

# Icons of the Resurrection and Ascension

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The Church teaches us that an icon is a visual expression of a spiritual reality, that through the icon, an everlasting and unchanging reality speaks without words. It is in this sense that an icon truly becomes an educator; but if we misunderstand this idea, if we approach the icon in a manner which is wrong, it will not, indeed it cannot, open itself to us. It will instead seem strange and silent. First we must understand that an icon does not simply give us accurate and historical information, it is not an illustration of a past event. If it were, it would be separating us from this event and saying to us: "too bad you were not there." But the Church brings all things together, She brings together all that is separated, even time; for in God there is neither past nor future, and the Church lives in that Day which is beyond time. In the icon the past events of our salvation are made present to us, the saints of old are made present to us; there is not "one dead in the grave," but all are alive in Christ, and we too become partakers of this heavenly reality. It is the same as in our liturgical celebration. We remember events of the past, but as Father Alexander Schmemmann says, the whole meaning and power of the Liturgy is that it transforms remembrance into reality. And this is why many of the Festal hymns begin with the word "Today . . ." This is why the icon is a symbolic representation, and not illusionistic. So if we try to "read" an icon as an illustration it will not work.

What is the proper way to approach an icon, how do we learn from it, how do we partake of it? When we pray in front of an icon it opens itself to us. The Church teaches us through the icons and through the Liturgy, which are Her words of prayer. One of the most fruitful learning experiences is to stand in Church in front of the icon of the particular feast day or saint that is being commemorated and to listen to the words of the hymns and the readings for that day. Here the icon comes alive. With our eyes we see and with our ears we hear and with our lips we pray, and the reality that the icon is giving pictorial expression to becomes known to us. This is the most direct way to learn from the icon. Yet beyond our own liturgical experience there are commentaries and meditations written by those whose minds are rooted in the same spirit, and whose words rise out of the liturgical experience of the Church, and these can also be helpful to teach us.

With this basic understanding we can turn to two of the main icons of the Paschal season, the icon of the "Descent into Hades" and the icon of the Ascension. Let us try to gain some insights into the meaning of these icons with the help of liturgical texts and some commentaries. When these two icons are placed before us, one next to the other, their basic unity is clearly perceived in a theme which we hear very often in the Bible and the Church services: that Christ's saving work involves both His descent to earth and His ascent to Heaven: "He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being likened to the body of our lowliness, . . . and having made for all flesh a path to the Resurrection from the dead . . . He has likened us to the image of His glory." (Liturgy of St. Basil).

"The more a person contemplates the icons, the more he will be reminded of what they represent, the more he will be inclined to venerate them by kissing them, prostrating himself, without, however, evincing towards them the true adoration which belongs to God alone, yet they are to be offered incense and lights, as are the Holy Cross and the Holy Gospels . . . Whoever venerates an icon, venerates the person it represents." -The Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, A.D. 787

## The Descent into Hades

The Feast of the Resurrection is our Feast of feasts and the basis of our faith. St. Paul says that if Christ is not raised from the dead then our faith is in vain. (1 Cor. 15:14). There are two representations of this feast day: the icon of "the Myrrhbearing Women at the Sepulchre", and the "Descent into Hades" which is the icon we are discussing. The first is from the Gospel account and has historical basis, the second is a symbolic representation. The Descent into Hades is not an event that was seen, it is a "painting of theology," as Father Alexander Schmemmann says, which corresponds to the meaning of the event.

The icon of the Descent is very simply an image of Christ, the Victor". . . Trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life." It is an icon rich in meaning. It takes place in Hades, also called Sheol. The term Hades should not be confused with the word hell, as generally understood as opposite of heaven. Hades is a term used in the Old Testament to describe the place where all the dead go; whether righteous or evil. The icon shows us the very depths of the earth, a gaping black abyss, the place referred to in the Old Testament precisely as Hades.

Upon His death, Christ descended into the regions of Hades. A verse on Ps. 119 sung during the Matins of Holy Saturday says, "Wishing to save Adam Thou didst come down to the earth; not finding him on earth, O Master, Thou didst descend to Hades seeking him." The hymns of Holy Saturday commemorate His presence in Hades and the chanting of Ps. 119 and its verses marvel at His condescension. The fact that Christ appears in Hades is a wonder, "O life, how canst Thou die?" (Verse on Ps 119.) It is also a confrontation between He who is Life, and death itself, the last enemy (1Cor 15: 26).

The theme of Christ's death is always interwoven with His Resurrection, and this message pervades all our Church services, especially, those of Holy Friday and Saturday. So the icon of Christ's death is that of victory. Acts 2:24 says that it was impossible for Him to be held by Hades power. He appears not as a captive but as the Victor. In the icon He appears in luminous golden robes in the middle of a halo, the symbol of glory, with rays of light issuing from Him.

"Now all is filled with light: Heaven and earth and the lower regions." (Paschal Kanon, Ode 3) "When Thou didst descend into death, Thou didst slay hell with the splendor of Thy Godhead." He tramples underfoot the gates of Hades which He has pulled down. (Troparion) "Thou didst break the everlasting bars which had held death's captives." (Paschal Kanon, Ode 6)

The icon shows "that Hell was embittered" when it met Christ. Often this is symbolized by two angels binding Satan. The verses on "Lord I Call" for Holy Saturday all speak vividly of this: "Today hell cries out groaning" and "hell shuddered when it beheld Thee." He holds in his left hand either a scroll, the message of the resurrection or the cross, now the symbol of Victory. With His right hand He raises Adam from the grave and with him Eve and all those who await His coming; King David, Solomon, John the Forerunner, Moses and the prophets. "Hell has been captured and Adam recalled, the curse has been annulled and Eve set free." (Theotokion-Vigil for the Resurrection) Christ's descent into Hades is the final abasement in His self-emptying. He takes on all of our human nature so that it can be saved, and not only saved but glorified as well. By descending into Hades He has opened to Adam, and to us, the "path to the Resurrection. We sing in Ode 1 of the Paschal Kanon," . . . for from death to life and from earth to heaven has Christ our God led us." We exalt the "beginning of another life" But the Resurrection is not the end of His saving work, for in His Ascension, He took our nature with Him into Heaven.

## The Ascension of Our Lord

Thus, we know Christ's Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection as inseparable from His Ascension. A hymn of Ascension proclaims: "We worship Thy Passion, We honor Thy Resurrection, We glorify Thy glorious Ascension." The icon shows that as Christ was raised from the dead in a physical body. He departs physically from this earth in His Ascension to the Father in glory. This is manifested in the icon by His throne, and once again the halo that surrounds Him. The concentric circles here are a symbol of the high heavens. He goes ahead to abide in that Kingdom which is to come, to sit at the Father's right hand. He is accompanied by angels who are the expression of His glory and greatness and also are a symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The emphasis in the Gospel narratives of this event, as well as in the liturgical texts and in the icons itself, is, as we see, not on the figure of Christ, but on those that stand below Him. This group represents the Church, which He visibly leaves on earth. As Leovid Ouspensky says, the icon speaks of the establishment of the Body of Christ and the relationship to Her head, which is Christ. The group consists of the twelve apostles, but also the Theotokos and St. Paul, two that are not in the Gospel narrative. The inclusion of them is a good example of how the icon transcends time. It cannot be read as an actual illustration or "newspaper photo". Rather, it reveals to us what is more important for our understanding of the Ascension of our Lord and the establishment of the Church. The Theotokos stands as the central axis of the group which is her place in the Church. The Apostles' gesture and turn their heads upward towards the source of Life of the Church. "Come let us rise and turn our eyes and thoughts on high.. ." (Ascension Canon). With His right hand He blesses them. Christ had told them, "If I do not go away, The Counselor will not come to you" (Jn 16:17), and even as He leaves He says, "Lo, I am with you always" (Mt. 28:20). The Kontakion describes the icon very well: "When Thou didst fulfill the dispensation for our sake, and unite earth to heaven, Thou didst ascend in glory O Christ our God not being parted from those who love Thee, but remaining with them and crying : I am with you and no one will be against you." All this is to say that the icon, as well as the feast itself, looks to and is fulfilled in the Pentecost; He goes that He might send the Holy Spirit.

Within these two icons we see the mystery of Christ's saving work. He has filled all things with Himself and by so doing unites earth we are made partakers with Him of the divine life. In our baptism we partake in His death, and it is He alone who pulls us up out of the depths of Hades. "Today Thou dost ascend in glory from the Mount of Olives. Thou hast shared our human nature. Today Thou hast raised it up to the Father's throne on high . . ." (Aposticha of Ascension.)

## Further Reading

- Ouspensky, L. and Lossky, V., The Meaning of Icons, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. Crestwood, N.Y. 1982.
- Ouspensky, L., Theology of the Icon, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. Crestwood, N.Y. 1978
- Schmemmann, A., A Liturgical Explanation for the Days of Holy Week. DRE, OCA. 1979.