



3016. Resurrection

Russian, Palekh, circa 1700

Egg tempera and gesso on wood

Panel: 31.5 x 26.7cm

Condition: The border would have been covered by a silver or silver-gilt revetment, now lost. Part of the mountains above Christ's head are restored

Provenance: German art market

Feast Day: Easter Sunday

The event is known in Russian as *Bogoyavlenie i Voskresinie*, in Greek as *Anastasis* and in Old English as the Harrowing of Hell. It shows Christ Descending into Hell and rescuing Adam and Eve from Tombs. It anticipates the general resurrection of mankind at the Last Judgement. Celebrated on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, it is the Orthodox Church's greatest feast.

Theologically the concept derives from passages in the New Testament, notably Ephesians 4:9, 'Now that He ascended, what is it, but because He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?'; and 1 Peter 3:19–20: 'God hath raised up Christ, having loosed the sorrows of hell, as it was impossible that He should be holden by it'. A very early source from the non-canonical tradition is the first century *Odes of Solomon*: 'Sheol saw me and was shattered, and Death ejected me and many with me' (42:11). However, icon painting throughout the Early Christian period avoided the Resurrection and the imagery for the subject only developed in the 8th century from the apocryphal *Book of Nicodemus*.¹ The iconographic narrative depicted here originates from the art of Constantinople in the 14th century, namely the great Anastasis in the Chora Church. (fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. Anastasis 1321 Karyie Djami, Istanbul

In our icon Christ is shown at the centre of the composition standing on the broken Gates of Hell and leaning towards Adam whom he grasps by the hand in order to raise him from the tomb. On the left we see Saint John the Baptist and other Old Testament figures among whom are Kings David and Solomon identifiable by their crowns. By juxtaposing Adam, the 'first man' and John the Baptist, the 'last man' of the Old Testament the composition symbolically implies the general resurrection of all humanity. Behind Christ we see Moses with the Tablets of the Law, above him Isaiah and, next to him Abel. (The abraded inscription on the fourth figure makes him difficult to identify.) These Old Testament figures representing 'the Just' are similarly grouped together as a unit, below them is the kneeling figure of Eve. Christ is surrounded by a circular 'glory' of light indicating his divine status. The sense of descent is emphasised by the feeling of a ravine between the mountains and by the fluttering ends of Christ's robe behind his shoulder. Below the Gates of Hell the dark pit of the lower world opens.

¹ see A. Kartsonis *Anastasis, the Making of an Image*, Princeton, 1986. Also Hennecke, Edgar, and Schneemelcher, Wilhelm, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. I (2nd ed., 1968) and vol. II (1964).

The cosmological symbolism is discussed in detail in my *Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity*.²

Our painter works with a high degree of skill, with fluid brushwork employing delicately balanced warm colours. Though a late work, the quality recalls the earlier tradition. The leading centre for icon painting in Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries was Palekh, the likely origin of our icon. The humanity and tenderness of his figures surpasses the routine academic work of many workshops in the late period.



Detail. Christ gazes at Adam with tenderness and compassion while raising him into eternal life.

² Richard Temple. *Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity*, Luzac Oriental, 3rd edition, 2001. pp. 135 *passim*.