

AND UPON THOSE IN THE TOMBS, BESTOWING LIFE

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*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life.*



How many times, over and over, do we sing these triumphant words on Pascha and throughout the forty days of Pascha! But what do these words really mean, especially the last phrase of the Paschal Troparion, *and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life*?

Most things in Orthodoxy have multiple meanings, and so it is here. This preeminent Orthodox Paschal hymn (*that does not exist in Western Christianity*) is the bold affirmation of the historical truths that Christ is risen, and that by His death, He became victorious over the power of death, and that He brought life to those righteous souls who had previously died. This is what is clearly portrayed in the traditional Orthodox icon of the Resurrection, as we see here. The Resurrection icon clearly depicts St. John the Forerunner and Baptizer, and Old Testament righteous kings and prophets: David, Solomon, Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, (and in other icons, sometimes the 3-Holy-Children-in-the-Fiery-Furnace, and other righteous prophets, depending on how much room is available in a particular icon). And of course the two central

figures, always portrayed, being raised up from their tombs/sepulchres/coffins, are **Adam** (whose name means *man*) and **Eve** (whose name means *woman*). *But what does all that have to do with us, here and now, today?*

Here, Adam and Eve are not just the first-created human beings of the past: they represent all men and all women — all of us, you and me. Whereas the other righteous holy prophets and rulers shown in the icon stand peacefully and calmly on the ground, in contrast, Adam and Eve are being *literally* dragged and pulled up out of their coffins. If you look carefully, in every single Orthodox icon of the Resurrection of this type, Christ is grabbing Adam and Eve by their wrist, not by their hand. To be grabbed by their hand, signifies a willing collaboration. Being grabbed by their wrist, implies being forced to do something against one's will, like a naughty child being dragged by their wrist by a frustrated parent. It is also like when being born. When a baby is born, it is pulled into this world, kicking and screaming and crying. In fact, one knows that the baby is alive precisely because it *is* crying. Being born hurts! We resist it! We kick and scream and cry, because being in the womb — in our comfort zone — is safe and secure and warm and comfortable. And so it is with us. In the Paschal icon, Christ is not only giving life to those who preceded Him in death. Christ is not only promising to give eternal life to us when we physically die and are buried. The Resurrection icon visually portrays and proclaims that Christ is seeking to bring *us*, while we are still in our bodies, into new and resurrected life *now*. But we resist, because it hurts to be born. It hurts to be crucified and to die to one's self and to overcome one's ego. It is easier to wallow in our complacency and to stay within our comfort zones, walking around like corpses (and there are many corpses walking around), than to participate in Christ's crucifixion and new, resurrected life. But Christ was born in order to give us Life and to give it abundantly. Christ invites *us*, challenges *us*, to allow Him to drag and pull *us* into new Life.

But what does it mean to have Life? Does it simply mean to eat and drink and sleep and work and play? That is what it is to be alive, but not necessarily to have Life. Because we use the same words to mean many different things, we need to stop and ask ourselves what do we really mean when we use words whose meanings we think we know, but can mean very different things. *What does it mean to have Life?* It is like the Prophet Ezekiel's glorious prophesy of the dry bones that is triumphantly and dramatically chanted on Holy and Great Friday night after the procession with Christ's shroud around the church, that announces Christ's coming Resurrection: the dry bones came together, but there is no life in them until God puts His Spirit into them, that they may live and know that God is the Lord, when He raises them from their tombs.

That is the same for each one of us today. To become a new creation, to be resurrected, to have Life in us and not just be walking corpses or dry bones, we have to be filled with the Life of the Holy Spirit. When our Resurrected Lord bestows His Life on us, and breathes His Holy Spirit into us, then we become filled with peace, love, patience, kindness, gentleness, humility, compassion, joy, mercy, and with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and then the Light of the Resurrection fills our hearts and overflows to embrace all of God's creation and bring His Life to others. Then as light naturally disperses darkness, the darkness of existence without God's Presence also disappears, and with it, the manifestations of darkness: sin and evil in all their forms — anger, hate, jealousy, violence, vulgarity, intolerance, lust in all its forms, self-centeredness, greed, acquisitiveness, lack of compassion for others' suffering and need, and using others as 'things' to satisfy one's own passions.

This is what it means when we sing in the Paschal Troparion: *"and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life."* Each time we sing it, we are thereby challenged to accept the Lord's gracious offer to be born anew into His glorious, Resurrected Life and Light, Truth and Beauty, and to reject the death and darkness, violence, lies and hatred that engulf us in the daily existence of the godless, secular, lifeless and ugly world of walking corpses that surrounds us.