



EPITAPHIOS

May 3



Did you know that the Epitaphios is a symbol of death overcoming death?

The Epitaphios is a large, beautiful cloth with an embroidered icon of Christ's dead body lying on the tomb. While Christ appears to sleep, He has descended into Hades to release the captive souls of the righteous in the great "Harrowing of Hell" (Greek: ἡ εἰς Ἄδου κάθοδος).

Epitaphios in Greek (Ἐπιτάφιος) means "on the tomb." The name of the icon on the cloth is called the "Lamentations at the Tomb," (Greek: Ἐπιτάφιος θρῆνος) which is based on the Gospel account in John 19:38-42.

Initially, the cloth was used to cover the Gospel book as it was brought out on Holy Friday for veneration. Over time, the cloth became the focus of the liturgical services of Holy Friday and Saturday. During the Vespers service of Apokathelosis ("Unnailing from the Cross") on Holy Friday, the Epitaphios is brought out from the altar to be processed and placed inside the wooden tomb, called the "Kouvouklion." The Gospel book is placed on top of the Epitaphios. During Orthros (Matins) for Holy Saturday — celebrated in the evening of Holy Friday — the tomb, decorated with flowers, is processed around the church in a funeral-like procession with the singing of Lamentations.

Holy Saturday is the day between the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the epitome of "bright sadness" and "joyful sorrow" (Greek: χαρμολύπη) — the tension between mourning and celebration that characterizes Great Lent and Holy Week. It is a "Sabbath rest" for Christ and a day of watchful expectation for us, as we anticipate the victory of eternal life overcoming death and the eternal beatitude (blessing) that is promised to those who mourn.

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