

Holy Week Activities for Children

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PRC– Practical Resources for Churches

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Introduction

Teaching children about the events of Holy Week can be a lot harder than teaching them about Christmas with its birth of a special baby, heavenly hosts of angels, and wise men bearing gifts coming from afar. Now the baby Jesus is a grown man, cheered by crowds as he enters Jerusalem, telling his followers to eat his body and drink his blood, and then arrested and killed in a cruel manner before rising from the dead. Where do we begin?



In most churches children don't attend services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, so they often only get the stories of what happened on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. It might be tempting to leave out the rest of Holy Week but the joy of Easter can't be fully experienced without some knowledge of what happened on Good Friday.

It's important to be aware of what is age-appropriate for children and be conscious of each child's particular sensitivities and level of understanding. Children younger than three can be told that Jesus is alive and with us today. For preschool children, a simple explanation that Jesus died on a cross, was buried in a tomb, and then rose on Easter Sunday is sufficient. Younger elementary children can hear stories from the gospels without going into too much detail. Older elementary children can be exposed to more particulars of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Whatever we teach our children about the events leading up to Jesus' death, it's important to always include the story of Jesus' resurrection and what it means for us today.

There are many good Easter books and videos for children but always preview them first to make sure they match your beliefs, are not too violent, and include the resurrection as well as Jesus' death.

When questions arise, answer them honestly. Don't be afraid to tell the children that you struggle with some of their same concerns. For younger children, a simple explanation such as telling them that Jesus died for us so that we could be together with him in heaven is usually sufficient.



Knowing what to teach about the crucifixion can be very difficult. How much detail we share depends on the age of the child and how sensitive they are. As I said previously, for all but the youngest children, Jesus' death should be included as part of the entire narrative of Holy Week.

The [BeliefNet website](#) offers some developmental guidelines from a psychologist for teaching children about the crucifixion.

Ages 3-5 are “The Age of Fantasy” and this is not a time to give graphic details about the violence of the cross. “Preschoolers' budding imaginations can build such details into frightening scenes that keep them awake at night...Saying only that ‘Jesus died for you’ might cause a child to feel guilty. Instead, you might say, ‘Jesus died because He loves you and me,’ and leave it at that.”

Ages 6-9 are “The Age of Questioning” and, although children can tolerate more details, “Excruciating details about the nails, scourge, and so forth are still too intense for this age group.” Children can learn the sequence of events in Holy Week and some of the details. Telling them about Jesus’ concern for his mother while on the cross can help children understand Jesus’ humanity and love for others.

Ages 10-14 are referred to as “The Age of Intensity” and children this age are “ready to move to a deeper understanding of the daily commitment of genuine faith...Children this age have a sense of the dramatic, and learn best when their minds and imaginations are engaged. Discussions, questions, books, and Christian services with emotional impact are ideal...Watching and discussing movies together, such as "Jesus of Nazareth" or "Jesus Christ Superstar," offer teachable moments.

Whatever the age group, it’s important to be aware of an individual child’s sensitivity. In the classroom, I think it’s best to offer very few details and let parents provide more information if their child has questions.

Some general guidelines for teaching about the crucifixion are:

- Increase realism over time.
- Increase intensity over time.
- Move from general to specific over time.
- Let your child's sensitivity lead.

Teaching about Holy Week

Sunday school curriculums vary in how they teach about Holy Week. I found one which was focusing on Jesus’ teachings in the spring and continued to do so on Palm Sunday and Easter, ignoring this most important week. Some curriculums had a lesson about Holy Week on Palm Sunday and then an Easter lesson on Easter Sunday, although in many churches there is no Sunday school on Easter, so unless this lesson is taught the week after Easter, it’s usually not taught at all. One curriculum had lessons about the Last Supper three weeks and two weeks before Easter, and then a lesson on Palm Sunday (on Palm Sunday) and an Easter lesson on Easter Sunday. Covering things out of sequence could be confusing to the children.

I remember a curriculum I used in Sunday school some years ago which taught a lesson on Palm Sunday three weeks before Easter, a lesson two weeks before on Maundy

Thursday, then a lesson on Good Friday the week before Easter, and then an Easter lesson on the actual day. This was also somewhat confusing because, even though the events were in the correct order, the lesson on Palm Sunday was taught two weeks before the actual day, and the lesson on the actual day of Palm Sunday focused on Good Friday.

Eventually I realized that it would be best to adapt the curriculum and to spend the weeks before Easter focusing on all the major events of Holy Week and including the story of Easter for each lesson. I felt it was important to always include the good news of Jesus' resurrection when talking about the events of Good Friday and the rest of Holy Week. This was done so that the children could see the entire time as a whole, as well as necessary since attendance can be sporadic in Sunday school, as we all know. I realized that if I didn't adapt the curriculum, there would be some children who would only hear the lesson on Palm Sunday while others only heard about the events of Good Friday.

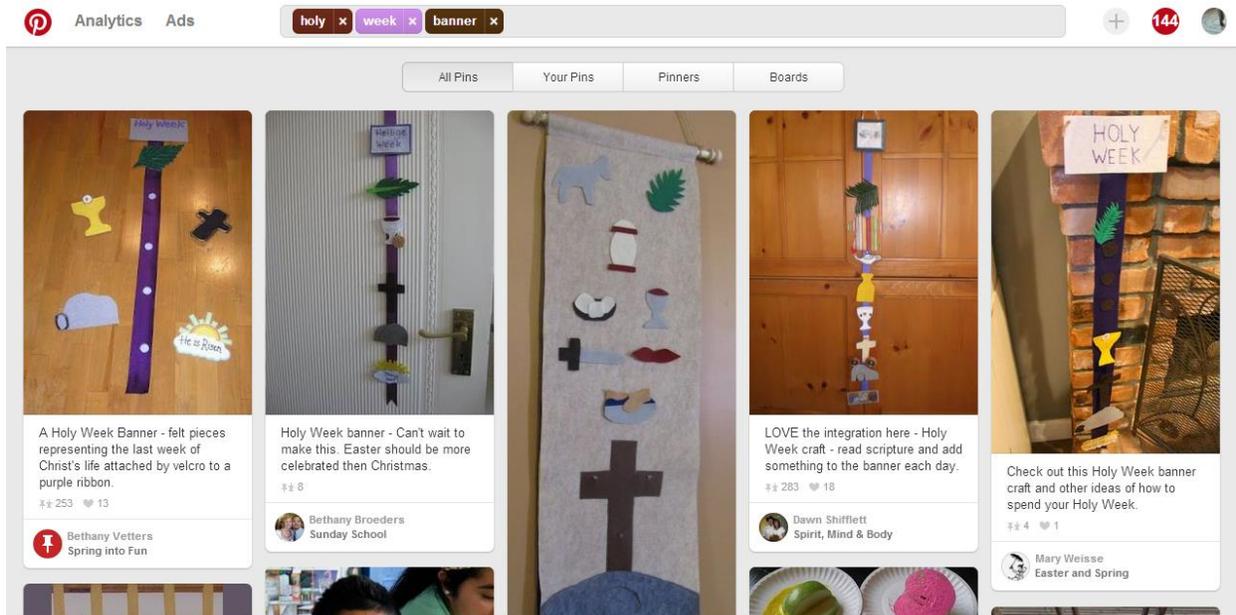
There are different ways to teach about Holy Week and Easter as a whole. You might just give an overview or you might want to give an overview and then focus on a particular event, such as the Last Supper. One option for an overview is to make a timeline of Holy Week using a symbol for each of the seven days as well as Easter Sunday. A palm leaf could represent Palm Sunday, a table symbolizes the tables of the moneychangers which Jesus turned over, and a temple stands for the time Jesus spent in the temple on Monday and Tuesday. Silver coins are the 30 pieces of silver that were given to Judas when he betrayed Jesus, a cup and bread stand for the Last Supper, a cross for Good Friday, and a tomb for the time Jesus spent there before he rose from the grave on Easter Sunday. You might want to cover the events of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday together, since there's some disagreement over the exact day some of them occurred, such as when Judas betrayed Jesus. Also, with younger children, you probably just want to focus on the most important days such as Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday.

Holy Week overviews

Besides a Holy Week timeline or map, you can give an overview of Holy Week in many other ways.

Banner

You could make a banner as a group or individual project using symbols for the events of Holy Week.



This is a screen shot of what came up on Pinterest when I searched for Holy Week banners. You can see here just a few of the suggestions. If you click on a picture while on Pinterest, it will usually take you to a webpage which has instructions about how to make the selected banner. Some photos take you to a website where you can order the product or a kit to make the project. You can make a complete banner for the children to take home or one that uses Velcro to attach something for each day of Holy Week. You can also include readings and prayers for each day and this is a wonderful way to get the whole family involved.

I hope you're all on Pinterest because it's a great place to find ideas for children's ministry. PRC has a Pinterest account and one of our boards has Lent and Easter children's crafts and activities. You can find our Pinterest boards at www.pinterest.com/pr4churches.

Book

Of course you can read a book that covers Holy Week, but you can also have the children make a book which covers the events of Holy Week. J. M. Rockhill's blog has [directions for making a very simple book](#) using a single sheet of paper. There are many other websites with directions for making books or you can create your own on your computer.

Box

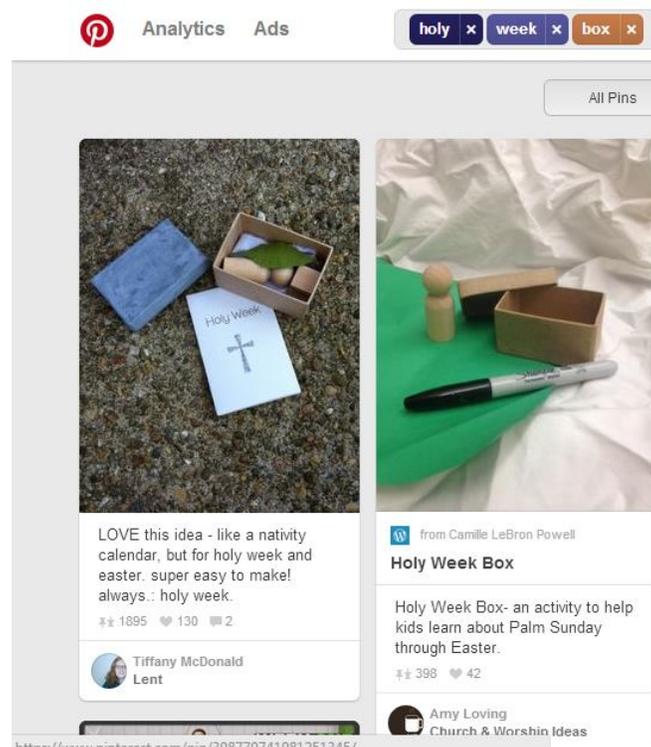
Another fun idea is to create a Holy Week box. This is a little bit like a nativity or manger set, but for Holy Week and Easter. The children use it to tell or act out the events of Holy Week and Easter. You start with a box with a lid and a simple wooden doll which represents Jesus.

Small palm branches made of green pepper alongside scraps of fabric can be used to act out the events of Palm Sunday when the crowds waved palms, laid their cloaks on the ground for Jesus to ride over, and shouted "Hosanna!"

For the Last Supper, you can use the box itself as a table, either drawing a loaf of bread and a cup on the top of the lid or attaching a paper loaf and cup to the inside of the lid's top.

For Good Friday, draw a cross on the bottom of the box and stand the box up behind Jesus. The box becomes Jesus' tomb when you wrap the wooden doll in white burial cloths. On Easter Sunday morning, Jesus will rise from the dead and the box becomes his empty tomb.

You see below a screenshot of two Holy Week Boxes on Pinterest. You can find directions online by visiting [J. M. Rockhill's website](#) or [Camille LeBron Powell's blog](#).



Resurrection eggs

Resurrection eggs are an interactive way for children to learn about the events of Holy Week. These can be [purchased](#) or you can make your own. There's also a book called [Benjamin's Box](#) which tells the story of the resurrection eggs from the perspective of a boy who lives during the time of Jesus.



To make your own resurrection eggs, take 12 plastic Easter eggs and put them in an egg carton or basket. You can number the eggs from 1-12 and then put an item into each egg which represents an event from Holy Week and Easter. For instance, the first egg might contain a small leaf which represents the palm branches waved when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The last egg is usually empty to represent Jesus' empty tomb. You can also put references to Bible verses in each egg. If you make these in Sunday school, your children can bring them home and use them to tell the story of Holy Week and Easter to their families. The [Life Your Way](#) website and [This Simple Home](#) website both have directions on making resurrection eggs.

Journey with stations

You can take the children on a journey through Holy Week and even give them passports that can be stamped with each "day" they visit. Search for [Holy Week Passport](#) on Pinterest for ideas. You can adapt the journey and passport ideas there for your church. The journey through Holy Week can be done on Palm Sunday or at another appropriate time where the children will journey to different stations that represent the days of Holy Week with information and activities. They will receive a passport sticker for each station. If your church holds Holy Week services on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday which are appropriate for your children, you may choose to give the passport stickers to those who attend these services.

The Holy Week passports can include Polaroid or other photos of the children and activities at the stations can include folding palm crosses, making crosses of beads or other materials, or other crafts related to Holy Week. You can also use the passport to provide activities for the children to do at home during Holy Week. The website links below provide ideas for offering a Holy Week journey with passports:

[Sermon on the Sidewalk](#)

[Be as a Light](#)

[Kids on Sundays](#)

[Kristin Jack](#)

[Flame: Creative Children's Ministry](#)

You can also set up Holy Week prayer stations for children or entire families to visit. These are similar to the journey stations but are more reflective and meditative. There

might be soft instrumental music playing in the background while participants find a scripture to read, prayers, and a simple activity based on an event of Holy Week, such as dipping their fingers into a bowl of water as they read about Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

If you are Roman Catholic or another denomination that uses the Stations of the Cross, there are many ideas to adapt them for children online.

Another variation on the journey with stations is to have stations with costumed people from the various stories of Holy Week telling their first person accounts of events.

Drama

Using drama is another good way to tell the events of Holy Week. You can find plenty of scripts to purchase or download for free, such as one on the [Worshiping with Children](#) blog called "[Surprise! A Play about God's Love.](#)" You can adapt the script so there are some speaking parts or just have a narrator read while the children act out the parts.

However, reading the stories of Holy Week directly from the Bible and then having children create their own script is a wonderful way to learn and explore these stories. Children who don't want to be in the spotlight can help make scenery or props. You can also videotape the children and then invite families in to watch their finished dramatization. This is a great activity for a Sunday school with different age children to do together, or you can have the older children create the drama and then put it on for the younger children. Puppets could also be used to tell the stories.

Other activities

It's important to have the children see the events of Holy Week in their entirety but, especially with older children, you'll sometimes want an activity to focus on a particular event. As with any activity, think careful about what it teaches children. Some activities may be fun or interesting but don't really send a useful or appropriate message. The events of Holy Week, especially of Jesus' suffering and death, call for a reverent attitude. For instance, you can purchase lollipops in the shape of the cross, but what is that saying to the children?

I would also look for activities which allow children to express themselves and explore the meaning of the stories. A purchased craft project which simply has the children put together pieces in a set way doesn't allow them to be creative and won't make as much of an impression on them as a project which lets them create something unique and personal.

I was once doing a Palm Sunday diorama with my Sunday school class of 3rd/4th grade children. I had a cardboard base for them and items for them to glue on to it such as a

sandpaper path, green paper for palms, fabric for robes, greenery for plants and trees, and rocks. We had read the account of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem in Luke 19 and of how the Pharisees had asked Jesus to make his followers stop shouting. Jesus had replied "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." That must have made an impression on the children because they remembered it and decided to make eyes and mouths on the rocks to show that they were ready to cry out. This gave us an opportunity to talk about how momentous an event Palm Sunday was and about Jesus being a king but not the type of king that the people had expected.

Food activities

People learn through all their senses, so using food is a great way to involve the children's senses of smell and taste in learning about Holy Week. Of course, you should always be aware of allergies and any special dietary concerns when using food in a lesson.



There's a rich history and some superstitions about hot cross buns, which you see pictured here. They are usually eaten on Good Friday but are often available at other time during Lent. The Loyola Press website has an [intergenerational activity](#) based on hot cross buns.

You can make resurrection rolls with your children, bake them yourself and bring them in to Sunday school, or send the recipe home for families to make together. To make them, you take a triangle from a can of crescent rolls which represents Jesus' tomb. Then you take a marshmallow, representing Jesus' body, dip it in butter and roll it in cinnamon sugar. The butter and cinnamon sugar represent the oils and spice that Jesus' body was anointed with for burial. Wrap the dough around the marshmallow and pinch the seams together tightly. Bake and cool, then break open the tomb and you'll find that the body of Christ is no longer there. [DLTK's Growing Together website](#) has directions for making resurrection rolls.

A similar activity is making Easter story cookies. These are made with pecans, vinegar, egg white, salt, and sugar and each of the ingredients represents part of the story of Good Friday. The cookies are put in a warm oven overnight with the heat turned off. In the morning the cookies are hollow, representing Jesus' empty tomb. [WikiHow](#) has a page which tells you how to make Easter story cookies.

Seder

Having a Passover Seder meal is a good activity to teach older children about the Last Supper, which many believe was a Seder, and to explain to them that Jesus was a Jew and followed the Jewish traditions. Jesus is also compared in the New Testament to the sacrificial lamb of Passover.



The word Seder means “order” because the meal is done in a certain order. The Haggadah is the book used for the Seder and tells the story of the Exodus, the Jews’ journey from slavery to freedom when God led them out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The Haggadah explains the foods on the Seder plate, tells the story of the Exodus and includes prayers, songs, and questions.

There are books and many websites with directions on how to have a modified Seder [for children](#) or from a [Christian perspective](#). Be aware though that some people think that having a Christian Seder may be insulting to those of the Jewish religion. You might want to stick with the traditional Seder meal and perhaps even find a Jewish person willing to come in and explain the meal to you and your children.

A word of caution: one of the traditional Seder foods is horseradish, but I found that some children couldn’t handle the smell. After my first Seder with my students, I used horseradish sauce instead of actual horseradish.

Resurrection garden



You see above another screenshot from Pinterest when I searched using the term “resurrection garden.” There are many different options for making this project on Pinterest and other websites. For a basic resurrection (or Easter) garden, you’ll need a small terracotta pot, a larger terracotta saucer, potting soil, small rocks, a large rock, twine, sticks, and either grass seed or moss. You put some potting soil in the saucer and then lay the pot on its side in the soil. The pot represents Jesus’ tomb. Put some of the smaller rocks in the saucer; you can make them into a path to the tomb if you like. Put the large stone to the side of the pot; this is the stone that was rolled away from Jesus’ tomb on Easter Sunday morning. Add more dirt and cover the pot with some of it. Use the twine (or a glue gun) to make three crosses, one slightly larger than the other two, and put them in the soil. You can then plant the grass seed, water it, and wait for it to grow, or have your garden ready immediately by planting moss. You can add other

small plants or even figures to represent Jesus and the other people who were at the tomb.

As you create this project with the children, be sure to talk about the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and connect it to the various parts of the garden. It's also a good conversation starter for families when you send the project home.

Crosses and butterflies

There are many craft ideas in books and online for making variations of well-known Holy Week and Easter symbols such as the cross, butterflies, and many others. However, we need to keep in mind the reason for making these crafts or doing other Holy Week activities. I've seen Sunday school teachers do a craft with their class and never explain why they're doing it or what it means. Even after a teacher takes time to read the Bible story, talk about it, and explain the symbol, children may not fully understand or remember why they're doing an activity. So if you're making a butterfly craft for Easter, be sure to repeat as the children are working on their project how the butterfly represents Jesus and how he came back to life just as the butterfly seems to come back to life as it emerges from its cocoon.

Spiritual activities

It's called Holy Week for a reason, so be sure to talk with your children about how Holy Week is set aside for us to focus on God and Jesus' journey to the cross and then his resurrection.

Holy Week is a good time for using spiritual practices with children. There are many spiritual practices which work especially well with children such as [creating prayers](#), [listening to a guided meditation](#), [praying with prayer beads](#), and [Praying in Color](#).

Service and missions

Having a special service or mission project during Holy Week is also something to consider. As Christians we are to follow Jesus, and Holy Week is the perfect time to follow Jesus' example to serve others. A simple project would be putting together Easter baskets for children in a shelter. Again, use the project as an opportunity to talk to the children about how we are responding to Jesus' sacrifice for us by sacrificing for others.

Connecting with families

There are 168 hours in Holy Week and chances are that the children you minister to will spend very few of those hours at your church. However, they will be with their families for many of those hours. So it's important to help equip families to share with their children the meaning of Holy Week and Easter.

Many of the activities (if not all of them) which I've mentioned in this webinar are suitable as intergenerational activities. You can also encourage your pastor and worship

leaders to consider making their Holy Week and Easter services as child-friendly as possible.

Sending home ideas for families to do together during Holy Week is another way you can assist families in their children's faith formation. There are many websites which have suggestions for Holy Week activities for families such as [Faith Gateway](#).

The [Children's Ministry Magazine](#) website has suggestions for setting up a family worship space for Holy Week along with devotions for each day of Holy Week and Easter Sunday.

You can also purchase and distribute resources from websites such as the [Faithguides](#) section of Channing Bete or [Christian Tools of Affirmation](#).

Websites with Holy Week activities for children

[Building Faith](#)

[Catholic Icing](#)

[Children's Ministry Magazine](#)

[Flame: Creative Children's Ministry](#)

[Godspace](#)

[Presbyterian Association of Resource Centers](#)

[The Catholic Toolbox](#)

[Worshiping with Children](#)

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