

King and Lord of Days: The Eastern Orthodox Celebrate the Resurrection of Christ

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Many Christians in the west have no idea that the Eastern Orthodox Church exists. Orthodox Christians in North America - home to only about one percent of the world's three-hundred million Orthodox -- are accustomed to answering big questions: What is Orthodoxy? Do you believe in the Bible? And maybe the most common question: How come I have never heard of you before?

Orthodox people often find themselves echoing Philip's plea to Nathaniel: "Come and see!" In the season of Holy Week and Easter, Orthodox churches everywhere play host to folks who are checking out these services for the first time. The city of Victoria is no exception, and of course the doors of our Orthodox churches are always open to all, and not just at this time of year. But your first experience of any Orthodox service can be pretty overwhelming - this is, after all, the eastern Church- and the Holy Week and Easter services are overwhelming even by Orthodox standards! Here are just a few things to help you as you attend your first Orthodox 'easter' service.

Not Easter, but Pascha

Chances are you will not actually hear the word 'Easter' in Orthodox churches. Rather, the Orthodox will almost always use the word Pascha for the feast of the resurrection of Christ, as we have since about the time of the Lord's ascension. 'Pascha' is the Greek transliteration of *pesach*, which is the Hebrew word for Passover. From apostolic times the Orthodox celebration of the resurrection has been framed within the story of the Passover in Exodus.

The original Passover is the prophecy for the true Passover which Christ would accomplish through His death and resurrection on the third day. This is why Christ died on the Passover, and why He celebrated the Passover supper with His disciples. He was saying, basically, the event we are celebrating is only a prophecy, a model of the event which I am now bringing to reality before you.

As the Israelites were enslaved to Pharaoh, the world was enslaved to sin; as Moses came to be the deliverer, so came Christ, God himself, Immanuel. As the lamb slain and its blood saved the Israelites, so Christ slain saved the world from sin and death. Moses was the type, Christ is the fulfillment.

This is big. really, really big

There are twelve major feasts celebrating Christ in the Orthodox year -- and Pascha is not among them! Pascha is too big; it is the Feast of feasts, and it gives meaning to everything else we do and believe. So like the woman in the Gospel pouring costly oil on the Lord's feet, we spare nothing in our love and response to His glorious resurrection. We fill our churches with flowers, strew the floors with basil leaves and rose petals, clad the clergy in gleaming white embroidered vestments, sing heart-aching theological poetry set to beautiful music, process out into the night with candles, incense and icons,

issue wall-shaking cries of 'Christ is risen', and read aloud the Gospel in many languages, our hearts radiant in the presence of the risen Lord.

Then there is the fellowship meal, or trapeza, after the paschal services, which continues into dawn -- tables laden with food and drink, red-dyed eggs and decorated bread, and everyone in bright (or white) festive clothing. No other feast of the Church comes anywhere close to the extravagant, colourful and loud celebration of Pascha.

The eighth day

From about 70 AD the Orthodox have called the day of Pascha the eighth day. This is because Christ was raised from the dead on the first day of the week (Sunday). This day quickly came to be experienced as the first day of the new creation, the day which has no evening, the day of the Kingdom, the everlasting day of God.

For the Orthodox, the resurrection is not a postscript to the crucifixion, and the crucifixion not just about His suffering. Christ's suffering without death is meaningless, and His death without the resurrection is empty. But God raised Jesus on the third day, and this changes everything. Now His birth unites God and man in Himself, since He is perfect God and perfect Man. Now the word of the Cross has become the word of love. Now His death on the cross has 'put death to death', since death "took in a body and encountered God", as St John Chrysostom says in his exquisite Paschal Homily. Death itself is abolished, and Christ has become the first fruits of the new creation.

We can preach and celebrate all of this not because it happened once upon a time, but because it has been accomplished for all time. Thus, when the Orthodox speak of Pascha, the resurrection of Christ, it is always in the present tense. "Christ is Risen!" the priest cries out. From the nave of the church the people, the royal priesthood, joyously respond, "Indeed He is Risen!"