

# THOUGHTS ON THE TIMELINE of JESUS'S LAST WEEK

## TAKING A FRESH LOOK AT PALM SUNDAY

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A recent exchange of emails with a website reader advocating a Thursday crucifixion gave me reason to take a fresh look at the timeline of events during the last week of Jesus's life. This examination of the Scriptures gave a surprising result related to the timing of Jesus's Triumphal Entry on what we know as Palm Sunday.

The dates given below are Jewish dates. They begin at sunset of the evening before the day of the week it is linked to; e.g., the Jewish date Nisan 14, which begins at sunset on Thursday, aligns with Friday on a modern calendar. The NASB translation is used.

### OT Background on the Passover

In reconstructing the timeline of Jesus's activities during His final week of life, a distinction must be made between the privately-observed Passover at the outset of Nisan 14 inaugurated in Exodus 12, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread from the start of Nisan 15 through the end of Nisan 21. (Some of what follows is drawn from my earlier online article, "How the Passover Illuminates the Date of the Crucifixion," <https://biblearchaeology.org/abr-projects/the-daniel-9-24-27-project-2/4360-how-the-passover-illuminates-the-date-of-the-crucifixion.1>)

The basic information given about these two discrete, yet closely connected, observances is given in Leviticus 23:4–8:

*These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, is the Lord's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work....*

*On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work.*

Numbers 28:16–18, 25 is similar, for brevity we will leave out the details about the sacrifices discussed there:

*On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Lord's Passover, and on the fifteenth day of this month is a feast. Seven days shall unleavened bread be eaten. On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work.... And on the seventh day you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work.*

These two passages establish some additional facts for us. One we learn from Exodus 12:11, that Nisan 14 was the assigned day of "the Lord's Passover," which specifically referred to the day of the privately-observed Passover *seder*—the meal of the lamb sacrificed at twilight as that day began and eaten with unleavened bread. To this we add an additional fact, that the next day—Nisan 15—would be the start of the seven-day publicly-observed Feast of Unleavened Bread. Even though "the Lord's Passover," the *seder* meal of Nisan 14, was also a day of eating unleavened bread similar to the seven days of the Feast, the inclusion of the household Paschal Lamb in the meal on Nisan 14 set it apart as separate from the rest of the Feast.

Thus, Nisan 14 was a *day* of unleavened bread, but it was not technically part of the *Feast* of Unleavened Bread that started on Nisan 15. The expressions "days of unleavened bread" or just "unleavened bread," unmodified by the words "Feast of," were the way the Jews joined Nisan 14 and 15 as two parts of a single, larger festival period called simply "the Passover." Used that way, it referred to an eight-day period. This is an important point to keep in mind when we look at the Passover in the New Testament.

Notice also that there is no "holy convocation" in connection with the household observance on Nisan 14, but there is one on Nisan 15. The latter day, the first day of the Feast, is also called



“the Passover,” and is a public observance. This use is seen in Deuteronomy 16:5–6, which looks ahead to after the Israelites entered the Promised Land:

You are not allowed to sacrifice the Passover in any of your towns which the Lord your God is giving you; but at the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name, you shall sacrifice the Passover in the evening at sunset [Heb. *ba erev*], at the time that you came out of Egypt.

Two things taught in this verse are that “the Passover” here refers to an observance specifically “at the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name,” referring to a pilgrimage festival. This describes what the Nisan 15 Feast of Unleavened Bread was, but not the individual household observances on Nisan 14, which could be celebrated anywhere. The second thing was that this observance was “at the time that you came out of Egypt,” which harkens back to Exodus 12:37, 42, 13:3–6, and the departure from Rameses the evening after the private household observances:

Now the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth... It is a night to be observed for the Lord for having brought them out from the land of Egypt; this night is for the Lord, to be observed by all the sons of Israel throughout their generations... Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the Lord brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten. On this day in the month of Abib, you are about to go forth... you shall observe this rite in this month. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD.”

One more matter to be pointed out is that the convocation days associated with the three pilgrimage festivals—the Feast of

Unleavened Bread/Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles—were days when no “ordinary” (Heb. *ʾābōdā*) work was permitted. This referred to “laborious” or “servile” work, in distinction from the work prohibition on the weekly Saturday Sabbath, when no work *whatsoever* could be performed. Although the convocation days during the pilgrimage festivals were days of rest, they were not true Sabbath days. Unlike on the Sabbath, some things such as cooking were not forbidden, but only the kind of “ordinary” work by which one made a living. This means it is erroneous to equate the term “high day” (Jn 19:31) with a weekly Sabbath day falling during a feast. A “high day” was a convocation day held on the first and last days of the pilgrimage festivals. Scripture knows of nothing called a “high Sabbath,” a term sometimes used which confuses things.

## NT Background on the Passover

Turning now to the New Testament, we notice in Luke 22:1, “Now the **Feast** [Gk. ἑορτή, *heortē*] of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover.” This is an unambiguous statement equating the expression “the Passover,” as used colloquially in Jesus’s day, specifically with the public observance during the Feast, considered separately from the private observance the previous evening.

John 2:23 similarly ties “the Passover” specifically to the days of the Feast, showing this was John’s custom as well as Luke’s: “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.” Likewise, John 6:4: “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.” In short, there is no justification for saying that John uses “the Passover” in a different, narrower sense than in Luke.

The same principle is seen in John 13:1: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own

who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” This was *after* the Nisan 14 Last Supper—the privately-observed *seder* meal—had concluded, yet John writes that it was “*before* the Feast of the Passover.”

Further passages teaching the same thing are discussed below. We should thus conclude that in Jesus’s day, the expression “the Passover” had become the normal way of referring specifically to the public observance on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These examples justify the contention that when we turn to John 12:1, “the Passover” refers specifically to Nisan 15, not to the private observance on Nisan 14.

## Exegesis of John 12:1

Now we turn our focused attention to John 12:1: “Jesus, therefore, *six days before the Passover*, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.”

In his commentary *The Gospel according to John*, Revised ed. (Eerdmans, 1995), Leon Morris remarks in Note 9 on John 12:1: “He does not in fact say ‘six days before the Passover,’ but  $\pi\rho\delta\ \epsilon\acute{\xi}\ \eta\mu\epsilon\rho\acute{\omega}\nu\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\chi\alpha$ , that is six days before, beginning from the Passover.” “From” the Passover means the Passover itself (Nisan 15 in NT parlance) is excluded from the count. So the six-day count is Nisan 9–14 inclusive.

This is corroborated by Anglican scholar Henry Alford who cites, in his exegetical commentary on John (online at <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/hac/john-12.html>), a 19th-century churchman named Edward Greswell thus: “he defines the expression to be *exclusive* of the period named as the limit *ad quem* or *a quo* (according as  $\pi\rho\delta$  or  $\mu\epsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}$  is used), but *inclusive* of the day or month or year of the occurrence specified.”<sup>3</sup> More simply, since John in 12:1 uses  $\pi\rho\delta$ , the grammar indicates the time encompassed excludes the *terminus ad quem* (final limiting point) of the period—the Passover—but includes within the count the day the counting began. Hence, understanding that the Passover John has in mind is the first day of the public festival that began on Nisan 15, and this day is excluded from the count, the six day backwards count to the day of His arrival at Bethany goes 14-13-12-11-10-9. With Nisan 14 aligning with Friday, it follows that Jesus arrived in Bethany on Sunday, Nisan 9.

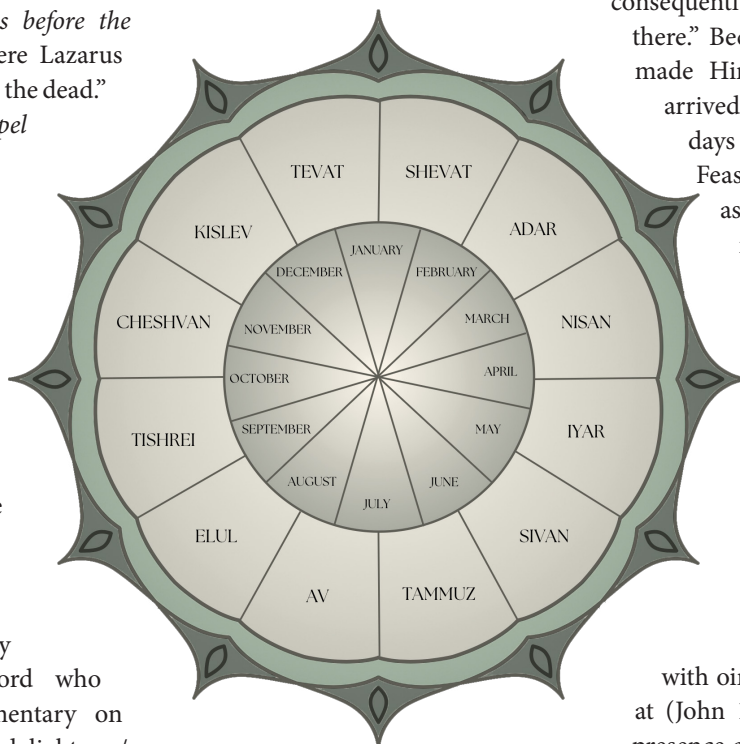
That this is correct is indicated by another consideration: if Jesus traveled from Ephraim (Jn 11:54) to arrive at Bethany, this was considerably more than a “Sabbath day’s journey” (the distance

from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, Acts 1:12), and would have been precluded by Jewish practice in Christ’s day. Making the reasonable assumption that travel was generally restricted to the hours of daylight, it appears He did not make that journey on Saturday, Nisan 8, the Sabbath. This puts His travel to Bethany therefore on the next day, Sunday, Nisan 9, after which he stayed at the house of Mary and Martha and did not depart thence until the next day, Monday, Nisan 10. Therefore, Monday was the day of the Triumphal Entry, not Sunday.

## Overview of Jesus’s Last Week

### NISAN 9 – Sunday, six days before the public Passover

John 12:1–2 – “Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was... so [Gk. *oun*, accordingly, consequently] they made Him a supper there.” Because He was *already* there, they made Him a supper. This indicates He arrived at Bethany before sunset six days before Passover (referring to the Feast). When Passover is understood as Nisan 15 (see below, John 18:28), it means Jesus got to Bethany on Nisan 9.

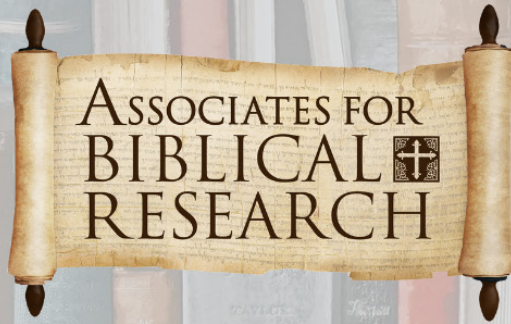


### NISAN 10 – Monday, five days before the public Passover

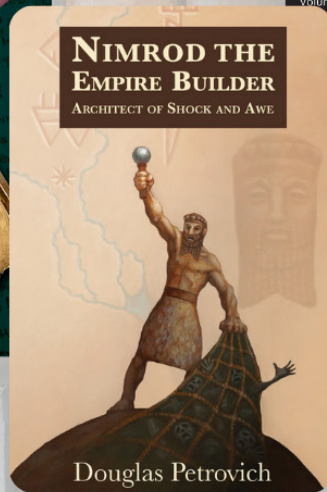
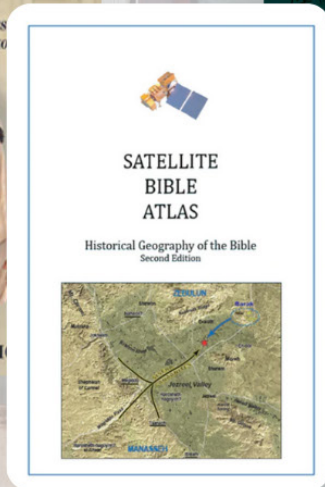
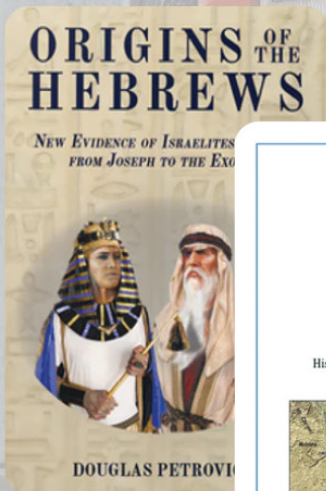
At the outset of Nisan 10, at sunset on Sunday evening, Jesus was at supper in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany. At this meal Mary anointed Jesus’s feet with ointment, which Judas took offense at (John 12:3–8). Word got out of Jesus’s presence at Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem, leading to a large crowd gathering there that evening (John 12:9). Note that these would have been people taking more than a “Sabbath day’s journey,” so they would not have undertaken it on Saturday evening, Nisan 8.

John 12:12 – “On the next day” – the following morning, still Nisan 10 but now Monday – “the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, ‘Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel.’” Some of those who had seen Jesus at Bethany the previous evening took word to the crowd back at Jerusalem of His impending arrival. They responded by coming out with palm branches to greet Him.

...continued on page 38



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SCAN ME

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On the ABR website, a recently posted article was “The Exodus Hebrew Calendar and the Date of Christ’s Birth”<sup>4</sup> (<https://biblearchaeology.org/abr-projects/the-daniel-9-24-27-project-2/5081-the-exodus-hebrew-calendar-and-the-date-of-christs-birth>). The calendar given there shows that the date of the Sabbath in AD 30, the year all of the twenty *Daniel 9 24-27 Project* articles<sup>5</sup> (<https://biblearchaeology.org/the-daniel-9-24-27-project-list>) point to as the year of Christ’s death, was Nisan 8. This being a Saturday, this is further evidence that Sunday was Nisan 9—the day Jesus arrived at Bethany—and Monday, Nisan 10, was therefore the date of the Triumphal Entry.

Therefore, notwithstanding the tradition from the Roman Catholic Church of Palm Sunday, the day of the “Triumphal Entry” according to Scripture is Palm *Monday*. The Church seemingly set the observation to Sunday because it was a day of regular church attendance.

### **NISAN 11 – Tuesday, four days before the public Passover**

Possibly the day of Luke 20:1. Jesus spends the day in Jerusalem, raising the antipathy of the chief priests further as He teaches the people, and returns to Bethany that night.

### **NISAN 12 – Wednesday, three days before the public Passover (two days before the private Passover observance in households)**

*Mark 14:1* – “Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away, and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him...” This verse lumps together the private Passover observance on Nisan 14 with the public Feast of Unleavened Bread on Nisan 15–21 into a single eight-day “unleavened bread” observance.

Jesus spends Wednesday in Jerusalem, teaching the people and offending the chief priests further, and returns to Bethany that afternoon. That evening—after the date transitioned to Nisan 13—He eats in the house of Simon “the leper” (Mt 26:6, Mk 14:3), and again there is an anointing, this time of His head by an unnamed woman that may be Mary Magdalene, since Mark mentions her in other places. Judas takes offense once again, and after departing consults with the chief priests to set up a betrayal (Mk 14:11)

### **NISAN 13 – Thursday, two days before the public Passover**

*Mark 14:12* – “On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover *lamb* was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, ‘Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?’” (Also Mt 26:17.) Mark is speaking here of the first of eight days of unleavened bread (there is no word “feast” [Gk. *heorte*] in this text, and the use of capitals in English versions is unjustified); the first day is private Passover observances in individual homes at the outset of Nisan 14 (following Exodus

12:6), and the remaining seven are on Nisan 15–21, the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Sunset on Thursday evening ushered in Nisan 14, when Jesus and His disciples observed the original Exodus 12:6 private Passover: “You shall keep it [the lamb in the household] *until* [up to] the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight.” Every household was to kill their lamb in private observances during the “between the evenings” interval, roughly 6:00–7:30 pm, between sunset and full darkness. Such private observances do not get called a “feast.”

### **NISAN 14 – Friday, one day before the public Passover**

*John 13:1* – “Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” This took place in the Upper Room during the Last Supper. “Feast of the Passover” is synonymous with the public Feast of Unleavened Bread on Nisan 15. The private observation at the beginning of Nisan 14, “before” the Feast, is the setting of John 13:1, and corresponds to Exodus 12:6.

*John 18:28* – early Friday morning, Nisan 14 – “Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled but might eat the Passover.” This being after the preceding sunset which opened Nisan 14, it shows that the popular understanding of “Passover” in Jesus’s time did not match up with the way it was used in Exodus. Instead, it was a synonym for the Feast of Unleavened Bread which started on Nisan 15. John’s account has the Jews before Caiaphas looking ahead to the public Passover celebration, which would not take place until the coming evening, after Nisan 15 had begun.

*John 19:14* – “Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover...” The public Passover observance was observed the next day, Nisan 15, so Nisan 14 was the day to prepare for it. (“Day of preparation” is also a Jewish expression for Friday, the day when preparations are made to observe the weekly Sabbath every Saturday. All cooking and cleaning must be done before the Sabbath begins.)

*John 19:31* – “Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation [when getting ready for the Sabbath must be done], so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away.” “On the Sabbath” refers to the regular weekly Sabbath every Saturday, while “that Sabbath was a high day” refers to that particular weekly Sabbath happening to coincide with the day of the Passover observance. It is not talking about two different days, as the advocates of a Wednesday or Thursday crucifixion assert, but two significances coinciding on the same day. Because there were going to be many pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Passover, it would not do to allow



Nisan 9

Sunday, six days before the public Passover

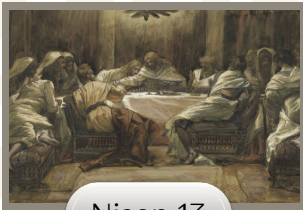
- Jesus arrives in Bethany, at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha.



Nisan 11

Tuesday, four days before the public Passover

- Jesus spends the day in Jerusalem, raising the antipathy of the chief priests as He teaches the people. That evening He returns to Bethany.



Nisan 13

Thursday, two days before the public Passover

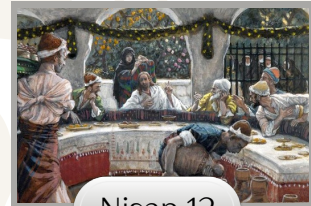
- Sunset on Thursday evening ushered in Nisan 14, when Jesus and His disciples observed the original Exodus 12:6 private Passover.
- Every household was to kill their lamb in private observances during the “between the evenings” interval, roughly 6:00–7:30 pm, between sunset and full darkness.



Nisan 10

Monday, five days before the public Passover

- At the outset of Nisan 10, at sunset on Sunday evening, Jesus eats supper in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany.
- Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with ointment, and Judas takes offense.
- Word gets out that Jesus is in Bethany, and some from the large crowd that gathered there takes the news back to Jerusalem with them that night.
- The following morning, still Nisan 10, Jesus is greeted with palm branches and celebration as he enters Jerusalem.



Nisan 12

Wednesday, three days before the public Passover

- Jesus spends Wednesday in Jerusalem, teaching the people and offending the chief priests further, and returns to Bethany that afternoon.
- That evening—after the date transitioned to Nisan 13—Jesus eats in the house of Simon “the leper,” and again there is an anointing, this time of His head by an unnamed woman that may be Mary Magdalene.
- Judas takes offense once again, and after departing consults with the chief priests to set up a betrayal.



Nisan 14

Friday, one day before the public Passover

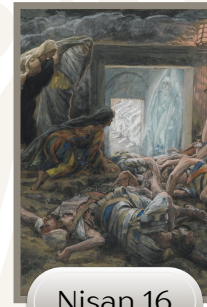
- Early Friday morning, after Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemane, they lead Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium.
- Jesus dies on the Cross around 3 pm that Friday afternoon.
- Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus make haste to bury Jesus in Joseph’s nearby tomb before sunset, before the Jewish date changes to Nisan 15 and the Sabbath begins.
- Friday Nisan 14 marks the first day of the Lord in the grave.



Nisan 15

Saturday, the Passover and Sabbath

- This date marks the start of “the Passover,” coinciding with the regular weekly Sabbath.
- This is Christ’s only full day in the grave, the second day of the three-day count.
- The women are unable to finish the hasty pre-Sabbath burial preparations of Joseph and Nicodemus due to observing the Sabbath.



Nisan 16

Sunday, the day of the Resurrection

- The women are able to go to the tomb and complete the hurried burial preparations begun by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea shortly before sunset the previous Friday.
- The Sabbath, with its prohibition against all forms of work, was over.
- The women arrive to find the stone rolled away from the tomb, and Jesus’ body gone.

dead bodies to remain on gruesome public display on a festival convocation day.

Jesus died on the Cross around 3 pm that Friday afternoon. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus made haste to bury Him in Joseph’s nearby tomb before sunset, when the Jewish date changed over to Nisan 15 and the Sabbath began. Since the Jews counted time inclusively, with part of a day counted as a full day, Friday Nisan 14 marks the first day of the Lord in the grave. Jesus was in the grave for three inclusively-counted days.

1 Corinthians 15:1–2 – “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised *on the third day* according to the Scriptures.” Other passages reiterate that the Lord was raised on the third day He was in the grave (Mt 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Lk 9:22, 18:33, 24:7). These statements must be paired with what the Gospels say, that the Lord rose from the dead early on *the first day of the week* (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2, 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1). This is unambiguously the day after the regular Saturday Sabbath, hence on our calendar it corresponds to Sunday. This day is called the third day in the grave. It follows that if Sunday was the third day, then Saturday was the second day, and Friday was the first day. It is wrong to use Matthew 12:40 to argue that each “day” had to last a full 24 hours, such that three elapsed days takes us back to a Thursday Crucifixion. Matthew 12:40 must be understood not on its own, but in the light of all of the other passages which unambiguously put the Crucifixion on the day before the weekly Sabbath.<sup>6</sup>

**NISAN 15 – Saturday, the Passover, and the regular Sabbath as well**

As John uses the term, this date marks the start of “the Passover,” which also coincided with the regular weekly Sabbath—our Saturday. This was Christ’s only full day in the grave, the second day of the three-day count. Because it was the regular Sabbath when all work was forbidden, the women who wanted to finish the hasty pre-Sabbath burial preparations of Joseph and Nicodemus could do nothing that day.

**NISAN 16 – Sunday, the day of the Resurrection**

This was the earliest time the women could go to the tomb and complete the hurried burial preparations begun by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea shortly before sunset the previous Friday. The Sabbath, with its prohibition against all forms of work, was over.

**Conclusion**

This article has undertaken a very close examination of the events in the Gospels leading up to the Crucifixion. It surprisingly indicates that the Palm Sunday tradition does not match up with what Scripture reports. Given how ingrained the celebration of Palm Sunday is in the Western Church, it is too much to expect that careful exegesis of the Word will set aside the weight of the traditional observance of this event on the Sunday before Easter. But perhaps some will choose Scripture over tradition and recognize the day as commemorating a memorable event in the last week of the Savior’s earthly life—just one day early. ☞