

Eyewitness to the Resurrection: Orthodox Church Observes Easter

By Gretchen Murray for the Traverse City Record Eagle Newspaper

Easter may have come and gone for some Christians, but not for the world's Orthodox Christians.

They will observe Easter on Sunday.

Many Christians don't realize that the Eastern Church does not necessarily celebrate the resurrection on the same day as Western churches. The date of the observance depends on which calendar you go by, and figuring the date of Orthodox Christianity's Easter, or Pascha, takes some mathematical calculations. Adding 13 days to the date of the Vernal Equinox on the Gregorian calendar, checking the date of the first full moon after the equinox and making sure Pascha follows the Jewish Passover means that today, Orthodox Christians are at the Great and Holy Saturday on the Julian calendar.

A full slate of services are in progress this week at the Orthodox Mission Church in Traverse City. It's a particularly special time for the congregation of about 100 members who, for the first time, have a full-time priest to lead them through the numerous Holy Week services between Palm Sunday and Pascha.

The Rev. Iakovos Olechnowicz said the Easter dates sometimes are concurrent, but in years such as this one, they can be weeks apart.

"Our calendar was determined by the First Ecumenical Council that convened at Nicaea in 325 AD. The Easter observance is tied in with the Julian calendar that was in place during Christ's ministry in Palestine. It also has ties to and always follows the Jewish Passover," Olechnowicz said.

Orthodox Christianity is rooted in several Eastern Christian churches in the Middle East and Eastern Europe that split from the Roman Catholic Church largely over papal authority. They are led by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople rather than the Pope. The idea of commemorating events instead of reenacting them during holidays is one of the important distinctions.

"Orthodox Christians do not conduct a Passion Play of Christ's entry into Jerusalem during Pascha. In Orthodox understanding, what we're doing is commemorating these events," Olechnowicz said. "That means, as 21st Century Christians, we are invited to participate in the original events themselves because they have become timeless. They're historical but by our participation in these services it provides a vehicle for us to experience these events first hand."

In other words the participation versus spectator approach gives members a virtual reality jump back in time that puts the crucifixion and resurrection in present tense.

"People participate in the events so that when you ask the question, 'Did you see Christ's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem?' their answer is, 'Yes, I was there,'" he said.

Olechnowicz admits it's a very different concept.

"When I converted I liked this idea of being able to be an eyewitness," he said.

The realities of the Orthodox Holy Week start to build on Thursday evening when church members sing about Christ's arrest and passion while a cross bearing the iconic representation of Christ is carried into the center of the sanctuary and a crown of thorns is placed on the figure. During the Good Friday service Olechnowicz removes the iconographic corpus from the cross, and church members conduct a burial service.

"The icon of Christ is taken down from the cross, the nails are removed from the hands and feet and the figure is wrapped in a winding sheet and placed in a tomb the congregation has decorated with fresh flowers. We sing a burial service for Christ," Olechnowicz said. On Friday night the congregation conducts a Service of Lamentations that includes a funeral procession that forms outside the church. When the people come back to church on Saturday morning for the first announcement of the empty tomb; they find it is empty. They return to church for a midnight service on Saturday to wait for the announcement that Christ has been resurrected. The service continues into the early hours of Sunday morning and transitions into a joyful Easter celebration.

"In spite of the fact that we're not in Jerusalem and we're separated by 2,000 years, at the end of the day it's as though we're there," Olechnowicz said.

The Orthodox Mission Church at 1030 Hastings in Traverse City, is a ministry of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Detroit serving all of northern Michigan. Visitors are welcome anytime, but especially to Pascha services. Today's Great and Holy Saturday services include 10 a.m. Vespers and Liturgy of St. Basil, where the congregation hears the first announcement of the Resurrection. A second service at 11:30 p.m. is an outdoor procession for the Proclamation of the Resurrection. The congregation moves into the church just after midnight Sunday for the start of the Great and Holy Pascha service.

