

**You are always Home for PASCHA**  
**by Donnie Carmichael**

You are always home for PASCHA. Home is with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Since They are everywhere present filling all things, you are always home filled with the joy of PASCHA. Be that at “home,” thousands of miles from home, hundreds of feet beneath the ocean, or even miles in space.

I have always loved and still do love PASCHA. My year basically revolves around it. And even when it is PASCHA-tide, I want to relive PASCHA more and more, every Sunday and every day. Every year through college I was at my “home” parish with my family, my Church family, all its familiarity and usual festivities. At the end of college I joined the Navy. The Navy is not necessarily conducive to taking time off. So PASCHA 2007 came around and I couldn’t go back to Holy Trinity Church in Springfield, VT. I was blessed to spend PASCHA at Holy Ascension in Charleston, SC. My sister came to be with me for the weekend. Even though I missed home, it was a wonderful PASCHA with new (and some already very familiar) family and traditions. But I thought “next year I’ll be home, just one year away is good.”

Next year came along. After 15 months of classroom and simulator training for the Submarine Force, I had just gotten to my boat, the USS New Hampshire SSN 778, as a fresh Ensign the first week of Lent. I was certain I would be home for PASCHA because it was a new construction submarine that was still being built and wasn’t scheduled to go out for sea trials until August. After a few weeks of being there, my boss, the executive officer (XO), told me, “you’re going to ride another submarine for a

month to get qualified [required experience to supervise the nuclear power plant and drive the submarine].” It turns out that sub was leaving port on Holy Monday. I didn’t really know what to think and I couldn’t say no. I was in the Navy and you don’t really have a choice about these things. I really didn’t know how to comprehend missing PASCHA or my first underway on a submarine, let alone both at the same time. So I packed my sea bag and “luckily” I had the Department of Religious Education/SVS Holy Week and PASCHA books, the Reader’s Service, a Bible, and the lectionary calendar. I figured I’d just have to read the services and maybe there will be some other Orthodox on the submarine. But I still thought that, “this will be just one year. God wants me to learn something. I’ll be home next year.” I told my parents and they were just as sad that we wouldn’t be together again. My dad, who is a priest and with whom I have served as his chief altar boy since I was 6 years old, sent me a card (unexpectedly) with the icon of the Resurrection/Descent into Hades on the front. On the inside it said, “Dear Donnie, Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen! You’re forever at my right hand at PASCHA. Love, Dad.” I cried.

The first time on a submarine is overwhelming for a number of reasons. 18-hour days, strange watch rotation, figuring out the sleep and meal schedule, ramping-up on submarine etiquette, all sorts of strange words/phrases, acronyms, acronyms within acronyms, flipping countless pages of a qualification standard with even more countless signature blocks for knowledge factors and practical factors, learning forward from aft and port from starboard. On top of all that, it’s Holy Week and I just want to go home or at least read through whatever service is happening.

Well, I didn't get through many of the service books. But Holy Saturday lunch-time came. We had kielbasa. How wonderful I thought. God is looking out for me, something familiar. At lunch the captain said "all the ensigns are watching a movie with me tonight." He's the captain, so we watched a movie with him. In between lunch and the movie, I check my email. My mom sent me one - "we sung about Jonah and the whale yesterday and we all thought of you and our prayers are with you!" My response was "I'm no Jonah, and I'm pretty sure living conditions are better than a whale. Thank you for your prayers." Most movies underneath the sea start at 2000 (8:00 pm for you non-nautical folk). I don't remember what the movie was but I gradually started to feel the joy one experiences at PASHCA, hundreds of feet beneath the sea. It was about 2130/9:30pm. I thought how wonderful this is, to know that it is PASCHA, without having attended a service, seen the inside of a Church, or light a candle. Even though it's not midnight local time, PASCHA is already being celebrated. The movie ended and I went to my rack read through the PASCHA matins and Reader's service singing the melodies I knew in my head. Next year I'll be home I thought.

Well next year came along. We had a very busy winter and spring to get ready for a mini 3-month deployment in May. As anyone with military experience knows, the schedule kept changing. And changing. And changing. I wasn't too worried because I had an experience of missing PASCHA under my belt and I was confident that everything would work out for me being home. The beginning of April came and things weren't looking so good. We had our pre-deployment over-seas certification

during Holy Week and no one could miss that. But we were supposed to let the certification/inspection team off on Holy Friday in Florida and then transit back to home-port in Groton, CT to arrive on Bright Monday. Great! I'll just submit a leave chit and miss three days of underway transit. This will work. I'll be home.

Denied! Leave chit disapproved. Couldn't miss the underway transit. Here we go again. Two years in a row. How? Why? I did this once already. Where am I going to get the strength to do this again? Well there were two fortunate experiences that prepared me. One Presanctified Liturgy my good friend Andrew was visiting St Nicholas in Norwich, CT and I also had the opportunity to go. He gave me a CD with the PASCHA Nocturns, Matins, and Liturgy service and music. I cheated and listened to it early. The second opportunity was the ability to go home for Palm Sunday. I got off duty Lazarus Saturday morning and somehow made the decision (and had the energy) to make a 3 and a half hour drive home to Springfield, VT and made it in time for Vespers. It was a wonderful surprise for family, my church family, and me. Then after Liturgy on Sunday and an early Bridegroom Matins, I got back in the car to get ready for underway Holy Monday morning. As Holy Week and our overseas certification progressed, all I could think about more and more was why am I missing PASCHA again? I did a little better than last year with regard to reading the service books but not much. All of a sudden though it was Holy Saturday night. I got in my rack, got my PASCHA book and reader's service, and iPod with the PASCHA services/music. And it was PASCHA, the joy was there! Having the music really made a difference and helped bring the peace and joy of PASCHA. Most of us know

the book "Goodnight Moon." At the end of the Reader's Service, I said, "Christ is Risen" out loud, and then Christ is Risen in my head to everyone and everything I could think of just like in "Goodnight Moon."

I woke up for watch a few hours later and went to breakfast. Another good friend of mine, Joe, happened to be riding my submarine to qualify. He was in the same situation as me last year. Joe wasn't Orthodox but he had come to Church with me a couple of times. He was at breakfast too and I greeted him with "Christ is Risen!" And he responded with "Indeed!" There were hard-boiled eggs for breakfast that morning on the table and my mom had given me Cadbury mini-eggs to take and share. We surfaced off the coast of Florida to drop off the inspection team. I was in the bridge and brought up my cell phone. Cell phones don't work far from land. But I guess the wind was blowing in the right direction that day (which I know has nothing to do with signal strength). Because I have enough reception to call home for about 5-10 minutes talk to my dad and say "Christ is Risen!" What a difference hearing and saying those words makes! How wonderful I thought. I'll be home for PASCHA next year. I'm not Jonah, surely God wouldn't have me spend three years "in the belly of the whale."

Well, PASCHA 2010 came around, and would you know, I made it home to Holy Trinity in Springfield, VT. I even got time off. I left work Holy Wednesday at noon and didn't have to be back until Bright Monday at noon. I left the submarine and shipyard as excited as ever, picked up my sister at the airport on the way home and

even got an hour nap in before Presanctified Liturgy followed by a small unction service. After Holy Thursday Liturgy, everything fell into place as we moved the Gol-ga'tha into the certain of the Church for that evening. All the usual and familiar things came flooding into my memory, almost in disbelief as if it wasn't really happening. Shortly after Holy Thursday Liturgy my Dad and I drove to get my brother from college for the rest of the weekend. So now not only was I home for PASCHA, but the whole family, Dad, Mom, Mary, David, and me were together again. The rest of the Holy Days progressed with all of their Tradition and traditions. PASCHA night came and it was beautiful and radiant. Everything was well with the world again. I had gone through trials, and now here is the reward. After Liturgy and the customary meal and basket sharing (with horseradish flavored vodka – talk about kick) I woke up for Agape Vespers and the sun was shining with beautiful bluebird skies. It was April 4<sup>th</sup> this year I think, and it was 70 degrees out which is a heat wave for New Hampshire and Vermont any time of year. My brother and I even took the top down on the jeep for the drive home (and stopped to buy fireworks, but alas the store was closed). We worshiped, celebrated, and had an Easter egg hunt for the kids and Greek “opa” music playing in the background. When we got home we even had visitors! We put on a CD of the PASCHAL Matins and Liturgy and continued to celebrate. Our visitors left and then my dad and I stayed up until about 11:00 pm talking about many things. I didn't want to go to bed and almost couldn't, filled with so much joy and excitement. As I lay trying to fall asleep I saw a brightly shining moon and thought “this is truly a day without darkness.” If I had to sum up PASCHA in 2010 with one word it would be joy.

As with most things in the military and life the only constant is change. I was originally going to leave my boat in November of 2010. Well that changed to July of 2011. It ended up working out anyway because that was the end of my obligation and the plan was to return to civilian life. The scuttlebutt (gossip) on the boat was that we were going to do an ICEX. ICEX, short for ice exercise, is when the boat goes to the Arctic Ocean, plays war games with friendly submarines, tries new things, and surfaces through the ice. During ICEX 2011, the two boats going were even supposed to surface at the North Pole. This was really exciting, to go under the ice cap, drive a submarine, and surface. The crew underwent countless hours of practicing in simulators and training in classrooms to prepare. This was going to be awesome except; I was going to miss PASCHA again. Why I thought? This once and a lifetime opportunity wasn't worth it. Why did I get extended, why another year without PASCHA? I can't do this again. Many family and Orthodox friends tried to console me. I could only respond with "if you're not part of the greatest story ever told [the life of Jesus] then there's no point in having any other stories." Only a mother, my mom, could offer a story that provided comfort. "An old man was very sick in the hospital and about to die. His family came to visit him and when they arrived at his room they saw no Icons. They asked the man if they should go get some. He said 'no that's ok. I have Christ in my heart.'" I still had no idea how I was going to make it through missing PASCHA again.

We left for ICEX at the end of February. Don't buy into global warming – it was very cold and more ice than you could see. We surfaced through the ice about half a dozen times, played war games, and even hosted some dignitaries and a news crew. It was a wonderful experience, something I'll never forget. But still something was not right. We were supposed to pull in to Faslane, Scotland at the end of ICEX for a liberty port over Lazarus Saturday/Palm Sunday weekend. There were rumors though that Faslane was going to get cancelled and we were going to get surged deployed immediately after ICEX. (Surge deployment means that a mission has come up and a boat needs to go take care of it ASAP. The surge mission is one that cannot be worked into any other submarine's normal 6-month deployment every two-year cycle.) To most people this was upsetting news. To me, if this rumor were true it means that we would arrive in Groton sometime during Holy Week, and I could at least be in a Church for PASCHA maybe even home. We would need at least a week to load out the boat and the in-port certification for the mission. Although I never told anyone from the crew, I hoped we weren't going to Faslane.

Well the part about cancelling Faslane turned out to be a rumor but the surge deployment was real. We made it to Faslane and there are few things like a foreign liberty port that really brings a crew together. Another wonderful experience, but was it really worth it especially since I had already visited there? We left Faslane on Holy Tuesday. I once again had my Holy Week Service books, Bible, Reader's Service, and a lot more liturgical music this year. I made it through reading more service books this year. Towards the end of the week I noticed on the plan of the week (a

Microsoft Outlook calendar) that there was training for officers on PASCHA/Easter Sunday morning at 0100/1:00am. This can't be right. We've never had training on a Sunday and we've never had training on the mid-watch (0000-0600). This has got to be an electronic typo or scheduling error. I ignored it. But then the printed plan of the day (POD) came out on Saturday that also has Sunday's POD on it. And the training was scheduled still at 0100 on Sunday morning. Maybe nobody noticed it, it was blindly copied and pasted, or it had to have been such a typo that it couldn't be true. I asked the "powers that be" about the typo/scheduling glitch. I was told the training was happening, and make sure everyone else knows to be there. So bizarre, is this for real? Is this some clever CO/XO ploy to get all the junior officers to watch a movie? (That happens often.) I still didn't know what to think. After dinner on Holy Saturday, I knew I needed some sleep. I can't remember when I started reading Nocturns/Matins/Liturgy but I know some of it was before and some after this poorly scheduled training session. We had the training session, no one was really awake, to say participation was poor at best is an exaggeration, but we held out for the whole hour. I was frustrated. No one else in the room (I imagine) knew the "real reason" we should be up this hour – celebrating the saving PASCHA of our Lord. We finished, and a few of us junior officers went to our stateroom to do what junior officers can be pretty good at – complaining. I wasn't angry yet, just really frustrated. I had some Cadbury eggs and I shared them with my dear friends Timmy, Will and Garth. I tried to teach them "Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!", explain the Liturgical and celebratory events of this "chosen and Holy Day" and although they were receptive, they didn't quite understand. To fully understand, or begin to

understand, that Christ is Risen, you have to experience PASCHA Liturgy. We parted ways to our racks for the remainder of the night. I finished the PASCHA service and went to sleep filled with the Joy of the Resurrection.

There is always an hour blocked out on Sunday mornings on the POD for Catholic and Protestant Lay Services. I had the morning watch (0600-1200) and at our pre-watch supervisor brief we told everyone that if you have someone on watch who wants to go to (or you want to go) to services on Easter Sunday we'll get you a relief so you can go. We coordinated with those who wanted to go and there were no hiccups.

On watch, there are certain training evolutions or drills that you perform to stay proficient. The captain gives in his "night orders" what specific evolutions or a topic he wants you to cover and sometimes gives direction as to how many per watch. So we, the watch supervisors, decided to run a training evolution during the one hour Sunday service block as we had many to complete that morning. This training evolution would only affect those on watch and since there was no one on watch who still wanted to go to lay services, this was no problem. We commenced the training evolution/drill (which was a mini-fire drill), and shortly after announcing the evolution on the 1MC (ship-wide PA/speaker systems), the "powers that be" comes screaming into the control room.

“What are you doing!?! It’s Easter Morning during services and you choose to do what? Cancel it now!” I got so angry, so angry. I wanted to strangle him and start shouting back. All these thoughts ran through my head, “what about the people in the wardroom [i.e. me] that celebrate starting at midnight? You don’t think we thought of people wanting to go to services *this* morning?” Oh I was angry and want to grab him by the neck. Really. But I didn’t, nor did I say anything. I just stood there silently, staring him down. By this point the training exercise was over so cancelling it didn’t matter. He stormed off and I stood there silently and probably as angry and as frustrated as I had ever been. But how could I be angry on PASCHA? So many lessons learned from years before both above and beneath the sea. I tried to let these feelings of anger go, but I couldn’t. All day long I fought this frustration and anger by saying/singing “Christ is Risen” in my head. But it was no easy task. As the weeks went on the feelings of anger and frustration subsided but for a long time I probably won’t forget that you can be angry on PASCHA.

We pulled in on Bright Tuesday only to leave again a week later for surge deployment. I made it to Church for St Thomas Sunday and the Blessing of the Graves afterwards. Then I met my mom and brother halfway between home and CT at our grandparents for dinner. I shared stories of ICEX and Faslane, and they shared stories of PASCHA and Easter. It was a wonderful AntiPASCHA or as I started to call it that day (for those of us who don’t really understand Greek - Little PASCHA).

The boat left for surge deployment and before I knew it, we were back in Groton. My discharge date, July 31 2011 came fairly quickly, and as happy as could be I took my DD-214 (Navy discharge paperwork) in hand and was gleaming looking at SUBASE Groton in the rear view mirror for the last time. Freedom! No more underway, no more duty, no more nonsense Navy policies. I still miss the friends I've made and keep in touch with them. But I won't miss being underway or stuck on the boat in-port for important life events like weddings, graduations, birthdays, name days, funerals, Feast Days, and PASCHAs.

I took a few months off before I started a job again to travel, visit people I hadn't seen in a long time and just do nothing. The first week of November came and four job offers all came at once. All had their pros and cons. After a tough week of weighing all the options, I decided to take the job where I wouldn't have to travel or work weekends or evenings. It wasn't the most money or the greatest benefits, it wasn't close to home, but I would always have weekends and evenings to go to Church. I started my new job in San Diego in January 2012.

Before I moved though my Dad and I went to visit Fr Sergious, a monk priest who had lived on Mt. Athos in Greece for 8 years and long-time family friend serving at Holy Resurrection in Berlin, NH, for lunch during the Nativity Feast. I told him of some of my experiences on the good ship USS New Hampshire, SSN 778, why I wanted to leave the Navy, and about missing PASCHA. He told me "Well, God is with us no matter where we are!" How simple and how beautiful! I had heard those

words “God is with us” at Compline probably at least one hundred times over the years. But now it made sense or at least I saw/understood it in a new light. Five years in the Navy, four years at a Merchant Marine service academy, and 18 years before that just to learn that God is with us. Always, everywhere, no matter what. I understood why I had had been on a submarine for PASCHA. All the experiences were suddenly worth it.

At the beginning of January I flew to the West coast and started my new job as assistant dock master for a shipyard. I was very excited, because I was 100% certain that I was going home to Holy Trinity in Springfield, VT this year for PASCHA. Why not, I had “learned my lesson” and in a few months all would be right with the world again. Well, turns out I still hadn’t learned everything. Between finishing a maintenance period for the dry-dock (maintaining and serving the dry-dock is my primary responsibility) that ended on Bright Monday and docking a ship on Bright Tuesday, there was no way to get the time off to fly home for PASCHA. It wasn’t feasible to take Holy Friday off either. It was very strange, still thoughts of why? But this year was much easier though, after having been strengthen through years past and knowing that I would still be on dry land for all of Lent, Holy Week, PASCHA, and PASCHA-tide. I still didn’t quite understand though, why I couldn’t be with my immediate family and the Church family I grew up with.

I found that there is a wonderful Orthodox Community in San Diego, as well as a wonderful Church, St Katherine, to attend regularly. Everyone in San Diego has

made me feel at home. As PASCHA grew closer, I continued to learn more and more valuable lessons regarding prayer, fasting, and almsgiving more than previous years combine. During Holy Week I made it to as many services as I could, disregarding sleep, food, and folded laundry. I would go to different Churches in the area for Bridegroom Matins and I felt home. For Holy Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and PASCHA, St Katherine Mission “teamed-up” with St John Forerunner Chapel at Marine Corp Base, Camp Pendleton, due to the small size of St Katherine and many parishioners traveling to be home with their families. Over the past four months at St Katherine, it became home. Even though I had known Fr Jerome and his family at St John in Camp Pendleton for years, it felt initially strange to be having PASCHA somewhere else other than what had become “home.”

PASCHA night and day finally came. It was nothing but unending peace. I wasn't just home, but I was there in the Kingdom. (I'm not claiming by any means or in any sense to have an experience such as read about in the lives of the Saints but I knew there is where we belong.) If I could describe PASCHA 2010 in one word it would be Joy. If I could describe PASCHA 2012, it would be Peace. Before nocturnes started, Fr Jerome told me that he usually has to proclaim “Christ is Risen!” between the end of each Ode of the Canon and the Little Litany because the choir is of a very congregational nature. I told him “don't be scared, I'll belt out ‘Indeed He is Risen!’” “Ok” Fr Jerome said. When I hear “Christ is Risen!” I responded loudly with joy “Indeed He is Risen!” When those words, Christ is Risen, are used as a greeting, in the context of a sermon or talk, when I read them, or even when I hear it listening to

the recordings of Matins and Liturgy, I respond out-loud with "Indeed He is Risen!" no matter what time of year it is. It may seem obnoxious to some, but I know it is heartfelt. The message of the Universal Truth in the words "Christ is Risen!" cannot be contained.

During Bright Week in 2012 my good friend Andrew came to visit his brother in San Diego and we meet up a few times as well. I told him this story and he asked me to write it down to share. And that is all I wanted to do. I'm not trying to preach or evangelize or trying to say I had some sort of mystical experience like those of the Saints. It was certainly an experience for me to write all this down and not every detail is in this story. And I had no idea it would be this long written down. Some details are left out because I have forgotten and some because it was difficult enough to put into context what I already have. (I'm much better with numbers than words.) There are also many more people and places that have contributed to this experience. I did not mean to leave anyone out or embarrass anyone. And I cannot say that any one contribution is more important than another so I apologize if you were left out or did not want to be included. I will certainly continue to learn more about the six years told here and the 21 before it. And most importantly, thank all of you for your prayers over the years and to come. I would not be here today without them or God. Christ is Risen! (And it only gets better!)