

**‘For everything a season’:  
Theology through the church year  
Session 7: Easter – *Raised Expectations***



Now the queen of seasons, bright with the day of splendour,  
with the royal feast of feasts, comes its joy to render.

John of Damascus (675-749)

### **1. Easter Liturgy**

The Easter service is the earliest of all Christian liturgical celebrations, and the only festival that can plausibly claim to go back to apostolic times. It was initially a commemoration of the death and resurrection of Christ, celebrated on a single night, the ‘Christian Passover’, with a single-day fast kept on Holy Saturday. The English word ‘Easter’ is derived from the old-English *Eostre*, the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring (which has the root *aus*, ‘shine’).

### **2. Vigil**

From earliest times the celebration of the *Pascha* began with a lengthy vigil – ‘the mother of all vigils’ (Augustine) – recounting the history of salvation from creation through to the death and resurrection of Christ. Over time, the vigil incorporated three features: the baptism of catechumens (and renewal of baptism vows); the blessing of the fire; the lighting and blessing of the paschal candle. These customs enable worshippers to experience a central aspect of the new life of resurrection: the passing from darkness to light and the renewal of hope. The vigil culminates in a joyous celebration of the Eucharist—colour, bells, music, singing, flowers, banners, incense should all be used as resources allow—nothing is held back!

### **3. This joyful Eastertide**

The fifty days of Easter form the oldest season of the Church Year, initially corresponding to the Jewish ‘festival of weeks’ (Tob. 2.1). They form a single festival period, sometimes called ‘the great Lord’s Day’ or ‘the Great Sunday’, beginning with the Easter octave (from Easter Day until Low Sunday), including the Feast of the Ascension 40 days after Easter, and culminating in the Feast of Pentecost on the fiftieth Day. The first forty days of Easter focus on the resurrection itself; the ten-day period from Ascension to Pentecost focus on the celebration of Christ’s heavenly reign and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church.

Throughout Eastertide, the lit paschal candle remains in a prominent place in the church, and the ‘Alleluia’ appears frequently in the liturgy. White or gold vestments and decorations are used to evoke the brightness, splendour and joy of the season.

#### 4. Stations of the Resurrection

Stations of the Cross are a well-established devotion during Lent and especially Passiontide. Stations of the Resurrection are a recent liturgical addition, originating in Spain and Portugal in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The devotion is known as *Via Lucis* (the Way of Light) in the R.C Church. There is no universally agreed upon list of stations, but here is a suggested list of fourteen, to match the number of stations of the cross:

I The earthquake	Matt. 28.2-4
II Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb	John 20.1,2
III The disciples run to the empty tomb	John 20.3-8
IV The angel appears to the women	Matt. 28.5-8 Mark 16.3-8/Luke 24.2-9
V Jesus meets the women	Matt. 28.9,10
VI The road to Emmaus	Luke 24.28-35
VII Jesus appears to the disciples	Luke 24.36-43 Jn. 20.19,20
VIII Jesus breathes the Spirit in the upper room	John 20.22,23
IX Jesus reveals himself to Thomas	John 20.24-29
X Jesus appears at the lakeside	John 21.9-13
XI Jesus forgives Peter	John 21.15-19
XII Jesus commissions the disciples on the mountain	Matt. 28.16-20
XIII The ascension	Acts 1.3-11
XIV Pentecost	Acts 2.1-11

Other suggested stations are: Jesus promises the Spirit (Luke 24.44-49); Jesus commissions the disciples (Jn 20.21-23); Jesus and the beloved disciple (Jn. 21.20-23); Jesus appears to over 500 (1 Cor. 15.3-6); Jesus appears to Saul/Paul (Acts 9.1-18).

The devotion incorporates various resurrection appearances and encounters with the risen Christ, and can be used over the fifty days of Easter as a way of reflecting on and celebrating the Easter mysteries. In the words of the *Holy See*, 'The *Via Lucis* is a potential stimulus for the restoration of a "culture of life" which is open to the hope and certitude offered by faith, in a society often characterized by a "culture of death", despair and nihilism'. As a follow-on devotion from Stations of the Cross, they can be used powerfully to illustrate that *per crucem ad lucem* (through the cross one comes to light).

**Next talk: Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April: 'Choose Joy' – the challenge of Easter**

#### References:

Cobb, P. 'The history of the Christian year', in Jones, C. et al, *The Study of Liturgy* (SPCK, 1992), pp. 455-472  
Gordon-Taylor, B. and Jones, S. *Celebrating Christ's Victory* (SPCK, 2009)