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Easter Worship in Jerusalem
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Constantine's ascension in 324 to the throne of the entire Roman Empire and his support of Christianity began a century-long process of transforming the Roman province of Palestine into the Christian Holy Land.

Churches, monasteries and other shrines were built on the sites where Christians believed Jesus had performed miracles or where something especially important happened during his time on Earth. Jerusalem became the main focus for this building. And once Jerusalem became a city of Christian holy sites, it then became a place for Christian worship. This worship reached a feverish pitch during the Easter season and the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The centerpiece of Christian Jerusalem was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Christians believed that in the area contained within its walls, Jesus was crucified on a cross, laid out and prepared for burial, placed in a tomb, and then rose from the dead. Although the Holy Sepulcher was the main church, it was by no means the only church in and around Jerusalem. Churches and shrines were built on the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, at the location of Jesus' miracles, and at various locations in the nearby towns of Bethany and Bethlehem.

During the Holy Week of Easter, these churches became the locations of key worship services. Based on Jesus' activities during the last week of his life, worship services were held on the corresponding days at the sites where the events occurred. On some days this involved only one service at a single location. On Palm Sunday, for example, Christians celebrated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding a donkey. This

service was held at a church near the gate where Jesus entered the city.

On other days, however, different services could be held at as many as four or five different locations. The celebrants, including the Bishop of Jerusalem and other leaders, would walk from church to church through the day to participate in each of the services at the proper time. We can imagine that the many services on Easter day in Jerusalem became not a pleasant spring day on which to wear bright, new spring outfits, but a day of walking and tired feet, interspersed with periods of standing quietly and concentrating on the proper words and actions of worship -- all in all, a day that required physical stamina and dedication to devotion more than anything else.

But for the rapidly-growing Christian religion of the fourth and fifth centuries, the worship in Jerusalem had even greater importance. The sacred places marked by churches in Jerusalem became the location for recalling and celebrating the events of Jesus' last week on Earth at the proper times, that is, sacred time. The worship services on those sacred times were then exported from Jerusalem all across Christendom. By the end of the fifth century, Christians as far away as Spain, England and Ireland were observing the same liturgical services on the same day at the same time as they were being practiced in Jerusalem. Thus the Jerusalem place-based rites of worship become the time-based rites of worship for all of Christianity.

Today, these same rituals on the same days still provide the basis for Holy Week services in the Orthodox Church, and vestiges of them can still be seen in Catholic worship and even in some Protestant worship.