

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 9: THE EASTER SEPULCHRE

The Easter Sepulchre and its accompanying ceremonies played a major part in the late Medieval proclamation of the Resurrection each Easter. By the fifteenth century it had become an intense and genuinely popular focus for devotion on the saving power of Christ's cross and Passion.

The Easter Triduum began with Maundy Thursday, when Mass was celebrated with extra solemnity, the priest consecrating three Hosts, one for his communion at the Mass, one for his communion at the Good Friday liturgy, and the third to be used at the sepulchre ceremonies. After Mass the altars of the church were ritually stripped of all their coverings and ornaments, while a series of responsories from the Passion narratives and the prophets were sung.



The Piscina in the old church at Holy Trinity

The Mass was not celebrated on Good Friday, and the main liturgical celebration of the day was a solemn and penitential commemoration of the Passion. Clergy and people then crept barefoot and on their knees to kiss the foot of a crucifix in the ceremony popularly known as 'creeping to the cross'. Afterwards the priest would ceremonially wrap the crucifix in fine fabrics and place this representation of the dead Christ in a 'sepulchre', together with a pyx containing the consecrated host (that is, the wafer consecrated the previous day). The door or curtain of the sepulchre would then be shut. 'I am counted as one of them that go down into the pit' was the responsory in the Sarum Use.

A watch was kept before the sepulchre continually until Easter Morning. Since large numbers of candles needed tending during this period, and since the pyx in which the Sacrament was 'buried' was usually extremely valuable, payments to parishioners or parochial officers like the sexton or clerk for

maintaining this watch, and for 'brede, ale and fyre' to see them through the chilly night hours, are common in pre-Reformation churchwardens' accounts. Early on Easter Morning, before Mass was rung, the clergy assembled, all the lights in the church were lit, and a procession formed to the sepulchre, which was censed (perfumed with incense). The host was removed without ceremonial to its normal position in the hanging pyx above the high altar. The crucifix was then solemnly 'raised' from the sepulchre and carried triumphantly round the church while all the bells were rung and the choir sang the anthem 'Christus Resurgens':

Christ, rising again from the dead, dieth now no more. Death shall no more have dominion over him. For, in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.

The sepulchre seems always to have been on the north side of the altar and was usually a wooden coffer or chest. At some churches a wooden framework was erected to carry the fine cloths and candles over the wooden chest. Churchwardens' accounts sometimes show these being erected before Easter and dismantled afterwards. It is believed that in many cases they were fine affairs, gilded and painted, with statues of angels, but none of these frameworks have survived.

Quite often the wooden sepulchre was placed on a tomb with a flat surface, especially provided for the purpose. Confusingly, the tomb-top is itself sometimes now referred to as the Easter Sepulchre. The very wealthy would aspire to be buried in such a tomb. In Long Melford, for example, the tomb of John Clopton, who died in 1497, supported the sepulchre. Clopton himself directed that his tomb should serve as an Easter Sepulchre, and he left rich hangings to dress it worthily for the parish's solemn public veneration of the Sacrament, and of Christ's cross, in Holy Week.

In some churches a canopied niche or recess was set in the north wall of the chancel to provide a permanent sculptured home for the sepulchre. This was the case in Holy Trinity: indeed, our fourteenth century canopied recess has been described as the best example of an Easter Sepulchre (or, more pedantically, a purpose built home for the Sepulchre) in Essex.

Beneath the Sepulchre is a tomb recess of an earlier period. This would have been the resting place of an important person connected with the church - the historian Benton went so far as to suggest it might be that of Lifstan. He records that, when the tomb was opened, it was found that rubbish had been thrown upon human bones, but the debris was cleared away and a new stone slab placed on the tomb.



The Easter Sepulchre in the old church at Holy Trinity

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