

# Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Rev. Ralph Carskadden

The Sixth Sunday of Easter; Pascha, and Rogation Sunday, April 27, 2008

Acts 17: 22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

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## The Mandorla

Many of my relatives are buried at Evergreen Washelli cemetery in north Seattle. When I was a child our family would go out on Memorial Day, Mother's Day and other occasions to place flowers and remember our loved ones. On the north side of that cemetery, there are several separate, gated burial grounds, including one for Russian Orthodox Christians. In the center of their cemetery is an unusual tall pyramid shaped building. As a child I thought it belonged to a secret society such as the Masons or was a reference to the pyramid with the seeing eye, which appears on our one dollar bill. I tried to make sense of what I saw.

It was only when I became an adult and fell in love with Russian cuisine and began making pascha, the pyramid shaped Easter cheese, and kulich, the tall domed Easter bread, that I caught on. The building in the middle of the Russian cemetery in north Seattle is a giant pascha—an architectural Easter cheese—a culinary sign of the Resurrection of Christ in the midst of graves. About 15 years ago, I learned about the sister church relationship between this Cathedral and Holy Trinity, Pascha and Kulich in St. Petersburg. In 1997, I traveled to Russia with the Compline Choir and, lo and behold, we saw for ourselves the 18<sup>th</sup> century church built in the shape of a neo-classical kulich with the pyramid shaped bell tower, a pascha, next to it.

Eastern Orthodox Christians call Easter Pascha – from the Hebrew Pesach/ Passover and they calculate the date of Pascha differently than we do in the West. At midnight last night, throughout Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Serbia, Greece, and in cities across the world, 225 million Eastern Orthodox Christians began their celebration of Pascha. Shouts of *Christos Voskrese*, *Voistinu Voskrese*, *Christos Anesti*, *Alethos Anesti* are



echoing around the world today. And at tables across Russia, families are sharing pascha and kulich.

This morning, as we celebrate the sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday, we are joined in Resurrection joy by the other half of Christendom. And I have brought the Orthodox icon for the feast to share with you – and I invite you to see in it and through it how much God loves humankind and the whole creation.

The Orthodox do not attempt to portray the actual resurrection of Jesus. Scripture doesn't describe it and so the icon for the feast shows the effect of the

resurrection as we confess in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended to the dead" and, as we find in the First Letter of Peter, our second reading today: "He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison."

In the icon, we see the risen Christ carrying his cross. He has gone down to preach good news of God's forgiveness and love to the dead. Under his feet we see the gates of hell that have been knocked off their hinges.

Scattered in the darkness are locks and bits of chain – broken by the compassionate Liberator who reaches out to lift up Adam and Eve, our first parents, from their graves. On the other side we see David and Solomon wearing crowns, standing in their coffins awaiting Christ's embrace. The Risen One is surrounded by a heavenly blue almond shaped mandorla filled with stars.

The mandorla is formed by two intersecting circles. Two distinct and separate realities, two opposites as humans perceive reality, intersect and a new space is created. The reconciliation of opposites is a bit clearer in some of the Resurrection icons that show Adam on one side and Eve on the other- Christ reaches out to both to reconcile them, to remove the history of recrimination and shame that marked their lives – bringing them together in new life.

As we gaze at, into and through this icon with eyes of faith, we see the lengths and depths that God is willing to go to embrace humanity, reaching out to us in our sin, in our dividedness, wherever death reigns in our lives. In the places of darkest despair, where we have entombed ourselves, where our bad choices have trapped us, God in Christ comes, bringing light and life, extending wounded hands to raise us to newness of life, reconciling us to one another and God. As we gaze upon the icon we hear the words of promise spoken in the gospel today: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."

And this mystery of new life and reconciliation is not for humankind alone.....the prayers and hymns of Rogation Sunday link the resurrection to the creation. As our Eastern Orthodox sisters and brothers teach us, created matter—wood, cloth, gesso, ground earth, minerals, egg yolk, and gold leaf of which icons are made—are means by which

God's presence and action are revealed similar to the way that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are infused with God's presence and purpose. The American–Russian Orthodox theologian, the late Fr. Alexander Schmemmann taught that the very universe was created to be a sacrament of God's presence - a vehicle for communication with God. Humans rarely grasp that truth. We seem to either idolize or misuse nature. We categorize our relationship to the creation, dividing it into sacred and secular, holy and profane, spiritual and material. The part we call sacred, holy, and spiritual, we may treat with care. The rest is left to exploitation. But we are called to live with reverence and respect for what God has made and declared to be "good". We are called to be stewards, wise caretakers, those who take care of the world in which we live, the creation through which we know God. The collect for today expresses this relationship: "O God, pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises."

I spoke of the mandorla, the shape of new possibility that comes when what we see as opposites or irreconcilably distinct come together and overlap. Though there are no literal mandorlas, the new global warming education campaign launched by Al Gore illustrates this. Have you seen the TV spots where Al Sharpton and Pat Robertson are sitting together - talking? Have you seen Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich together? Seeing these "opposites" together we are surprised. For a moment old categories, distinctions, old walls of division are broken open – something more important than what divides is revealed and we sense a possibility for "this fragile earth, our island home".

Christ is risen. He stands in our midst reaching out his wounded hands to raise us up, that we may be "a people, renewed, forgiven and healed." A people reconciled with one another, with the creation and with God who has made all that is, in love.

*Christos Voskrese. Voistinu Voskrese. Alleluia.*  
Christ is risen! Risen indeed.