re both. We can hold grief, anger, or disappointment in one hand and, at the same time, the overwhelming peace and comfort of God’s faithful love and mercy in the other hand. Joseph foreshadowed in Genesis, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Our teens need more than upbeat, emotional highs at weekend retreats. Invite them to enter in and experience Good Friday. Hopefully your church has a Good Friday service, but if not, we highly recommend finding and attending one. There are many powerful ways that churches choose to capture the beauty, solemnity, sadness, and hope of this day.

**Holy Saturday** is a strange day in the church year. It’s dark, and honestly it points out an existential crisis for all of humanity. God in Christ is dead in the grave, and humanity has killed him. The very love of God has been rejected by man. For those followers of Jesus living that first Holy Saturday, all of their hopes had just been dashed: The One who they thought had come to

save, restore, and free them had just been killed in the cruelest of manners at the hands of the same oppressive government they had hoped He would overthrow. It was the ultimate punch in the face; Rome was still in charge. . . or so it seemed.

Sit and wait on this day. Sit in the apparent hopelessness and try to experience what the disciples must have felt that dark Saturday knowing their friend was cold in the grave. Sit in silence, for part or all of the day and mourn the wages of sin and death. Have a mini retreat at your home, and put your technology and screens away completely. Can you remember a time recently that you or your family sat in silence without something to distract you? It may be extremely uncomfortable but incredibly good to enter into the deepest parts of our own separation from God.

As you wait, be still and know. . . .Remember who God is, whatever good or hard things you may be going through. He is the God who takes a hopeless situation and doesn't merely make it okay, doesn't just make the best of it, but redeems it along with the entire world. As we lie paralyzed by our fears, inabilities, and unbelief, God works mightily on our behalf, through no striving of our own. Jesus did not just lie dormant in the grave; He conquered sin and death and hell, setting the captives—indeed, us—free.

If God can bring life out of his own death, there is nothing God can't do. Holy Saturday represents the worst of humanity, yet God brought life out of it. We can only appreciate Easter at its fullest when we embrace the darkness of Saturday.

## — **What really happened early that Easter morning?**

After descending to the grave, Jesus Christ—the Messiah, the son of God—was physically resurrected and made alive that third morning.

[One tradition's catechism](#) question asks and then answers:

*What does the [Apostles'] Creed mean when it affirms that Jesus rose again from the dead? It means that Jesus was not simply resuscitated; God restored him physically from death to life in his perfected and glorious body, never to die again. His tomb was empty; Jesus had risen bodily from the dead. The risen Jesus was seen by his apostles and hundreds of other witnesses. (1 Corinthians 15:3–8)*

According to 1 Corinthians, if Christ was not raised, our faith is futile and we are lost in our sins. This event is the hinge of our faith, and it changes everything.

The fact that this bodily resurrection really, actually happened matters. [Says Dr. Simon Greenleaf](#), “According to the laws of legal evidence used in courts of law, there is more evidence for the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than for just about any other event in history.”

Multiple scholars have put together wonderfully detailed works demonstrating not only theological arguments but also historical and extra-biblical evidence that the resurrection really, truly did happen. [Here's one article](#) summarizing some of what's been written. Depending on the personality of your teens, it could be enjoyable to read and discuss together.

It's not uncommon today for an Easter Sunday sermon to focus on this evidence and proof of the Resurrection, which can be very valuable! But [Webber cautions](#) us that "in our earnestness to defend the Easter fact, I wonder if we have so intellectualized the resurrection that it has become fact and not faith—or at least a weakened and misunderstood faith." We, of course, should ask what happened, but we need to go a step further and ask. . .

## — Why does it matter?

We have to not only know the Easter *fact* but also have an Easter *faith*. If Christ has indeed been raised, what does that mean for us now? N.T. Wright, in his book [Surprised by Hope](#), proposes that "What we say about death and resurrection gives shape and color to everything else."

Jesus conquered death through suffering love. God shared in all that we are, all that we humans have to undergo, and because of that, He offers us a way through and beyond suffering to a new life. Jesus shows us the victory of suffering love. Despite everything that happened to Him on the cross, He goes on loving us to the very end. And "in this way He shows [love is stronger than hatred](#)," even stronger than death.

Jesus was the first of humanity to be resurrected, to receive a new, physical, glorified body. It's significant that He wasn't just alive in some sort of "spiritual" form. Remember, the tomb was empty. His new body in some way "used up" the physical matter of His former one. The Jews of the time believed in life after death, but were expecting a physical, bodily resurrection at a future point in time. . . Phase 2, so to speak. What they didn't expect was that this would happen to Jesus only three days after He died.

Jesus is still human and always will be, and this not only secures our future, but also brings hope crashing into our present. Jesus' resurrection means death has been defeated and will someday be banished completely. Because of this, earthly powers have lost their power—their power depends on being able to wield the weapon of death. Death no longer has power over us; it has lost its sting.

We now follow Jesus in dying to our sins and being resurrected into the life of the Spirit, a metaphorical resurrection. At His resurrection, Jesus inaugurated a new kingdom—one that wasn't what people expected— and He continues to and will be different than what we expect.

But not only do we experience a resurrecting of our current state, we await a future bodily resurrection after we die. A common view of life after death, even in Christianity, is to think of heaven as a disembodied, ethereal, spiritual realm to which we go directly the moment we die and which remains in that state forever. However this view doesn't align with the teachings of the Bible and the history of Christian and Jewish belief. Again in [Surprised by Hope](#), Wright writes that "what we have at the moment isn't, as the old liturgies used to say, 'the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead' but the vague and fuzzy optimism that somehow things may work out in the end." And later he says:

*Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life—God's dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21–22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace.*

We can't wrap our minds completely around that future hope. We can't fathom all that it is yet to come, and to pretend we can creates a weak and boring picture. We imagine a fuzzy, dream-

like world in which we are only sort of present. Muffled sounds, cloudy, serene images. But that day and time will be more present and real than anything we now know, and we will experience and see it more fully than we ever could see reality today. As [Amy Lee says](#), “The chief beauty of heaven isn’t its desirability over hell.” **What is to come is more glorious than anything we could imagine.**

This future hope can and should interpret our present lives. We pray for God’s Kingdom to come, and for His will on earth *now*. And we become part of that work as His church, a visual representation of that Kingdom to the world. Our theology, our concept of who God is—His character and the good news of what He has done and is doing—is important and affects how we live our day-to-day lives. Which brings us to the question...

## — **/ get that all this is vital, but how do I get my kids to understand the importance of it all to their daily lives?!**

Teaching good theology does matter, and we might be surprised to find that our teens actually like it. And the more deeply we understand this good news, this Gospel story, the more it begins to sink down deep and truly change our lives.

We don’t merely need isolated Bible verses; we need to know the whole of God’s story that’s being told through the Bible. We need to *know* God revealed in Scripture and personified in Christ, not just know *about* Him. We don’t just need a biblical worldview or to be knowledgeable about Bible facts; we need a truly Christian no how, a life infused with the Spirit of Christ and shaped by the beauty and power of the whole story of the Gospel. We need to remember that Jesus is the full representation of God. If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus. If we want to know who God loves, we look at who Jesus loves. If we want to know how God deals with sin, rebellion, and evil, we look at how Jesus dealt with sin, rebellion, and evil.

Teaching our children good theology goes beyond putting the right thoughts in their heads and goes into forming them holistically, which again brings up the importance of liturgy and habit—rituals and immersive experiences like Holy Week—to teach and actively participate in truthful experiences that will shape their heads and their hearts.

Shane Blackshear’s podcast [Seminary Dropout](#) boasts the tagline, “Because good theology should be for everyone.” And so it should. (Check it out! Maybe a podcast in the car would be an unthreatening way to start a conversation.)

## — **What do we actually DO during Easter? How do we celebrate for 50 days?**

In the liturgical cycle of feasts and fasts, Easter once again brings us to a season of feasting. Celebrate and feast as much or more as you would at Thanksgiving or Christmas! Easter gatherings, though joyous, tend to be a blip on the radar compared to things like Thanksgiving and Easter, but that need not be the case! [N.T. Wright points out](#) that “we...keep Lent, Holy Week, and Good Friday so thoroughly that we have hardly any energy left for Easter except for the first night and day. Easter, however should be the center.” We can’t make Lent the point.

The point of Lent (fasting, waiting, repentance) is Easter (resurrection, new life, forgiveness)!

And with the magnanimity of the Easter message, we need more than a day to behold it and gaze upon it.

You may be familiar with the traditional Easter morning greeting of:

“Alleluia! Christ is risen!”

“The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!”

Why not keep that spirit alive and use that greeting for more than just one day throughout Eastertide? And think about what sets the tone for other seasons we hold dear. It is often what engages the senses — what we see, taste, hear, smell. What are the things that say new life to you? Feast on that beauty. Fresh flowers on the table every week, spring vegetables on the menu or planted in the garden, Easter-themed artwork, spring decorations? Let it be a time set apart that looks and feels different from the rest of the year, even if it's just in small ways. It might take some trial and error and perhaps awkwardness, but new traditions can often be that way. They will develop and become more deeply rooted in our hearts and memories every time we return as we again cycle our way through the Story as told by the liturgical seasons.

In case we haven't quoted N.T. Wright enough (maybe you should just read [his book](#) at this point!), here's another great thought:

*If Calvary means putting to death things in your life that need killing off if you are to flourish as a Christian and as a truly human being, then Easter should mean planting, watering, and training up things in your life (personal and corporate) that ought to be blossoming, filling the garden with color and perfume, and in due course bearing fruit. . . .Easter...ought to be a time to balance out Lent by taking something up, some new task or venture, something wholesome and fruitful and outgoing and self-giving.*

And let's not forget that every Sunday is a mini-Easter, a celebration of the Resurrection. We worship on Sundays because it was the day Jesus rose... the first day of the week, symbolizing the ushering in of the new creation and a new Sabbath rest. It's the first day of a new week, a new time.

### Practical Suggestions

- [Biola's Lent project](#). Continue to follow it through the beginning of Easter as a way of putting beauty regularly before your eyes, ears, and heart.
- [Easter baskets](#). \*Gasp!\* You mean, giving our kids gifts and treats that bring an extra element of fun to Easter morning? Of course! Go for it! Take it a step further and buy [fair-trade chocolate](#).
- [Hot cross buns](#). Make them on Good Friday or Easter.
- [Easter music](#).
  - [To sing](#): “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” “In Christ Alone,” “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” “Jesus Paid It All.”
  - [To listen to](#): [Easter at Ephesus](#); [Holy Week](#) and [Easter](#) from Sacred Ordinary Days.
- [Pray](#) an Easter prayer together regularly, like the following [collect](#) from the Book of Common Prayer:

*O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

## Remember Your Baptism

Remembering is powerful. Your baptism and (possibly) your children's baptisms are in the past, but that doesn't mean they aren't significant today. Talk about them. Remember your spiritual births, how Jesus took *your* sins with Him to the grave and raised *you* to new life in Him. We can sometimes reduce God's saving work to one point in time, where He rescues us from spending an eternity apart from God, and then stop there. But remember your baptism. Remember that Christ died and rose again so that you could be saved and so that you could have life now, and have it more abundantly. Remember that when you were a sinner, Christ died for you, and today when you sinned, He reached out His hand to you yet again. He wants to see you free from oppression, free from living under the weight of your sin.

## What's after Easter?

Ascension Day takes place 40 days into Easter. After Jesus reminds His disciples that all earthly and heavenly authority has been given to Him and gives them the comfort of knowing He will always be with them, He sends them out to declare this good news to the world. As in [Matthew 28](#), after we “come and see” who this Jesus really is and what He has done, we are then sent out to “go and tell.” After this commissioning, Jesus, in His human physical form, broke through that thin veil separating heaven and earth to take His place on the throne to rule with His Father. Jesus continues His work for us, always living to intercede on our behalf. He did not leave us to go it alone, because 10 days after the Ascension was...

Pentecost. The birthday of the church. Just as God breathed life into Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, Jesus breathed His Spirit into His disciples, giving them life once again, which this time will never be taken away. Spirit and flesh are once again brought together as a foretaste of the reuniting of heaven and earth that is to come.

When we think of the Holy Spirit, our minds may first go to the giftings of the Spirit. But this puts the focus on what we can get out of it. The Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity, who has made a home in us, moving us forward into the people we are made to be, in ways that are often a mystery and shatter our expectations.

Jesus doesn't just die to save us and leave us in that point in time; He has life for us to live, and He gives us what we need to do it. Sometimes we act like if we could just see and touch and be with Jesus like the disciples, everything would make sense, and we would be able to believe. But wait—the disciples certainly didn't understand everything even though they lived with Jesus every day for years. They received far greater understanding when the Spirit fell.

It is traditional, on this birthday of the church, to decorate your church or your house in red (balloons, anyone?) and to wear red, as a symbol of the joy and fire of the Holy Spirit. Does this do anything on its own? No, but it's a tangible reminder of an invisible reality, which is powerful to our imaginations.

As you press into these seasons, do so in community with other believers. The church is not perfect, but she is Christ's beloved, and she is where we find our home and our family on this side of eternity. As Webber writes, “The proof of the resurrection is not in rational argument but in the community of the resurrected people. The church is called to be a sign, a witness to the Easter message that Christ has overcome the powers of evil (Eph 3:10).” Don't just believe the resurrection, be the resurrection.

The rest of the calendar, which comprises an entire half of the year, is lived in Ordinary Time. Stay tuned for our Parent's Guide to Ordinary Time (aka Gospel-Shaped Living) coming soon!

## Final thoughts

Where are you this Easter? Are you eagerly anticipating this glorious celebration? Or does it feel more like you're sitting in the dark... like the Messiah you had hoped would come and rescue you is lying dead in a tomb, all your hopes shattered.

It's okay if you don't feel it. It's okay if you don't understand. It's okay if your family feels like a mess, and you're not sure anything you say to your teenagers is getting through. The "already-but-not-yet" space we live in is hard.

Outside things are beginning to bloom, the world is coming to life again, but inside it may still feel like winter—like a long, dark, bleak winter. But the good news is: Spring is coming, and indeed is slowly arriving even now, and with that spring comes renewal and new life and glory. And as in Narnia, spring doesn't arrive via our own efforts. Spring is coming because Aslan is on the move, because Jesus is King. And when it comes, we will see fully that truth we know now: that what we have gained in Christ is far greater than what we have lost.

## Further reading

[\*Ancient-Future Time\*](#) by Robert E. Webber

[\*You Are What You Love\*](#) by James K.A. Smith

[\*Surprised by Hope\*](#) by N.T. Wright

[\*The Day the Revolution Began\*](#) by N.T. Wright

[\*Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God\*](#) by Brian Zahnd

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