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Easter In Greece

With the vast majority of Greeks identifying themselves as Christians Orthodox, Easter (“*Pascha*”) is one of the most sacred and celebrated religious holidays in Greece.

It is a moveable feast, but every few years, Western (Catholic and Protestant) and Greek Orthodox Easter coincide. To estimate when the Greek Orthodox Easter occurs, somebody needs to consider that it is based on the Julian, not the Gregorian, calendar, and it is after the Jewish holiday of Passover. Moreover, it must be on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring Equinox (March 21st).

Holy Week (“*Megále Hebdómátha*”) is the week before Easter Sunday, during which special ceremonies are performed to symbolize Christ's passions, his death, and his resurrection. It starts with Palm Sunday (“*Keriaké ton Vaéon*”), which represents the warm welcome people gave to Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Palm leaves, blessed during the service, are distributed in churches on that day.



Jesus entering Jerusalem, the event celebrated on *Keriaké ton Vaéon*



Palm leaves blessed by the priests are distributed amongst the Christians on *Keriaké ton Vaéon*

The beautiful *Hymn of Kassiani* is sung on Holy Wednesday, during the Presanctified Liturgy. On this day, two events are memorized: the first one is related to sinful Maria Magdalene, who anointed Jesus' feet. The Service of the Holy Unction ("*Mystirio tou Efheleou*"), held in the afternoon, commemorates this event. People attending the ceremony are blessed by the priests, who apply oil at the Christians' palms and foreheads. The second event is related to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot.



The priest anoints kid's hands during the Holy Unction

Holy Thursday is the day when the Twelve Gospels of the Passions of the Christ are read in church. On the same evening, girls decorate with flowers an embroidered cloth

depicting Christ (“*epitaphios*”) placed on a wooden frame or desk, which represents Jesus’ tomb. Before the end of the evening liturgy, epitaphios is carried inside the church, where it is sprinkled with rose petals and ethereal oils. At the same time, the 12th gospel is heard, which talks about the sealing of Jesus’ tomb.



Epitaphios decorated with flowers and rose petals

From that moment on, and until Friday evening, all the bells of the church ring mournfully. People go to church and, during or after the service, they come forward to kiss the feet of Christ. In some areas, it is also customary to crawl or pass underneath epitaphios, vertically and horizontally, representing the sign of the cross. During Great Friday, the *Apokathélosi* takes place: the body of Christ is taken down from the cross, covered with the epitaphios, and placed on the aforementioned frame or desk. The “tomb” is carried around the church in the evening of Great Friday, followed by people holding burning candles of dark color, as a symbol of their grief.

On Holy Saturday *Resurrection Orthros* starts at around 11pm. Christians, holding unlit white (or colorful) candles, wait for the priests to share the joyful news of Jesus’ resurrection. Kids carry candles which are, most frequently, gifts from their godparents for Easter celebration. The Holy Light (*Áyio Fos*) is quickly spread amongst the gathered people a few minutes before midnight, as soon as the priests announce that Christ has risen from the dead. Fireworks go off, and the bells ring joyously to celebrate the event.

People kiss each other saying “Christ has risen” (“*Hristós Anésti*”) while the others reply “Truly risen” (“*Alithós Anésti*”).



Priest distributing the Holy Light to the Christians

After the end of the service, people return home. Traditionally, this is when the 40-days fasting ends (it had begun after the *Apokreas*, in February). The main dish for dinner is *mageiritsa* soup, made of lamb and lettuce, Greek Easter egg bread (*Paschalino tsoureki*), and cookies (“*Paschalina koulouria*”).



Paschalino Tsoureki

After dinner, red-colored eggs (red symbolizes Christ’s blood) are distributed amongst the guests. Each person hits their own against someone else’s, saying “Christ

has risen”, while the other replies “Truly risen”. Whoever remains having an un-cracked egg is considered to be lucky. This tradition symbolizes Jesus breaking out of his tomb and rising from the dead.



Cracking of Easter eggs

The festivities on Easter Sunday are usually combined with lots of music and dancing, as Greeks celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. Traditionally, spit-roast lamb is the main dish for the day, which symbolizes the Biblical sacrificial lamb. Other dishes include *kokoretsi* (spit-roast lamb’s intestines), *tzatziki* (garlic-flavored yoghurt), *tyropita* and *spanakopita* (cheese- and spinach-pies), and other delicacies.



Spit-roasted lambs, the main delicacy on Easter Sunday