

Timing the Passion and Holy Week

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As we begin Holy Week, many questions arise about the timing of events. Many of us try to make a direct connection between a particular church service and one event in the accounts of Jesus' final week with His disciples, His Passion, and His Resurrection. This is not very easy given that the Gospel readings overlap and are not as precise as we would like. For example, the Gospel readings of Holy Thursday morning (the Vespereal liturgy), the Orthros of Holy Friday (Holy Thursday evening), the Vespers of Holy Friday (the Apokathelosis) overlap considerably. Many of the Gospel readings during Holy Week are composites, beginning in one book, inserting material from another, and sometimes another, and then even returning to the first.

The core of the four Gospels is the story of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. These elements comprise the longest sections of each of the Gospels. However, the Gospels only provide clues to understanding the timing of the events of this week. Ancient Christians, especially those with close ties to the Jewish community, would have more easily understood the references.

The table below outlines the order of events reported in the four Gospels and places similar events next to one another so that you may see where the stories converge. You will also notice that there are some differences. Since the Gospel of Mark is the oldest of the Gospel texts, the table begins with that.

Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
Ch. 11. Jesus enters Jerusalem, leaves and returns the next day. Cleanses the Temple.	Ch. 21. Entry to Jerusalem. Cleanses the Temple. Leaves for Bethany.	Ch. 19:28. Entry into Jerusalem. Cleanses Temple.	Ch. 12. Six days before the Passover, Jesus is at Bethany to see Lazarus, who Jesus had raised some time earlier. The next day, Jesus enters Jerusalem.
Ch. 14. Two days before the Passover – the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Jesus is in Bethany, anointed First day of Unleavened Bread, the day when the Passover lambs were sacrificed. Jesus eats the Last Supper. Institution of the Eucharist. (Take, eat, this is my body...).	Ch. 26. Two days before the Passover. Jesus is in Bethany, anointing. First day of Unleavened Bread. Last Supper. Institution of the Eucharist. (Take, eat, this is my body...).	Ch. 22. Feast of Unleavened Bread draws near, day on which Passover lambs are sacrificed. Prepare for Passover. Last Supper. Institution of the Eucharist. (Take, eat, this is my body...).	Ch. 13. Before the Passover, Jesus washes the disciples' feet at the Last Supper.
Gethsemane. Arrest Trial before Caiaphas.	Gethsemane Arrest Trial before Caiaphas.	Gethsemane. Arrest. When day comes, Trial before Caiaphas.	Ch. 18. Gethsemane. Arrest. Trial before Caiaphas.
Ch. 15. In the morning, Jesus before Pilate. Scourged, mocked, crucified. Evening comes – because it was the day of Preparation – (Friday), Jesus' body is removed from cross and buried.	Ch. 27. In the morning, Jesus before Pilate. Scourged, crucified. Evening comes. Jesus is buried. Next day is Sabbath.	Ch. 23. Jesus before Pilate. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod. Herod returns Jesus to Pilate, mockingly dressed in "gorgeous apparel." Crucifixion. Burial. Ch. 23:56. On the Sabbath, they rested.	Led to Pilate (but the Jews will not enter the place, because they want to celebrate the Passover). Ch. 19. Pilate has Jesus scourged. Jesus is mocked. Crucifixion. Because it is the day of Preparation (Friday), Jesus' body is removed and buried.
When the Sabbath was past, the first day of the week, the tomb is empty.	Ch. 28. First day of the Week, the tomb is empty.	Ch. 24. First day of the week, the tomb is empty.	Ch. 20. First day of the week, the tomb is empty.

Some things to notice:

Mark, Matthew, and Luke, called the “Synoptic Gospels,” are the most similar to one another. John presents a very different picture, often considered a more theological account.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus does not cleanse the Temple after the entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday). In John, Jesus cleanses the Temple at the beginning of His ministry (John 2:13-25).

From the time Jesus enters Jerusalem to the time of the Last Supper, in all four Gospels, Jesus is actively teaching the people.

The date of the Jewish Passover fluctuated from year to year, then as it does now. Judaism relies on a lunar calendar. Passover is a spring holiday, so it must take place after the vernal equinox. The 14th of Nisan begins on the night of a full moon after the vernal equinox. (In 2020, Passover begins on Wednesday April 8.) According to Jewish Law, the Passover lambs were slaughtered on 14 Nisan at the Temple and the lamb was eaten the next day, with no leavened bread.

One of the great dilemmas of Christianity is discerning whether or not the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Evidence points in both directions. Since no work of any kind could be done during the Passover, Jesus’ trial could not have taken place during the Festival, thus the meal (and the trials) must have been before Passover began (John). Two of the Gospels point to the Last Supper occurring on the same day as when the Passover lambs were slaughtered, not the next day when they would be eaten (thus the meal is not the Passover meal). Details about the meal itself point that it was a Passover meal, for example, the disciples reclined at couches, the meal was eaten in Jerusalem, and the meal took place at night. However, after two millennia there is still no conclusion to this discussion because the evidence is not conclusive one way or the other.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper (we read that he says, “Take eat, this is my body,” etc.). He does not wash the feet of the disciples. In John, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, but does not institute the Eucharist as we understand it.

The order of events from the arrest to the crucifixion is the same, although Luke adds the detail of Jesus being taken to Herod.

Given the Jewish reckoning of a day, from sunset to sunset (not our way of reckoning, from midnight to midnight), we can see that Jesus has died during the day on the Day of Preparation (Friday) and is buried at the close of the day, the eve of the Sabbath. On the Sabbath itself, Jesus is in the tomb. The resurrection is on the third day, the first day of the week, Sunday in the morning.

All four Gospels clearly agree that the Empty Tomb is discovered on the first day of the week, Sunday, the day after the Sabbath.