

# Celebrating Easter through the Bible, Art & Music - Art Commentary

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## **1. Christ is fully human**

### **The Rest on the Flight into Egypt - Orazio Gentileschi (c 1620)**

What is so astounding about Orazio Gentileschi's picture is its unflinching realism. Many artists have depicted the same scene. They show the Holy Family embowered in welcoming trees, serenaded by circling flocks of angels, bathed in the tender light of imaginative religious fantasy. For them, for this special Family, the art suggests, everything in life must be different from the sad and sordid conditions known to us sinners. But Gentileschi shows a family about which two things are brutally clear: they are very poor, and they are bone weary. One feels that Joseph is too tired even to try to seek shelter for the night; he has unsaddled the ass and fallen exhausted on the baggage. He has not even had the

energy left to cover his body against the night chill. Mary has forced herself upright until she has fed her child. Her naked feet stick out ungracefully as he sucks hungrily and almost apprehensively – a big clumsy child, far from the tiny beshawled infant of poetic idealism. We see three peasants, three refugees, three poor tired creatures who face the hardness of life bravely but without divine protection.

### **Agony in the Garden - Andrea Mantegna (1457-59)**

This tempera-on-wood version is now in the Musee des Beaux-arts, in Tours. Here Jesus is kneeling on the right, his face clearly revealed, while the disciples sleep almost at his feet. An angel reaches down to comfort him and strengthen his resolve, while behind him the soldiers, led by Judas, approach inexorably down the hill from the Holy City of Jerusalem in the background. The pastel greens and warm browns create a poetic setting which contrasts with the agony etched on Christ's face, as his soul is "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He prays that he might be spared the approaching ordeal: "Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but you will." Mark 14:36. Jesus is portrayed in all his agonised humanity.

### **The Agony in the Garden - Giovanni Bellini (1458-60)**

Bellini was brother-in-law of Mantegna. In this painting, housed in the National Gallery, he also portrays the spiritual agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemene. Aware of his imminent arrest and death, Jesus prays to his Father to help him through his ordeal. A cherub appears in the top left of the painting and presents him with a chalice, a symbol of his impending sacrifice. The soft light on the horizon points to the promise of resurrection, but at this moment Jesus is alone, isolated, deserted by his disciples, without a halo – a “man of sorrows and familiar with suffering,” Isaiah 53:3. He is at his emotional and spiritual limits.

### **Christ on the Mount of Olives - Paul Gauguin (1889)**

This extraordinary painting by post-impressionist Paul Gauguin is both a self-portrait and representation of Jesus about to be taken by the soldiers. Such is the humanity of Jesus that Gauguin identifies with him as an object of sacrifice. His face is full of sorrow, humiliation, and despair - in the case of the artist because of the rejection he faced from the art establishment and his feeling that nobody understood him.

Under the trees on the Mount of Olives Gauguin associates himself with the fully human Christ.

## **The Flagellation – Caravaggio (1607)**

Caravaggio has eliminated any superfluous spectators, and reduced the architecture to a single central stabilizing column. He has used an austere palette of warm neutrals and flesh tones. From all the figures Caravaggio has taken away the lithe grace of their sixteenth-century prototypes, replacing earlier elegant forms with heavy brutish muscularity. Even Christ is quite brawny. The result is to make this scene convincing not merely as an idea of torture, but as its sadistic reality. The event takes place in the murky vastness of a grim dungeon. Menace fills the shadowy figures surrounding Christ. The crouching man binding a scourge would, in himself, speak of malevolence, even without the snarling cruelty contorting the face of his companion of the left and the savagery of their gestures. Christ responds naturally, with involuntary physical reaction, his powerful physique emphasizing his helplessness and sense of degradation. He holds his head down, less in shame than to avoid the blows, and he literally writhes with his feet and body, as if struggling to escape. He is haloed and the light, striking only him fully, makes him radiant, but he is suffering like any other man.

## **Christ after the Flagellation – Bartolome Esteban Murillo (after 1665)**

Murillo was known for his intense renderings of religious martyrdom and ecstasy and for the sensuous beauty of his paint.

Here, the artist has focused exclusively on Christ's suffering, choosing a moment after his tormentors have left the scene.

Murillo's image depicts the human yet divine nature of Christ. The artist has placed him humbly upon the ground and painted his battered body so that his skin seems almost radiant, despite its wounds and sores.

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## **2. Christ died for our sins**

### **Christ nailed to the Cross – Gerard Davis (c 1481)**

Christ is stretched on the cross on which he is to be crucified – he looks straight at us to invite our sympathy. At his feet, two soldiers haul on ropes to pull his legs straight as another hammers an iron nail into his feet. A fourth knocks a nail into his right hand.

Christ's pale skin and nakedness emphasise his vulnerability, and David has painted his body with great care: the thin covering of flesh on his distorted chest, the blue veins and taut sinews in his

arms and the contorted fingers of his left hand all convey his terrible pain. His face is red, and he seems to be gritting his teeth as he looks at us to invite our compassion. Lying on the ground is Christ's coat – in the Bible, the soldiers cast lots for it (John 18: 24) – and a dog sniffs at a skull. According to the Gospels, Christ was crucified at Golgotha, 'the place of the skull'. Traditionally the skull was thought to be that of Adam, the first man; Christ was seen as the second Adam who came to redeem humanity's sins through his sacrifice.

### **Raising of the Cross – Peter Paul Rubens (1610)**

Rubens painted the triptych for the high altar of Antwerp's church of St Walpurgis, which was demolished in 1817. It marked Ruben's introduction of the Baroque style into Northern art. The diagonal composition is full of dynamism and colour. Rubens had just returned from Italy, where he had seen paintings by Michelangelo, Caravaggio and Titian.

In the centre nine executioners strain to raise the cross from which Christ's body hangs. On the left is St John, Christ's mother Mary and a group of weeping women and children. On the right, a Roman officer watches on horseback while soldier in the background crucify the two thieves – more of them later.

### **Crucified Christ – Victor Vasnetsov (1896)**

This painting is as concise as possible, restrained in colours and in the characters present in the picture. In the centre of the picture is Jesus Christ crucified on the cross, who judging by the calm and tranquil expression of a haggard face and a nimbus over his head, has already died. Virtually the entire background of the painting is black-brown, and only in the distance the horizon brightens, foreshadowing the soon-to-be Resurrection of the Saviour and the Joy of the Righteous in the Lord. Now the picture is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Karelia, Petrozavodsk.

### **Crucified Christ – Velazquez (1632)**

This intensely powerful image of Jesus on the Cross was painted during the creative period that followed Velazquez' first stimulating trip to Italy (1629-31). His Christ on the Cross is a dead or dying body which is unaccompanied by other narrative elements except for the cross itself. Nevertheless, the artist succeeds in endowing the work with great dignity and serenity. The influence of Classicism in the work is shown in the overall calmness of the body and its idealised posture. The influence of Caravaggism is evident in the light that focuses all attention on Christ's pale body.

### **Christ of St John on the Cross – Salvador Dali (1951)**

This is by far the most popular of all Dali's religious works. The painting was inspired by a drawing done by St John of the Cross (a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish priest) after he had seen a vision of Christ. The people beside the boat come from different sources. Dali based the geometry of the painting on a triangle and a circle. The perspective gives a sense of God looking at His Son. Given that it is God's view, we see Jesus as the bridge between God and the mortal world, represented by the seascape below. The seascape is in our eye-level, instead of following the angle of the cross.

The work was regarded as banal when first exhibited in London. Nevertheless, some years later, it was slashed by a fanatic when hanging in Glasgow Museum, proof of its astonishing effect on people.

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### **3. Jesus brings forgiveness to everyone**

#### **The Crucifixion - Jacopo Tintoretto (1557-58)**

This depiction of *The Crucifixion* by Tintoretto was painted for the Chapel of the Sacrament in the Church of San Severo, Venice. It is currently housed in the Gallerie dell'Accademia. Characteristic of Tintoretto's dramatic style, the biblical event is teeming with

energy, as is apparent in the numerous twisting figures that fill the canvas, almost to the effect of diluting or distracting from the principal event.

At the apex of this chaotic scene, Christ on the Cross is illuminated at top centre with a glowing halo, and his body appears more noticeably at peace in contrast with the other figures. A subtly rendered spear wound on Christ's torso intimates that he is already dead, which is further confirmed by the figure of Mary at the base of the Cross, who has fainted and is being held up by her companions.

Tintoretto includes references to other events surrounding the account of the Crucifixion as well, such as the Roman soldiers casting lots for Christ's tunic in the right foreground. Jesus has prayed for them as they nailed him to the Cross: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34. Out of the background's darkness, the artist masterfully uses light to highlight not just the figure of Christ but also one of the two thieves on the cross (Luke 23:39-43) as well as the centurion (Mark 15:39), who are both saved after declaring Christ the Son of God. Jesus brings forgiveness to everyone.

## **Christ and the Good Thief – Titian (c. 1566)**

The painting with Jesus Christ and the 'Good Thief' depicted against the backdrop of a livid and cloudy sky is a fragment of a larger composition with the whole scene of the Crucifixion.

In fact, it appears as though it has been cut along the margins and is missing a lower part, as evidenced by the detail of the spear tips, the only testimonial to the group of soldiers that must have appeared in the lower part.

The painting is now accepted as having been painted by Titian. It shows complex composition, quick cursory brushstrokes, and strong contrasts of light and shadow. The beautiful detail of the body of Christ seems to be constructed with light.

The vertical format of the original altarpiece would explain the extraordinary invention of the body of Christ seen as a glimpse and not frontally as in traditional Crucifixions. This element increases the dramatic nature of the scene, involving the viewer in the dialogue of forgiveness between the two dying men, Luke 23:39-43.

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## 4. Jesus really died

### **The Descent from the Cross - Rogier van der Weyden (1435-40)**

This is one of the greatest religious paintings of the Flemish school.

It depicts the crucified Christ being lowered from the cross.

It is the earliest painting that can be safely attributed to Van der

Weyden. By analysing the wood, it can be dated to around 1435. A

masterpiece of Flemish Christian art, it may have been designed as

the central panel for an altarpiece, installed in the chapel of the

Great Crossbowmen's Guild of Louvain - identified by the two

small crossbows in the lower part of the tracery in the left and right

corners.

The painting is full of imagery. The body of Jesus is slightly curved,

and his arms are arched in the shape of a crossbow. This is the

Guild paying tribute to Jesus in whom everything has its being,

even in death. To the left a similar pose is adopted by the lady who

is swooning, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Moving further to the left,

there is a skull, the symbol of Golgotha where Jesus has been

crucified (the Place of the Skull), and the symbol of where Jesus has

descended - to the Place of the Dead, to Sheol or Hades.

The artist records in great detail the signs of death. The right eye of

Jesus is slightly open, showing white, his eyeball rolled back in

death. The blood from the wound in his side is coagulating as it

runs down his leg. The servant above holds the vicious nails he has removed from the body. This is a lifeless corpse.

He also conveys a scene of utter grief which hems in the body on all sides. The artist paints raw emotion. Tears cascade down the face of the Virgin Mary and begin to drip from her chin. She knows her son is dead. Tears flow on the faces of her two sisters in law on the left who are supporting her (Mary Salome and Mary Cleophas) and on the face of Mary Magdalen on the right. They are painted like pearls. John the Evangelist on the left is glassy eyed with grief, and the faces of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who are tenderly carrying the body, are etched with sorrow. The body of Jesus is idealised - more youthful than a man in his early 30s, no marks of cruel scourging on his skin, a haze of recent stubble on his face. As she swoons, has the artist painted the image in Mary's mind of the beloved son she has nurtured and lost?

### **Christ carried to the tomb - Jacopo Tintoretto (1557-58)**

The painting was commissioned for the altar of the Dal Basso family chapel in the Venetian church of San Francesco della Vigna. Before it was cut from its frame, the painting was taller and arched in shape, with a flying angel at the top holding a crown of thorns. The angel's feet are just visible at the top of the canvas.

Christ's elongated body being carried down to the tomb dominates the centre, as his swooning grief-stricken mother is comforted at the bottom right-hand corner. In the elongated lifeless body with head tilted slightly forward in death, we sense the dead weight of a corpse as it is carried down into the darkness; we can feel the strain on the backs and shoulders of the young men who are carrying him.

The painted flickering torch light heightens the mood of despair.

Jesus is really dead.

### **The Entombment of Christ - Caravaggio (1603-04)**

*The Entombment* is the sole painting of the mature Caravaggio that gained unanimous critical acclaim, and was much copied. No fewer than forty-four drawn, painted, or engraved copies are known, including one by Paul Cezanne, who, having never visited Rome, must have made his watercolour from a photograph or a print.

The painting is as tragic as Michelangelo's *Pieta*, which Caravaggio must have had in mind as he painted.

Two members of the grieving group are gently bearing Christ's body into a cave-tomb barely visible in the obscurity of the left background. Much of the pathos is conveyed by the gestures: Nicodemus almost embracing Christ's legs, St. John touching

Christ's wound, the Virgin Mary blessing him and extending her arms to embrace the whole group, and most poignant of all, Christ's right arm hanging down lifeless and his left hand lying on his abdomen. In its fan-shaped arrangement the group is as compact and as monumental as a piece of sculpture. It is motionless, at the moment when the mourners pause just before carrying the corpse into the burial chamber. It is as motionless as the corpse of Jesus.

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## **5. But Jesus really came back to life**

### **Angels rolling away the Sepulchre - William Blake (c 1815)**

This is one of over 40 watercolours of subjects from the Bible which Blake was commissioned to make by a civil servant, Thomas Butts, one of his most loyal patrons.

Here we see the body of Jesus Christ, placed in a cave following his crucifixion. When Mary Magdalene visits, she is startled to find two angels sitting at the head and feet 'where the body of Jesus had lain,' John 20:12. Jesus then appears and speaks to her.

For his imagery Blake was inspired by a passage in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament. When the prophet Moses is alone on Mount Sinai, God tells him to instruct the Israelites to make a lid for

the Ark of the Covenant called a 'mercy seat' - each end of the mercy seat flanked by an angel in beaten gold, Exodus 25:17-22. In between the cherubim God himself was said to appear.

When the angel in the centre removes the stone from the tomb, just as if he were lifting the lid off the Ark of the Covenant, in between the two angels on either side the risen Jesus appears - his face tilted upwards, alert and his eyes open as if awakened from sleep. Jesus has really come back to life. The strange light and colours used here convey a sense of the mystery of the supernatural. 'Almighty, Invisible, God only Wise' has intervened in history by raising Jesus to life.

### **The Resurrection – Rembrandt van Rijn (1661)**

In the darkness of this canvass Rembrandt paints the moment the guards flee from the angel descending from heaven. The angel lifts the stone covering the grave and Jesus emerges from darkness with great gentleness. On resurrection day light and life triumphs over darkness and death.

### **The Three Marys at the Tomb – Hubert Van Eyck (c 1410-26)**

Here Van Eyck depicts the empty tomb. The Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Mary Salome are shown grieving to the left of the tomb, under a hill of jagged rock. The soldiers, carrying weapons, are asleep. Our eye is drawn to Jerusalem in the distance and a flock of birds flying in formation, but returns to the empty tomb and the angel telling the three Marys - "Christ is risen!" Luke 24:6.

### **The Incredulity of Saint Thomas - Caravaggio (1603)**

This painting by Caravaggio moves us from the supernatural raising of Jesus from the dead and the questions posed by the empty tomb to the physical reality of the resurrected Saviour. The design is intensely concentrated, inside an archway shape formed by the outline of the four figures clustered intimately together against a dark background. The focus is on Thomas's right hand, firmly guided by Christ's, as the doubter carefully prods the wound with his index finger. John 20: 24-28. Tellingly, the hands of the other two apostles are concealed, although they are clearly curious and scarcely less restrained than Thomas. The three apostles don't question Christ's identity but are fascinated by his wound as physical evidence of his existence as a man in the world, though no longer of it. Christ is understanding, indulgent rather

than reproachful. He is a man made of flesh and blood, not a disembodied spirit. He is not painted with a halo, and the wound is visceral and very real. Caravaggio knew much about knife wounds - he had a reputation as a street fighter. Jesus' resurrection is literal.

### **Christ Appearing to the Apostles after the Resurrection – William Blake (c 1795)**

In the final chapter of Luke's Gospel, two angels announce that Christ has risen from the tomb. Later, Christ himself appears to his disciples. As Blake shows here, they are terrified, thinking that they are seeing a ghost. Christ tries to reassure them by holding out his hands to show the wounds he received at the crucifixion, Luke 24: 36-39.

### **Road to Emmaus – Duccio Di Buoninsegna (1308-1311)**

Luke also tells how Christ appeared to the disciples on their way to Emmaus, a village just outside Jerusalem. That story is the inspiration for this painting by the Sieneese artist Duccio Di Buoninsegna.

Duccio follows Luke's narrative but shows Christ as a medieval pilgrim - see the knapsack on his shoulder, the pilgrim's staff in his hand and the typical wide-brimmed hat in his back. On the right is

a village on a hill; it draws our vision to the right, with a sense of movement.

Jesus is walking up to the disciples to engage them in conversation. “What are you fellows talking about?” Jesus asks. To which they reply incredulously: “Are you the only person who hasn’t heard about the strange things that have happened in Jerusalem?” Luke 24: 17-18.

See how their eyes meet as they speak - phantoms do not engage with their eyes. But Jesus does as he walks along and explains what those things meant. He is alive.

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## **6. Our eternal destiny in Jesus.**

**Resurrection of the dead – a detail from *The Last Judgement*,  
Michelangelo (1536-1541)**

*The Last Judgment* is one of the best known and most admired works of art ever created - a fresco by the Italian Renaissance painter Michelangelo, covering the whole altar wall of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. It depicts the Second Coming of Christ and the final and eternal judgment by God of all humanity. The souls of

humans rise and descend to their fates, as judged by Christ who appears in glory and majesty at the top of the altar wall.

Michelangelo was a master of muscles, sinews and physicality. In this detail from the lower part of the fresco, we can see corpses in their shrouds becoming living muscles, flesh and bone again as they arise from their graves. Two bodies are being lifted up on the right-hand side, and a creature resembling the devil is trying to tug one of them back.

What Michelangelo has painted is not a super efficient production line to resuscitate the dead. It is the dynamic launch pad for bringing people back to life again, people with unique personalities and backgrounds and a shared faith in Christ as they look upward to their Saviour. Their bodies are being pulled up from the pit of death as they morph into physical perfection.

Resurrection of the dead is both spiritual and intensely physical - and very personal.

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