

# How to Conduct a Tenebrae Service

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A Tenebrae is a special service for Holy Week, that can be conducted on Wednesday in Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday. You can read a description of a Tenebrae service at <http://www.kencollins.com/question-39.htm>. The purpose of this page is to help you design one.

“Tenebrae” is Latin for “shadows,” so this is a service of shadows. In this service we use increasing darkness to dramatize the increasing sadness of Holy Week.

## Ready-Made Tenebrae Liturgies

Why reinvent the wheel? You can find explicit directions for a Tenebrae service in the following books:

- [\*The Book of Occasional Services 1994\*](#), on page 75. This service of the Episcopal Church is designed for Wednesday in Holy Week.
- [\*Chalice Worship\*](#), on page 118. This service of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is designed for use on Maundy Thursday.
- [\*The United Methodist Book of Worship\*](#), on page 354. This service is particularly suited for Good Friday.

## Designing Your Own Tenebrae Service

If you cannot use these resources for some reason, here’s how to design your own Tenebrae liturgy.

If you are designing the service for Maundy Thursday, be sure to include a Communion service, because this was the day on which Jesus instituted it. Otherwise, it is optional. In any case, the Communion should be the first half of the service.

## Advance Preparation

- You need as many readers as you have readings, plus one person to moderate this part of the service. You may need to have them rehearse the service. Make sure they all know how to pronounce all the words in their assigned readings.
- Before the service begins, set up a table at the front of the church with one dark-colored candle for each reading, arranged in a semi-circle or a line. Put a white pillar candle in the center. You can use the altar or Communion table for this purpose.
- Set up a lectern with a dim reading light, such as you find in a bookstore. Make sure that the readers have a clear path to the lectern when the sanctuary is lit only by candlelight.
- Make sure you have a candle snuffer handy. Blowing the candles out is not a good idea, because you might spray hot wax onto the paraments or other objects, causing a cleaning problem.

## **The Readings**

You can devise your own readings, but here is a good starting point:

For Maundy Thursday

Matthew 26:20-25

Matthew 26:31-35

Mark 14:32-41

Matthew 26:47-52

Luke 22:54-62

John 18:33-38a

Matthew 27:20-26

Mark 15:16-20

For Good Friday

Divide John 18:1-19:42 into as many parts as you have readers.

## **Conducting the Service**

### **Before the Service**

- Light all the candles before the service begins or as part of the opening of the service.

### **The Actual Service**

- Begin with your normal order of worship, with appropriate hymns, but omit the scripture readings and the sermon. Explain the purpose and meaning of the service to the congregation.
- Have the Communion service.
- The people sit. Dim the lights as far as you can so the main light comes from the candles, but the readers can still see well enough to get to the lectern and back to their seats safely.
- The moderator sits down at the table with the candles, a candle-snuffer at hand.
- Each reader goes to the lectern, reads their appointed reading, and sits down.
- After each reading, the moderator snuffs out one of the dark-colored candles.
- When all the readers have finished, the moderator reads Psalm 22:1-21 by the light of the white pillar candle, then puts it out, plunging the congregation into darkness.
- The congregation sits in silent darkness to underscore the drama. If the Tenebrae is on Friday, you might want to slam a door or make some other loud noise during the darkness to represent the stone being rolled to seal the grave.
- Turn up the lights just enough that people can see to leave.
- The people leave in silence. There is no benediction.

### **After the Service**

It is traditional for people to leave the church and go home without speaking to each other, but if this is the first time you've had a Tenebrae, that can be a bit harsh. You can have a subdued fellowship hour after the service.