

### Views from the Pews - Counting the days in Biblical times

Have you ever wondered why Biblical tradition has always insisted that Jesus rested for *three days* in the tomb? To us, Sunday would be only the second day after Friday. The difference arises simply because they counted days differently then, for two reasons. First, because Biblical days were counted from sunset to sunset, whereas our days click over at midnight; and second, because the Roman numbering system did not have a zero.

Genesis 1 states clearly that every day ends at sunset, because God created light out of darkness for a short morning period until darkness was allowed to return. So, Genesis states that ‘there was morning and evening, the first day’. Then, the second new day began at sunset, about 6pm. Biblical authors counted the hours of daylight from dawn, assumed to be 6am, hence “the third hour” was 9am by our reckoning.

So, what we call Good Friday actually began after sunset on Maundy Thursday evening, as (according to the synoptic Gospels) Jesus and his disciples were sharing their last symbolic Passover meal together. Jesus used that event to establish a new tradition of even greater symbolism. The 24 hours of Good Friday therefore extended across the whole series of pivotal events, from the institution of the Eucharist on Thursday evening right through to the tomb on the Friday evening. By their reckoning, that period was counted as Day 1. By the same logic, the period from after dark on Friday to Saturday afternoon was counted as Day 2, and **Saturday evening to Sunday morning as Day 3**. Hence the gospel accounts are correct in stating that Jesus lay for three days in the tomb, and that the Resurrection was indeed on the third day.

The confusion arises because the concept of zero was unknown until it was developed by Indian mathematicians around the fifth century CE. To us now, a 3-day span counts Friday afternoon as the end of Day 0, then from midnight Friday and all day Saturday as day 1, and Sunday as Day 2. It seems like jumping the gun to celebrate the New Fire on Saturday evening by our calendar when Sunday doesn’t begin until 1201 am. But not so: the Day of Resurrection did indeed begin after dark on the Saturday.

For a comparison of the timing of events of Holy Week according to both Biblical and modern dating, go to <https://bible.org/article/chronology-synopsis-passion-week>.

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