

## The Meaning of Pascha

Pascha, the name by which Orthodox Christians know the yearly celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection, comes from the Hebrew word for "Passover." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew people "passed over" from slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, with Moses at their head. But this event was only a foreshadowing of something bigger and better to come. In the New Testament, the whole human race "passed over" from slavery under the devil in sin and death to freedom in grace and eternal life, with the risen Christ as its head!

This liberation was God's response to the fall of Adam and Eve, the parents of humankind. Created by God in his image and set over his creation to live in fellowship with him, they listened to the devil and followed his lead instead. This "ancestral sin" of theirs broke the vital link between them and their only source of life and being: God. As a result, they, their descendants and the world given to them became hostages to sin and death, and the devil became the "one who holds the power of death" (Hebrews 2:14) over a fallen and fearful humankind.

But God did not leave us in that lurch. Out of love for humankind, he took on our flesh and blood, shared in our humanity and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ. And when he was put to death on the cross, he died as all humans do. But the underworld of death could not hold him, because this mortal man was also immortal God! Being, by nature, "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), Christ rose from the dead, ransoming us from the devil by breaking his death grip on the human race and dealing a deathblow to his power!

Hence, we chant during the Matins of Pascha: "We celebrate the death of death, the destruction of death's underworld, the first fruits of another, eternal life" (from Song 7 of the Canon). Christ's resurrection changed death from a fearsome end into a way back to God, a peaceful rest until his second coming. "Christ has risen from the dead as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. As death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. Just as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ, but each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then those who belong to Christ, at his return" (1 Corinthians 15:20-24).

That is why Pascha is our greatest joy and brightest hope as Orthodox Christians! It is the cornerstone of our faith and the main point of the good news we have for the rest of the world.

But Pascha is not just the remembrance of something that happened long ago and far away. It has happened to us in our lifetime too. Baptism was our personal Pascha. It made Christ's death and resurrection our own: our old sinful selves were put to death and buried in its holy waters, after which we were raised up out of them, washed clean of sin and born again to a new life in him.

“Don’t you know that as many of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were then buried with him through baptism so, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. And if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, so will we be in the likeness of his resurrection as well” (Romans 6:3-5). So wrote Saint Paul the Apostle. Elsewhere, he restated the point: “Buried with him in baptism, you are also risen with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12).

This parallel long made Pascha the prime occasion for baptism in the Church. The connection between the two still echoes in this hymn chanted during the Matins of Pascha: “Yesterday I was buried with you, Christ; today I rise with you in your resurrection. Yesterday I was crucified with you; now glorify me with yourself in your kingdom, Savior” (from Song 3 of the Canon). And during the Divine Liturgy of Pascha, we chant: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Ponder those words. You bear the risen Christ within you by dint of baptism (Galatians 3:27). You were anointed with his Spirit in chrismation (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). You are nourished with his body and blood in the eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:23-29), so his own life is in you (John 6:53-57). And every time you join in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, you proclaim his death and resurrection until he returns (1 Corinthians 11:26). Your identity as an Orthodox Christian and membership in the Church is rooted in a personal relationship with the risen Christ, shared collectively with all your brothers and sisters in him, through baptism, chrismation and the eucharist.

With that in mind, can others see Christ in what you think, what you say, what you do, how you behave, how you live and how you treat others? “Let your light shine before people so they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Whether or not others discover God’s goodness and find their salvation in his one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church might very well hang on how well we Orthodox Christians live up to the Pascha we celebrate yearly and experience in the God’s gifts of baptism, chrismation and the eucharist throughout our lifetimes.

This Pascha, “rekindle the gift of God that is in you” (2 Timothy 1:6). In celebrating it once a year, do not forget to strive to live it the other 364 days as well — for your own good and the good of the world around you. Draw near to the Lord and work hand in hand with him, so the risen Christ shines through you!

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