

Lent Course 2026 St Andrew's with St Mary's Stoke Newington

Palm Sunday

Lent 2 | Session 2 04/03/26

Keeping Holy Time – Exploring the Origins of Holy Week with Egeria

Who was Egeria?

In the fourth century, a woman named **Egeria** travelled from what is now Spain to the Holy Land. She was likely a consecrated woman (often described as a nun), and she undertook a three-year pilgrimage across Egypt, Israel, Palestine and Syria.

Towards the end of her life, she wrote a detailed account of what she had seen. Her writings were rediscovered in 1887 in a monastery library in Italy. What she left behind was not a theology book, but a travel diary - letters written to her community back home.

And yet, this diary became one of the most important sources we have for understanding how Holy Week was celebrated in Jerusalem in the late fourth century.

Much of what we now take for granted in Holy Week - the Palm Sunday procession, the dramatic movement through sacred space, the veneration of the cross on Good Friday - can be traced back to what Egeria witnessed and described.

She calls Holy Week **“The Great Week.”**

Orthodox Christians still use this title today, following “Great Lent.”

Her account is vivid and detailed. It reads almost like a sacred drama unfolding across the landscape - worship woven into geography, Scripture embodied in movement.

Egeria's Account of Palm Sunday

“The Great Week:

“The next day, Sunday, is the beginning of the Easter week or as they call it here, ‘The Great Week’. On this Sunday, they do everything as usual at the Anastasis and the Cross from

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cockcrow to daybreak, and then as usual they assemble at the Great Church known as the Martyrium, because it is on Golgotha, behind the cross, where the Lord was put to death. When the service in the Great Church has taken place in the usual way, before the dismissal, the archdeacon makes this announcement: "During this week starting tomorrow, let us meet at 3 o'clock in the afternoon at the Martyrium." (that is, in the Great Church). And he makes another announcement: "At 1 o'clock today, let us meet on the Eleona." After the dismissal in the Great Church, the Martyrium, the Bishop is taken with singing to the Anastasis. They do it in the Anastasis, the things which usually follow the Sunday dismissal in the Martyrium, and then everyone goes home and eats a quick meal, so as to be ready by 1 o'clock at the Eleona Church on the Mount of Olives, the place of The Cave where the Lord used to teach.

At 1 o'clock, all the people go up to the Eleona Church on the Mount of Olives. The Bishop takes his seat, and they have hymns and antiphons suitable to the place and the day, and readings too. When 3 o'clock comes, they go up with hymns and sit down at the Imbomon, the place from which the Lord ascended into heaven. (For when the Bishop is present, everyone is told to sit down, except for the deacons, who remain standing for the whole time.) And there too they have hymns and antiphons suitable to the place in the day, with readings and prayers between them. At 5 o'clock the passage is read from the Gospel about the children who met the Lord with palm branches saying. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

At this the Bishop and all the people rise from their places, and start off on foot down from the summit of the Mount of Olives. All the people go before him, with psalms and antiphons, all the time repeating, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." The babies and the ones too young to walk are carried on their parents' shoulders. Everyone is carrying branches, either palm or olive, and they accompany the Bishop in the very way the people did when they once they went down the hill with the Lord. They go on foot all the way down the mount to the city, and all through the city to the Anastasis, but they have to go pretty gently on account of the older women and men among them who might get tired. So it is already late when they reach the Anstasis; But even though it is late, they hold Lucernare when they get there, then have a prayer at the cross, and the people are dismissed."

What Do These Words Mean?

To help us understand what Egeria is describing:

- **Anastasis**

Greek for "*Resurrection.*"

This refers to the church built over the tomb of Christ — part of what is now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

- **The Martyrium (The Great Church)**

The large basilica built on Golgotha, near the site of the crucifixion. It was the main gathering place for major liturgies.

- **Eleona**

A church on the Mount of Olives, associated with the cave where Jesus was believed to have taught his disciples.

- **Imbomon**

The traditional site of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives.

- **Lucernare**

An evening service of light (from the Latin *lucerna*, lamp).

This is an early form of what we now recognise as Vespers or Evening Prayer - the lighting of lamps at dusk.

- **Archdeacon**

The senior deacon, responsible for organising liturgy and making public announcements during worship.

- **Deacons**

Ordained ministers whose role included assisting the bishop, organising the liturgy,

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reading the Gospel, and helping to order the assembly. In Egeria's account, they remain standing as a sign of service and attentiveness.

Why This Matters for Us

Egeria shows us something profound:

Holy Week was never meant to be rushed.

It was meant to be inhabited.

The people walked the story.

They moved through space.

They sang Scripture as they descended the Mount of Olives.

Children were carried.

Elderly people were accommodated.

The whole community participated.

Palm Sunday was not simply read - it was enacted.

As we continue **Keeping Holy Time**, Egeria reminds us that our liturgies are rooted in embodied faith. We are part of a living tradition that stretches back to believers who longed to pray in the places where Christ suffered, died, and rose.

And perhaps her greatest gift to us is this:

Holy Week is not only something we observe.

It is something we enter.