

What is a Tenebrae Service?

The word ‘tenebrae’ is Latin for shadows. The purpose of the Tenebrae service is to recreate the emotional aspects of the passion story, so this is not supposed to be a happy service, because the occasion is not happy. If your expectation of Christian worship is that it should always be happy and exhilarating, you won’t appreciate this service until the second time you attend it.

The service was originally designed for Good Friday, but it can be used for Maundy Thursday as well. Both services have long scripture narratives, which for this service are divided into seven, eight, or nine parts, each one assigned to a different reader.

The service may include other parts, such as solemn hymns, a sermon, and Communion, but the core of the Tenebrae service works like this: It starts out with the church in candlelight. There are as many candles as there are readings, plus a white Christ candle. The readers go up one at a time, read their assigned selections, and extinguish one of the candles, until only the Christ candle remains. Then someone reads the first part of Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the cross. Then the Christ candle is put out, leaving the congregation in near total darkness—and near total devastation. At this point, the service ends. There is no benediction and the people leave in silence. (The lights are turned up but remain dim so that people can see their way out.)

The purpose of the service is to recreate the betrayal, abandonment, and agony of the events; and it is left unfinished, because the story isn’t over until Easter Day.

The first time I went to a Tenebrae service, I thought it was awful, because I didn’t understand it. But I went a second time and now it is my favorite service in the year! After I became a pastor, I had one at my church. It was the first time they experienced a Tenebrae service, so I prepared them for it. Everyone who attended said it was the most moving service they had ever been to.

If you see only the happy ending of a movie, everyone who saw it from the start is elated, but you go away saying, “So they were all hugging each other. So what?” But if you see the beginning and the middle part, with all the suspense and grief, you understand what the characters overcame, and the happy ending is all the happier. So to me, attending the Easter service without attending the Holy Week services is like watching the happy ending of the movie without seeing the middle—you only rob yourself of joy.

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