

## RESSURECTION OF THE CHRIST (a few words about the feast and its iconography)

Ján HUSÁR

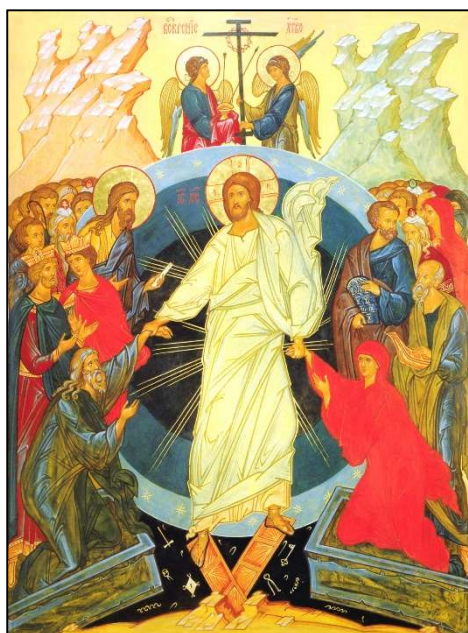
Pravoslávna bohoslovecká fakulta Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove, Prešov,  
Slovenská republika

### **Troparion, tone 5:**

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life!

### **Kontakion, tone 8:**

Thou didst descend into the tomb, O Immortal, / Thou didst destroy the power of hell. / In victory didst Thou arise, O Christ God, / proclaiming "Rejoice!" to the myrrh-bearing women; / granting peace to Thine apostles, // and bestowing resurrection on the fallen. [6]

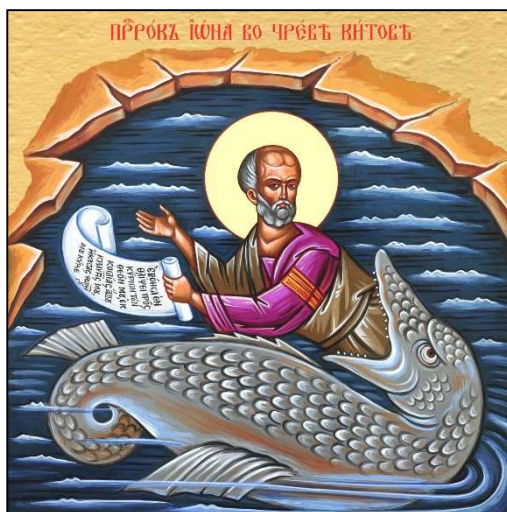


Without the Resurrection our faith would be empty, our acts without meaning. A correct understanding of the iconography of the Christian feasts is a necessary component of the basic education of all believers, which relates to theological and soteriological issues. In the minds of people Christs Resurrection was always connected with the idea of redemption from sin. Christ experienced death just as every human being, but his death ultimately led to the destruction of death. Christ had risen, vanquished death through death and gave life to those in tombs. This is the meaning of the *Troparion* of Christs Resurrection. It is necessary to say, that the very moment of the

Resurrection was not seen by anyone and thus it is inaccessible to human minds, and therefore there is no icon which would capture this moment. This was one of the reasons why the icon of the Resurrection was in the Orthodox tradition exchanged with the icon of Christs descent into Hades, where the idea of human redemption from eternal death is emphasised. The depiction of Christ who is

going out of the tomb with flags in his hands, with groups of sleeping soldiers, is a later unorthodox intrusion from Western Art on to the feast of Resurrection, and offers an inaccurate view of the understanding of God. The West attempts to understand everything by rational constructs and therefore it also attempted to rationalize the Resurrection and depict it. However the Resurrection was inaccessible to human eyes. Also the icon of the nativity of Jesus Christ does not depict the moment of birth, and how this took place is left to the imagination of our faith.

From the beginning, the theme for the writing of the icon of the Resurrection took its cause from the book of the prophet Jonas, who after spending three days in the bowels of the whale, was thrown out. Three days in the bowels of the whale, prefigured Christ's three days in the tomb. [1] Later (around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century), the themes of this icon were taken out of the Gospels. Most often the theme of the appearance of the angel to the Oil bearing women at Christ's tomb. [5] Around the sixth century, another theme appears, which is Christ's descent



into Hades, which according to Orthodox teaching, occurred on Great Saturday and which prefigured Christ's Resurrection in light. Later other themes appeared: the appearance of Christ to Mary of Magdalene, the appearance to the eleven disciples (the icon on the Sunday of Thomas – *Antipascha*) and others. We can mention here the icon of the Resurrection – Descent into Hades.

The basis for the Orthodox iconography for the feast of the Resurrection was the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, where the story of Christ's descent into Hades is told. Further, the work of Eusebius of Alexandria, "The word about the descent of John the Baptist into Hades" and also the work of Epiphanius of Cyprus "The word about the burial of the body of Our Lord Jesus Christ", which were written in the fourth century. In the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus we read: "And then the Lord of glory, the powerful God with his strength had overcome death, caught the Devil, he tied him, presented him to



eternal punishment and took our forefather Adam, together with the prophets and all saints who, where in Hades into his enlightened glory...and God presenting his hand said: Come all to Me, who are my saints, because you have my image- you, who, where condemned to death due to the diabolical wood. Now however, you see, how I have condemned death with wood. [6]

The iconography of the feast of the descent into Hades was formed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the Byzantine environment. The event which is taking place on the icon, is happening as if in the bowels of the earth- in hell, which is depicted in the manner of an opening black abyss. [1] In the centre of the icon there is the Saviour,

which depicts his central role in the history of salvation. The author of the Paschal canon, saint John the Damascene states: Even if Christ died as a human being and His holy spirit had departed from his most pure body, his Divinity remained united with his soul and body. Thus in hell he does not appear as its captive, but as a Victor, the Liberator of those who are captured in it, not as a servant, but as a Representative of Life. Christ is depicted with a shining halo (a circular or ellipse *mandorla*), in the symbol of glory, which is usually depicted in various shades of a bluish colour. His clothes are not those, in which he was depicted during the period of his earthly service, that is blue-red, but his colour is shining white and of a golden-yellow shading and thin yellow rays shine from them. The darkness of hell is filled with the shining of Divine rays, the shining of the glory of the God-Man who is entering it. This is the light of the future Resurrection and the shining rays symbolise the coming Pascha. The Saviour is stepping on two boards placed over each other, which symbolise the gates of hell. On many icons underneath them we can see the figure of Satan the lord of darkness who is dwelling in the abyss being thrown there and turning away. On older icons we can see further details: ruptured chains, by which angels are capturing Satan, there are further different keys here, nails, and others – all this symbolises the destruction of evil. [4]



Usually in his left hand, Christ holds a cross which is the symbol of victory over death, and with his right hand he is taking out of Hades the forefather Adam. On some icons, Christ is holding a scroll in his left hand or with both hands he is taking out Adam and Eve from Hades (then the cross is held by two angels depicted above Christ). [2] Around Christ there are the just Old Testament forefathers, kings and prophets, most often are depicted Adam and Eve, John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ in Hades, who usually points to the Messiah with his hand, whose coming he was announcing already in Hades. The icon also contains the kings David and Solomon, the first murdered human being Abel, Moses, and other just. The elevations, which are raised above the saints symbolise the upper world and depict an antithesis to the darkness of Hades. The figures of Adam and Eve protrude from the graves.



The symbolism of the colours of the forefathers is also interesting. The top parts of their clothing is different and the bottom of the same colour. Adam is in white (sometimes in grey-white) and blue and Eve is in red and blue. The blue colour of the bottom clothing symbolises, that God had created both of them, that is that they do not have bodily parents, but that they are the first people. The white garments of Adam symbolises, the fact that God created him as the first person out of dust from the earth. The red garment of Eve symbolises again the fact, the God created her out of the body of Adam ("blood from my blood"). The red-blue garment of Eve is completely identified with the garment, in which it is depicted on Orthodox icons of the Most pure Mother of God. [3] This is also not due to chance, since just as through the first (Eve) sin came into this world, so also through the second (Most Holy Mary) redemption came to this world from sin. Sometimes the foremother Eve has her left hand covered, which symbolises the fact that she had picked with this hand the forbidden fruit and had infringed upon the commandment of God.

## SUMMARY

The correct understanding of feasts, their liturgical texts and iconography is a very important feature of basic catechetical work. When one understands the

historical context and iconography and its symbolism, one is much more prepared to accept the important theological import of all Gospel events. Undoubtedly, the resurrection is the most important of Christian feasts in the liturgical year, because among other things it confirms our membership in the Kingdom of God promised to us, and to which Jesus Christ is the key. Without the Resurrection our faith would be empty, our acts without meaning. The whole meaning of the feast is summarised in the liturgical text, which states: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling over death by death, and in those in tombs bestowing life!

## REFERENCES

1. USPENSKY, L. A. 1997. *Theology of the Icon of the Orthodox Church*. Moscow, 1997. 656 p. ISBN 5-89419-009-6. /УСПЕНСКИЙ, Л. А. 1997. *Богословие иконы Православной Церкви*. Москва, 1997. 656 с. ISBN 5-89419-009-6./
2. ALEXEEV, S. 2007. *Encyclopedia of the Orthodox icon*. St. Petersburg, 2007. 246 p. ISBN 5-7373-0208-3. /АЛЕКСЕЕВ, С. 2007. *Энциклопедия православной иконы*. Санкт-Петербург, 2007. 246 с. ISBN 5-7373-0208-3./
3. EVDOKIMOV, P. 2005. *The art of an icon. Theology of Beauty*. Klin, 2005. 384 s. /ЕВДОКИМОВ, П. 2005. *Искусство иконы. Богословие красоты*. Клин, 2005. 384 с./
4. CATHERING A. - MEYENDORFF, P. 1995. *The Incarnate God : The Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary*. Volume II. Crestwood, NY : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995. pp. 103-121. ISBN 978-0881411300.
5. HALLICK, M. P. 2001. *The Story of the Icons*. Brookline, MA : Holy Cross Press, 2001. 80 s. ISBN 978-1885652423.
6. *The Resurrection – Icon of Victory* [online]. [2020-06-04]. Dostupné z: <https://iconreader.wordpress.com/2011/01/24/the-resurrection-icon-of-victory/>.

## **RESSURECTION OF THE CHRIST (a few words about the feast and its iconography)**

Jan HUSAR, docent, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Presov,  
Masarykova 15, 080 01 Presov, Slovakia, jan.husar@unipo.sk, 00421517724729

### **Abstract**

The article refers to the most important of all Christian feasts - the Resurrection of Christ with a special emphasis on iconography. It describes the historical development of the depiction of the feast and it also discusses the details of the icon of the Resurrection. A correct understanding of the iconography of the Christian feasts is a necessary component of the basic education of all believers, which relates to theological and soteriological issues.

### **Keywords**

Resurrection, Jesus Christ, iconography, symbolism, Gospel