EASTER!!!

The new Shofar

Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. Amen. Truly the Lord is Risen!
(ancient Easter proclamation)

And he descended into Hades

The Orthodox Church's Easter icons do not portray the **empty tomb**, an image which is the normal image in Western Christianity. Rather, the Easter icons of the Orthodox church depict the event known as the **Harrowing of Hades**, known to us through the Apostle's Creed as **the descent of Jesus into hell (Hades)** after his death on the cross.

The **Harrowing of Hades** refers to the events between Jesus' death and his resurrection (Saturday). The early church believed that after his death Christ descended into hades and rescued ***all*** the souls, starting with Adam and Eve, who had died under the Fall. Jesus smashes down the doors of hell and leads the souls of the lost into heaven. As the ancient hymn puts it: *"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs, He has granted life*. This is the Orthodox message to believers.

There is still death to contend with

However, the reality of death, the result of man's fall, and of his free choice to disobey God and thus break communion with Him, was not abolished. Death was human being's ultimate enemy, "*will be the last enemy to be destroyed*" (**1 Corinthians 15:26**). By means of their faith in the Resurrection of the Son of God, the faithful can live life to the full as God had planned from the beginning, "*in abundance of life*" according to John the Evangelist: *(I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly* (**John 10:10**). This is life without the destructive influence of the devil. God gave us this new life of freedom by the Resurrection of Christ, who "*did trample down death and did abolish the devil*" (from and Orthodox funeral service).

By His death Christ abolished the devil, the One who had until then used the power of death as a weapon against God's fallen humanity. In so doing God liberated the humanity that was enslaved by their fear of death. In the words of the epistle to the Hebrews: *"That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage* (**Hebrews 2: 14-15**) and *"putting an end to the agony of death…because you will not abandon my soul to Hades"* (**Acts 2:24, 27**).

In Paul's first, and probably his oldest written text, Paul refers, for the first time, to the significance of the Resurrection for the future of the Christians: *"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep"* (**1 Thess** 4**:14**). Faith in the resurrection of Christ, leads the faithful into a participation God's eternal reigning: *and so, we will be with the Lord for ever"* (**4:17**).

To the community of Corinth, Paul further developed his teaching about the resurrection of the dead making it central to the Christian faith: *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless"* (**15:17**). For Paul, the Resurrection of Christ was not an isolated past event. It was a wonderful intervention of God into the created world that lifted our fear of death and its potential domination over us. It marked the beginning of humanity's salvation, which will be completed with the return of the Son of man as Judge at the end of time.

Because Christ rose from the dead, we too will rise

The apostle makes it clear that the resurrection of Christ ensures the *resurrection of the all the dead*. He argues the connection between Adam and Christ, first man-second man: *since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive* (**15:21-22**). He also writes of the earthy body of this life and the heavenly body after death. He says the new body will replace the old one: *So also, is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body* (**15:42-44**).

Finally, he describes the future resurrection of the dead using widely known themes of the Old Testament. This is the real "mystery" of immortality gained for us in Christ: *Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality* (**15:51-53**). And he concludes, triumphantly exclaiming, in the way that the Orthodox celebrate Christ's Resurrection: *O Death, where is your victory? O Death where is your sting?* (**15:55**).

The Resurrection transforms our purpose behind our lives

The Resurrection of Christ is the fundamental truth and the ultimate event of Christian faith. It is the most decisive act of the liberation of humanity from the fear of death and from the devil's seductive power. It is the beginning of the new creation. It is the guarantee of the salvation of all human beings who live in Christ. This is why we read in the later New Testament sources that Christ during the burial of his earthy body and his Resurrection *"He also went and preached to the spirits that were in prison"* (**1 Peter 3:19**).

This is the reason the Byzantine painting tradition represents the Resurrection through the "Descent to Hades." The descent to Hades is hinted at in another passage of this letter: "*For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead*," **4:6**, and in the Acts of the Apostles (**2:24. 27-31**). With Satan crushed and Hades gates smashed open, and its locks destroyed, those who hear Christ's invitation are set free and will live eternally.

In Byzantine iconography, the Resurrection is portrayed primarily as Christ pulling Adam and Eve out of their sepulchres while smashing down the gates of Hades (death). They were joined by the Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and other figures, including John the Baptist who announced the arrival of Jesus as the promised Messiah; all those who sought righteousness, without even knowing Christ, were set free. That is Easter joy!