



# Holy Week in the Armenian Church

Walking with Christ through Holy Week from Resurrection to Resurrection

We concluded the Great Lent past Friday! What's next?

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, or Dzaghgazart in Armenian. On this day, we remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey, and the people welcomed Him by waving palm and olive branches, shouting, "Hosanna!"

All over the world Christian churches celebrate this day according to their own traditions. In Armenian Churches, we bless willow branches (or palm leaves in the US) and decorate the churches with flowers and ribbons. This joyful day also reminds us that those same crowds who cheered for Jesus would later turn away from Him. Palm Sunday is both a celebration and the beginning of Jesus' final journey toward the cross. Even though the Palm Sunday celebration is grand, this day follows a very important event, the day before, which marks the start of the Holy Week (the week that follows Great Lent).

Holy Week, also known as Avak Shapat in the Armenian Church, is the most sacred week of the entire Church year. It is a time when we walk with Jesus Christ through His suffering, death, and resurrection. This week is full of deep meaning, powerful services, and beautiful traditions. Holy Week is celebrated with a sequence of special church services, that teach us about Jesus, inspiring us and others.

In the Armenian tradition, **Great Lent (Medz Bahk)** ends on the Friday before Palm Sunday and Holy Week begins the day after, on Saturday, with the amazing story of the Resurrection of Lazarus. This day is called **Lazarus Saturday**, and is filled with joy and hope. Jesus raised His friend Lazarus from the dead after four days in the tomb. This miracle showed that Jesus has power over death and gave people a sign that He truly is the Son of God. It prepared the hearts of the people to welcome Him into Jerusalem—later to witness an even greater miracle - His own Resurrection. Holy Week begins with a foreshadowing of how the week will end, with resurrection. It is a reminder to us as well, no matter what we see, hear, or experience in our lives, we know and have faith that in the end there will be resurrection and life again.

**Palm Sunday** is the second day of Holy Week. On this day we celebrate Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. We celebrate the Divine Liturgy with an open curtain and bless palm leaves and willow branches at the end of the service, the same way people welcomed Jesus with palm and olive branches, shouting "Hosanna in the highest!" Just as we do today, then also, people believed Jesus was the promised king who would save them. On this day we also

remember that the same crowd who welcomed Jesus with such joy and open hearts, would later turn against Him, reminding us how quickly hearts can change—and how we must remain faithful to Christ no matter what. On this day, Jesus also cleansed the temple, reminding us that our churches and our hearts should be pure places of worship.

On **Holy Monday**, we remember how Jesus cursed the barren fig tree, which looked healthy on the outside but had no fruit. The Armenian theology teaches us that we should not only look faithful on the outside, but also bear good fruit—like kindness, honesty, and prayer—in our lives. It is also a reminder that we must be prepared for Christ's arrival, never knowing when He will return.

**Holy Tuesday** focuses on the Parable of the Ten Virgins, where some were wise and brought oil for their lamps, and others were foolish and not ready when the bridegroom came. The Armenian Church teaches that we must always be spiritually awake and prepared to meet Christ—not just someday in the future, but every day.

**Holy Wednesday** is sometimes called Betrayal Wednesday, because Judas Iscariot agreed to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. This reminds us to guard our hearts against greed and pride. This is also why Wednesdays are fasting days throughout the year. In this way, we ask God for forgiveness and strength as we repent and change our ways.

**Holy Thursday** is one of the most important days in the whole year. It includes several powerful events: the Last Supper, where Jesus gave us the mystery of Holy Communion; the Washing of the Feet, where He showed us the importance of humility and service; and His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Armenian tradition today, the Washing of the Feet (Vodnlava) is performed in the church, reminding us that we are all called to love and serve one another through humility. In the evening the faithful gather in the church for a very moving service called Khavaroom (the Darkening) during which the altar and sanctuary is plunged into darkness, and we sing ancient hymns filled with sorrow and love.

**Holy Friday**, known as Avak Oorpat, is the day we remember the Crucifixion of Christ. Jesus was beaten, mocked, and nailed to the Cross, where He died to take away the sins of the world. In the evening, we have the Burial Service of Christ, when we place a symbolic tomb in the center of the church (usually shaped like an Armenian Church), covered in flowers. We bow before it with tears and prayers, knowing that our Savior died out of love for us. The flowers, symbols of resurrection, offer a sweet aroma, hinting at the resurrection to come.

**Holy Saturday** is a quiet and holy day. Jesus lay in the tomb, but His soul went into the depths of the earth to free the souls who had died before His coming. In Armenian theology, this is a moment of great hope—we call it the Descent into Hell. Jesus went to the place of the dead, Hades/Sheol, shattered the gates of death, and brought the hope of salvation to all there. He invaded Satan's kingdom and freed the enslaved, granting them hope of the resurrection. In the evening, we gather with candles for the Easter Eve Vigil, preparing our hearts for the greatest joy of all.

**Easter Sunday**, known as **Zadig** in the Armenian Church, is the most joyful and important feast of the year. On this day, we celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. We believe that Christ's Resurrection is the victory of life over death, light over darkness, and hope over despair. It is not just a memory of a past event—it is a living reality that changes everything. By rising from the tomb, Christ opened the gates of heaven and gave us the promise of eternal life.

Easter season begins on the eve of Holy Saturday and goes on for forty days, until the Feast of the Ascension when Christ ascended into heaven and sat at the right-hand of the Father. During this time we greet each other with words: "Քրիստոս յարեալ ի մեռելոց" (Christ is risen from the dead), and respond, "Օրհնեալ է յարութիւնը Քրիստոսի" (Blessed is the Resurrection of Christ).

We rejoice and celebrate easter as the beginning of new life.

The Monday following Easter is known as **Day of the Deceased (*Merelots Or*)**. On this day Divine Liturgy is celebrated, a Requiem Service is done (Hokehankisd) and families and priests go to the graveyards and cemeteries to bless the graves of loved ones, while also preaching the resurrection of Christ to them, giving them hope as well. Just as Holy Week began with resurrection (Lazarus), it concludes with that same hope of resurrection to our loved ones and us too.

So, Holy Week is like a spiritual journey with Jesus. We go with Him from Lazarus' tomb to the gates of Jerusalem, to the Upper Room, to the Cross, and finally to the Empty Tomb. Every service teaches us something about love, preparedness, sacrifice, humility, hope, and resurrection. If we open our hearts and follow Christ closely this week, we will come out on the other side—on Easter morning—transformed and filled with His light, love, and hope.

## **Recommended Readings**

**Lazarus Saturday** – Christ raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44)

**Palm Sunday** (Dzaghgazart) – Christ enters Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19) and cleansing of the temple (Matthew 21:12-13)

**Holy Monday** – Jesus curses fig tree (Mark 11:12-25; Matthew 21:18-22; Luke 13:6-9)

**Holy Tuesday** – Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)

**Holy Wednesday** – Judas agrees to betray Jesus (Matthew 26:14-16)

**Holy Thursday** – Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-35; Mark 14:12-31; Luke 22:1-38), Foot Washing (John 13:1-17), Arrest (Matthew 26:30-56; Mark 14:32-50; Luke 22:39-62; John 18:1-11)

**Holy Friday** – Crucifixion and Burial of Christ (Matthew 27:32-66; Mark 15:21-47; Luke 23:26-56; John 19:16-42)

**Holy Saturday** – Christ rests in the tomb, horrowing of Hell (Matthew 27:50-54; Ephesians 4:8-9; 1 Peter 4:6)

**Easter Sunday** (Zadig) – Krisdos haryav ee merelots! (Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10)

**Day of the Deceased** (Merelots Or) - We bless graves and preach the risen Christ to our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Christ (John 5:19-29)