

Letter to a prisoner

Meaning of Pascha

Paschal joy

Like a Pelican

Bright week instructions

Priest Seraphim Holland PO 37, McKinney TX

4/8/2018 (ns) 3/26/2018 (os)

Christ is risen! I am writing this on Sunday morning, Pascha. This is the only Sunday morning of the entire year when I am home at 10 o'clock in the morning. We celebrated Pascha by starting at 1130 Saturday evening, and continuing with a procession around the church beginning at Midnight and then Paschal Matins and Divine liturgy and the blessing of the baskets. We ended about 3:30 in the morning.

I think I'm getting to be an old man. I really don't like all the noise and the excitement at the end of the service. Everybody's talking and is excited and it just seems too loud for me. I suppose you would be willing to put up with that. I have thought of all of you very often during Holy Week.

I am writing this as a general letter to everybody, because right now it's hard for me to keep up, and I want to show you my heart as much as I can so that you know that I love you and that I never stop thinking of you and I pray for you every day.

I won't lie to you; this season has been difficult for me. My son +Daniel missed the last Pascha before he died, because he was just a foolish young man who was overcome by his studies and his 20-year-old priorities and he didn't show up. He did not know that he would never be able to show up for Pascha on this earth ever again. Some people tell me that it must be hard this first Pascha without Daniel but it's actually the second Pascha.

I think it's important to be able to feel joy, but not any kind of fake joy. I don't believe in joy just for the sake of joy. Sometimes I see sermons and stuff about Pascha: it's like this is the greatest day and we should all feel this incredible joy. I will be completely flagrantly honest with you right now. Sometimes I do not feel happy, sometimes I feel very sad. My joy is more internal and in expectation of the eternal joy that is promised to me and you. In the meantime, I see too many things that are terrible in the world, and even wade right into them to feel ebulliently happy.

I feel very sad for all of you, because you spent Pascha in prison. But I also feel happy for many of you because I know you and know that many of you have found your way out of prison even while being incarcerated. On the other hand, I feel great sadness because some of you are still in prison. Of course, I'm also speaking metaphorically here. I might be different than your average bear, my wife certainly thinks so – but I think that the joy that we should feel on Pascha is not because of all the festivities, but because the Lord Jesus Christ has come to make us whole and the resurrection is the sure sign that indeed it will happen. For me, it has not happened to completely yet, but there are certainly signs of it. For many of you it has not happened completely yet but there are certainly signs of it, and for some of you it is not happened very much or is in a nascent stage and I am looking for signs.

I suppose this letter might be thought of as the worst Pascha letter of all time because it's not all full of joy, but I am more interested in you finding eternal and permanent joy rather than earthly joy.

Holy Week is a very busy time for a priest. We had services twice a day and three times on Friday, for the entire week beginning on Saturday before Palm Sunday. It is not just that I serve many services in here many confessions. It is also that there is a sort of a spiritual weight upon me and it makes me very tired. I've intended to write you a Paschal epistle for many days now. Somehow it is not happened. I wanted to send it by J pay and have it come to you before Pascha. Some of you are locked down right now and that's of pretty terrible way to spend Pascha. Of course, the prison system has no clue about Orthodox Pascha, and if they did I'm not sure if they would care at all.

The meaning of Pascha is what should bring us joy. If you are one of those fortunate people that always feels joy on this earth that I salute you. If you are person who sees pain and injustice in your own sins and weeps because of them, I also salute you. The resurrection is the answer to sin. Sin is not just the things you do, it is our condition, that we are incompetent and unable to be in the presence of God, in the presence of light. That light is too bright for us and makes us afraid and ashamed. Jesus Christ became man so that he could take on all of our sins and take on our corruption and make it incorrupt, so that we could stand in his light and not be ashamed and indeed be happy. This is the meaning of Pascha for me.

The way we fulfill the meaning of Pascha in our life is to live in a way that is completely sold out to Christ. That is, we give God our heart. We cannot give him our works or our virtues or any righteousness whatsoever because, as the Scriptures say our righteousness is as filthy rags before God. We can give Him our heart, and that is He wants. If we give Him our heart that means that we struggle to follow His commandments and struggle to live according to who He is, and struggle to order our life in a way that is holy and good and just. We cannot take as examples for how to live basically anything that is in the world.

There is no justice in the world; there is no righteousness in the world. There is only justice and righteousness in God, and there is only life in God. If the next time that I come down to prison I get hit by a truck, I hope that you remember only one thing for me – that is that your purpose is to become like God because He made you to be like Him. There is no life outside of this.

The entire incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His passion, and His death on the cross, and His resurrection on the third day, and His teaching His disciples for those 40 precious days after the resurrection, and the Ascension to heaven bodily, and the sending of the Holy Spirit 10 days after this, for the establishment of the church and the enlightenment of man-- all of these things make it possible for us to have true, and eternal life. There is no true and eternal life without becoming like God, without having an aching in your soul to become like Him in all things, to follow His commandments, to put off sin and to become righteous.

Many people define Christianity only as being forgiven by God, but it's not like that at all. Forgiveness is only a very small part of our healing. God forgives us because He loves us. He will always love us, He made us because He loves us, and nothing we can do will stop Him from loving us. He desires to impart life into us. That life cannot come into us without our submitting to Him and admitting that there are things related to us that are not compatible with righteousness -- the things we think, and the things we do and the things we are.

I have found that my message, which I am trying to write to you in halting words, is not well understood. Some of you understand it, and it brings me great joy that you do. Some of you still think in a very legalistic way. Salvation

is not legalism. Salvation is that God loves us and wants us to become like Him, and we could not do this, so He became like us to help us.

I apologize from the depths of my heart that I was not able to get this letter to you before Pascha. Sometimes things in life are very hard, and I find myself stretched in various ways, and I am not often up to the task of the things that I must do. But I tell you freely that I do pray, even though my prayers are poor, and I pray for each one of you every day. I think of my prayer is the widow's two mites. That was a very tiny amount and yet the Lord called it all of her living and praised her. We must also give our two mites – even though were not righteous we must pray for others, pray for each other and love our enemy.

I was going to go to the Hughes unit this week and bring food, but Hughes is on lockdown. There are so many disappointments in prison ministry, and of course in living in a prison. It is been a real difficulty getting the prison authorities to okay the food that I want to bring. And now I'm not able to bring it, at least during Bright week. I will try on other weeks to bring food to you, although already one prison has categorically denied my request.

I hope that somehow in your heart you feel the joy of Pascha. I don't care if you're jumping up and down and singing or not. I'm not actually doing that, but I am looking with great expectation to the eternal joy that will be ours. I hope that you long for this eternal joy in order your life to feel this eternal joy and change things that you should change right now in order to more fully be prepared for this eternal joy.

I want to share with you something one of the readers in the church wrote. It brings me great joy, and also some energy to try to emulate the pelican in some way, even though this is often beyond my strength. Reader David explained a hymn we sing, (one among 176 hymns!) which comprise the "lamentations" before the grave which we sing on Friday evening. They are sung in 3 different, beautiful and plaintive melodies.



“Like a pelican, With Thy Side, O Word, by wounding riven, Hast Thou made Thy children once dead to live, by distilling on them Moisture rich with Life.”

Lamentations of Great & Holy Saturday 2:44

“In Christian art from ancient times the pelican was a symbol of self-sacrifice. There was an ancient belief inspired by the pelican's red-tipped beak that when the mother pelican could not find food for her young she would stab herself and let her nestlings drink her blood so they could live. Similarly, Christ feeds us with His blood that we might have life as we nest in the Church and on the cross.” (Reader [David Hawthorne](#)
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10216004691460669&set=a.1098623796366.2015885.1549777626&type=3>)

I have come to the end of my creativity for the day (I started this in the morning, on Pascha, and am finishing it at 1am, foolishly, since I need to get up soon to serve liturgy). When I send a “j-pay” letter to the guys, I try to fill up every page, since each page costs a “stamp”, and I try to get my monies worth. So, I added the following from a talk in 2010. When I condense everything on jpay, (no pictures or headings) this letter just fits in 2 pages. This letter was sent to about 40 men.

...This week is as one day, according to the Typikon. It is as if Pascha is an entire week. For that reason, we don't fast today, nor do we fast tomorrow or Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday or Friday or Saturday or Sunday. No fasting for the entire week. All foods are allowed, except that Tofu is forbidden, and those bean hamburger things, they're forbidden. They are like anathema. All other foods are allowed for this week.

During this week we say Paschal hours for our prayers instead of morning and evening prayers. We don't read the Psalter at all. If you saw in the service, the only verses of the Psalter that were used were when we were singing the Stichera. The penitential verses of the Psalter are not read. We don't read Psalm 50 the entire week. We don't read Psalm 118 which is normally read every day. We don't read any of the Psalter except the portions that are for the Prokeimena or for “Lord I have cried.”

The Paschal hoursⁱ are in your prayer book. Use these Paschal hours; it takes about six minutes to sing them, maybe five and a half minutes to read them; if you cannot sing, read; that's fine. There is beautiful theology in these prayers, and they are short and very sweet. Read the Paschal hours in the morning and in the evening for the entire week.

The doors to the altar are open. The Royal doors and the diaconal doors are open in every Orthodox Church in the world for the entire week. They are only closed at Vespers on Bright Saturday.

I make a note about this, because this is always a very sad day for me because the doors have to be closed, not because God's mercy ends for us, but because we being fallen, being people that are easily distracted, we cannot take so much grace. We are not ready for the grace that God wishes to give to us, so when the doors are closed it is a profound theological statement. It is not that God's mercy is shut off from us – No, not at all, but we, because we are immature, are not able to hold onto all of God's mercy. Therefore, for a time God's mercy shines especially bright in all of the services and in this week. But if it were like that every week then we would fall away from Him because we do need rigor. We do need fasting. We do need repentance and penitence because of our nature, *not because God requires it of us* but because without that kind of rigor that we just went through in the fasting of Great Lent we would not be able to become good and know God Who is good.

We have started reading the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles, and they will be read all throughout the Paschal period. And I explained why we read the Gospel of John for Pascha because of course, to know the Resurrection, we have to know Jesus Christ and Saint John more than anyone else ever has explained who Jesus Christ is. There are symbols for the evangelists, and his is the eagle because he soars high above on the wings of

theology. Truly, his language, from a grammatical standpoint, is the simplest and, yes, from a theological standpoint it is the deepest.

We read the Gospel of John during the Paschal period because, as I explained, it is the church's strategy or the church's tradition that when we have a feast we explain more about it later. This entire Paschal period, *Paschal is really being explained to you in all of the services, in all the hymnology and in the Gospel of John.*

And then of course we read the Acts of the Apostles. And why would that be? With Pascha, the Church was strengthened. Some people would say that the Church began on Pentecost. I personally don't think that that's true because I believe that Joseph and Abraham and Isaac, all those holy fathers are part of the Church. But the strengthening of the Church, to be able to spread to the entire universe was accomplished on Pentecost, but there would be no Pentecost without the Resurrection. The beginnings of the Church as a universal entity are really with Pascha when the disciples were gathering together in the upper room praying.

Now for this first 50 days after Pascha they were afraid because they didn't know what was going to happen and as I explained yesterday, the Resurrection comes to us a little bit by little bit, not all in a flash like the Lord resurrected, but a little bit by little bit so the Apostles only with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost really understood all things and had the power to proclaim the Gospel to all of mankind.

It would be a very good exercise for all of you to read from the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts. If you pick one, do the Gospel of John and read it every day. If you can read a paragraph, if you can read a chapter, if you can read the daily readings, that's fine too. Read the Gospel of John so that you complete it throughout the Paschal period. It is truly a remarkable book, and it's the kind of book that you must read literally a hundred thousand times to fully understand. Every time you read it, something new will come out to you that is important for your salvation. If you have to pick one, you only have so much time or so much energy or so much zeal, read the Gospel of John.

The theme during this period of *time is about enlightenment, gradual enlightenment.* We see it already with the Gospel here about Thomasⁱⁱ. Right now, we only hear the first half of the story. The second half will be this coming Sunday, and the first half, as Thomas said, "Unless I see the prints of the nails, the holes in his hand and in his side and unless I put my finger in them, I won't believe." For eight days he anguished because his fellow friends, the Apostles, the women that had been around Jesus, they believed, but Thomas didn't. But he was faithful, and his faithfulness would be rewarded. So that on Sunday we will proclaim him as the first to declare unequivocally the two natures of Jesus Christ when he said, "My Lord and my God."

During this entire Paschal period up until Pentecost we do not say "O Heavenly King. . ." - Why would that be? Sometimes the Church speaks about something and teaches us and sometimes they do not speak about something and teach us. "O Heavenly King, Comforter. . .", is about the Holy Spirit, and we are asking Him to come and abide in us. What is going to happen in fifty days? The Holy Spirit will come and abide in us, liturgically, at Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. The lack of this prayer is reminding us of the greatness of the coming of the Holy Spirit. That's why we omit this prayer and we substitute instead of it "Christ is risen" three times, and then when we get to Ascension, then we substitute the Ascension Troparion for those days until Pentecost.

Oh, by the way, no prostrations either. There are no prostrations until Pentecost also and that is to recall the joy of the season.

Christ is risen! Truly is He risen!

Sources: http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2018-04-08+meaning-of-pascha-paschal-joy-like-a-pelican-bright-week-instructions.pdf
http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2018-04-08+meaning-of-pascha-paschal-joy-like-a-pelican-bright-week-instructions.doc

ⁱ We have them available on our website in English and Slavonic:

- [PASCHAL Hours - HTML](#)
- [RTF Format, double sided, two per side, for printing as a convenient card](#)
- [PDF Format, double sided, two per side, for printing as a convenient card](#)
- [Pascha hours - Slavonic - html](#)
- [Pascha hours - Slavonic - RTF Format, double sided, two per side, for printing as a convenient card](#)
- [Pascha hours - Slavonic - PDF Format, double sided, two per side, for printing as a convenient card](#)

Go to the page: <http://www.orthodox.net/pascha/> for these prayers and many other things about Pascha.

ⁱⁱ Homilies here: http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/index.html#Thomas_Sunday