

THE EASTER ICON: DEATH IS NO MORE

Contrary to the usual Western artistic portrayals, the traditional Eastern Christian icon of the resurrection is unique in that the actual resurrection of Christ is never shown. Following the lead of the Gospels which are silent about that moment and give no indication of how Christ rose, the Eastern iconographer has accepted the mysterious and unfathomable character of the event and the actual impossibility of depicting it. In fact, Eastern tradition is rather disinterested in the physical aspects of the resurrection, operating on the believe that one who stops short at the mere historical event can never comprehend the full significance and mystery of the event for all mankind.

For the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Christian, the real significance of Christ's resurrection is the Pascha or Passover from death to life. St. John Chrysostom stresses this point in his famous Easter homily, still read in Byzantine churches before the Easter Liturgy:

“O Death, where is your sting? O hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen and you are overthrown. Christ is risen and the demons are cast down. Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and life is freed. Christ is risen and the tomb is emptied of the dead; for Christ, being risen from the dead, has overcome Death and has become the Leader and Reviver of those who have fallen asleep.”

Against all that we know, see or feel, the resurrection of Christ teaches that Death is no more and that we are now “Sons of the Resur-

rection”, as early Christians in the Middle East called themselves. Even the dead in the graves are no longer under the power of Death but already have within themselves the seed of the new life. In the Passover of Christ from death to life we accomplish this Passover as His people, His community, His chosen inheritance.

Thus the resurrection of Christ is never considered as an isolated event but only in relation to the transformation of our mortality that it effects: the risen Christ is the principle of our incorruptibility and deification.

THE HARROWING OF HELL

The icon of the resurrection, therefore, does not depict the actual moment of Christ's rising but rather the descent into hell. This is represented as taking place in the depths of the earth, shown by the rocklike formations and the gaping black abyss in the foreground. Dominating hell is the figure of the risen Lord, larger in scale than the other figures and by His very posture indicative of life, movement, and action. Resplendent in white garments and surrounded by a mandorla of light in shades of blue covered with stars, the Christ figure shatters the darkness of hell by His presence. Below Him in the abyss lie broken chains, locks, keys, and sometimes the very gates of hell, heralding the complete destruction of the power of Death over mankind from this moment on. And yet, amid the glory and victory, the wounds of the passion are clearly visible on the hands and feet of the Savior: as ever, Christ leads to glory through suffering, pain, and self-immolation.

The central message of the icon is seen in the tender lifting up of Adam and Eve from the tombs of their imprisonment and death. Listless and lifeless, they contrast with the vitality of Christ, Life itself, who draws them to Himself, into the radiance of the new life and the light of incorruption which is now to be theirs.

As Adam and Eve, the firstborn of the human race, are raised; so all of us, their descendants, experience with them His boundless love and celebrate with them the annihilation of Death, the destruction of hell, and the beginning of a new life which is eternal. As the great theologian, St. John of Damascus, expressed it, “When He had freed those who were bound from the beginning of time, Christ returned from the dead, having now opened for all of us the way to resurrection.”

Approaching this wonderful scene of the resurrection of all mankind as portrayed in the raising of Adam and Eve, are the Just Ones of the Old Law who had hoped with expectation of this day. Especially significant among the patriarchs, prophets, and holy men are David the King with regal crown, accompanied by St. John the Baptist and Forerunner whose hand pierces the mandorla of light, ever pointing out Him who is the light and salvation of all mankind.

Far from being an attempt to depict the historical setting, the Eastern icon of the resurrection is a profound meditation on the deepest theological meaning of Easter. Easter is truly for us the Passover (Pascha), for Christ through His passion and resurrection brought us back from the curse of Adam and the bondage of Satan to the state of the people of God. “Today is the day of the resurrection: O nations, let us be jubilant; for this Passover is the Passover of the Lord, in that

Christ has made us pass from death to life and from earth to heaven: we who sing to Him triumphant praise.” (First Ode of the Eastern Canon).

Comprehending this great mystery of mysteries and feast of feasts, let us all glorify his third-day resurrection: “Christ is risen from the dead and by His death He has trampled upon death and has given life to those who were in the tomb.” (Troparion of Pascha).

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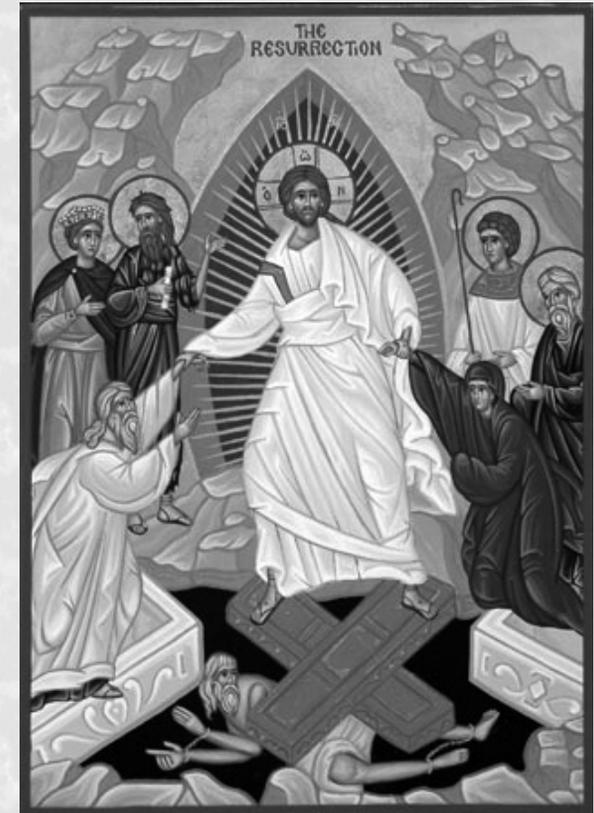
oday Hades tearfully sighs: “Would that I had not received Him who was born of Mary, for He came to me and destroyed my power. He broke my bronze gates and, being God, delivered those I had been holding captive.” Glory to Your cross and resurrection, O Lord!

Today Hades tearfully sighs: “My power has vanished! I received One who died as mortals die, but I could not hold Him. With Him and through Him I lost those over whom I had ruled. I had held control over the dead since the world began, and lo, He raises them all up with Him.” Glory to Your cross and resurrection, O Lord!

Today Hades tearfully sighs: “My power has crumbled, for the Shepherd who was crucified has raised Adam, and those whom I had possessed I lost. Those whom I had swallowed up by my might, I have given up completely: for the Crucified has emptied the graves and the power of death has vanished.” Therefore glory to Your cross and resurrection, O Lord!

(Vespers Stichera, Great Saturday)

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