

The Icon of the Crucifixion

As you continue your walk around the church, look for an **icon of the Crucifixion** of Jesus. You will note that this icon does not frighten us with the cold breath of death. It breathes, instead, the sweet hope of eternal life with God.

Christ is shown as standing on the cross, not hanging on it. The expression on the face of Jesus is not the open mouth of the last spasm of death, full of horror.

It is, rather, a face full of heavenly peace, gentleness, and forgiveness. For this is the suffering Savior who has undone the pangs of death and given us the peace of the life to come.

The crucified body is the very body of the God-Man Himself. It radiates the hope of the Resurrection. The Lord does not hang on the cross like some miserable criminal.

It is He, rather, who appears to be holding up the cross. His hands are not cramped as they are nailed to the wood. Instead, He spreads them out peacefully in an attitude of prayer.

Instead of filling us with the brute horror of death, the entire icon is illuminated by the light of hope in Christ.

It is full of the grace of the Holy Spirit. It breathes the nobility and gentleness of eternal life.

In some icons of the crucifixion, the sun and moon are placed in such a position above the cross as to make it appear that the outstretched hands of the Savior are holding them up.

Jesus is our King. His throne is the cross.

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

The Icon of the Resurrection

Continue your walk around the church until you come to an **icon of the Resurrection** of Jesus. This is what you will see:

This icon shows what the Resurrection of Jesus really means. It shows the risen Christ descending into the depths of death (Hades).

There He breaks the bonds of death and announces to those who lived in the Old Testament the good news of salvation from sin and death.

We see the broken doors of death flying off their hinges and arranging themselves in the form of a cross.

Then we see the second Adam, Jesus, the perfect Man, bending over an old man.

He takes him by the hand and leads him out of the tomb. That old man is Adam.

With his left hand, Jesus raises Eve out of the tomb, and, behind her, all the righteous patriarchs, prophets, and kings who lived before His coming.

He is indeed the Victorious Christ who has "trampled death by (His) death and to those in the tombs He has given life."

One day the same risen Christ will reach His hand out to you and me. He will raise us from the tomb of death to life everlasting.

Christ is risen from the dead. By His death He has destroyed death and to those in the tombs He has given life (Hymn of Pascha).

The Epitaphion and the Tomb of Jesus

Most Orthodox Churches have a beautiful tomb of Christ sitting in a corner of the sanctuary. Every Good Friday it is decorated with flowers.

On the tomb is placed an **Epitaphion** (in Slavonic, plaschanitsa). This is a rectangular piece of cloth on which is painted the Body of Jesus laid out for burial. The word *Epitaphion* means "something which is placed on top of a tomb." It reminds us of the winding sheet in which Christ's body was wrapped when it was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. In addition to the figure of Christ in the tomb, the *Epitaphion* cloth includes pictures of Mary, the Mother of God; Joseph of Arimathea, and the saintly women who took part in the burial of Jesus.

On Good Friday afternoon, the priest, representing Joseph of Arimathea, removes the body of Christ from the cross. He lays it carefully in a shroud or winding sheet. Then he carries it into the altar which stands for the tomb of Jesus.

During the afternoon service of Great and Holy Friday, the priest lifts the *Epitaphion* cloth which has the picture of Jesus lying in the tomb, and carries it in a procession around the church. The Great and Holy Friday evening service takes place around the tomb of Jesus, beautifully decorated with flowers. The *Epitaphion*, showing the Body of Jesus laid out for burial, is placed in the tomb, surrounded with flower petals.

The people gather round the tomb of Jesus and sing a funeral service for Jesus. They express their sorrow over Jesus' death. Yet even in their sorrow they sound the note of the joy of the Resurrection in their singing. Before they leave, the people kiss the Body of Jesus in the tomb. They are all given a flower from the tomb which they take home and keep on their family altar.

We worship Thy passion, O Christ; show us also Your glorious resurrection. - Holy Week Hymn

The Easter Candle

If you are visiting the church at Eastertime you will see a special candle called the **Paschal (Easter) candle**. This is kept on the holy altar table.

This candle stands for the risen Christ. It is lit in the darkened church for the Easter liturgy. It is held by the priest.

The people in church also hold candles. The priest invites the people to come and light their candles from the Paschal candle. He says to them, "Come receive light from the light that never dims, and give praise to Christ Who is risen from the dead."

When the liturgy is over, the people carry the lighted Easter candle home.

They make the sign of the cross on the front door of their house with the candle. Then they bless each room of the house with the holy light.

In order to keep the holy light in the house all year long, the Paschal candle is then used to light the small votive light that burns before the family icon.

During the forty days of Easter, Orthodox families light their Easter candles at the supper table as they sing:

Christ is risen from the dead. By his death he has destroyed death. And to those in the tombs He has given life.

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die (John 11:25).

The Eternal Light

The eternal light is a votive light that either hangs from the ceiling above the tabernacle, or burns before it on the altar table.

It is kept burning always to show that the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is “the light of the world,” is present in the tabernacle.

Because Jesus died at 3 p.m. on Holy Friday, the eternal light is put out every year at that hour.

It is lit again at the midnight Easter service to remind us that “Christ is Risen, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

We who live in darkness have now seen the great light—Jesus—who shines as “a lamp to our feet and a light to our path” (Psalm 119:105).

Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8).