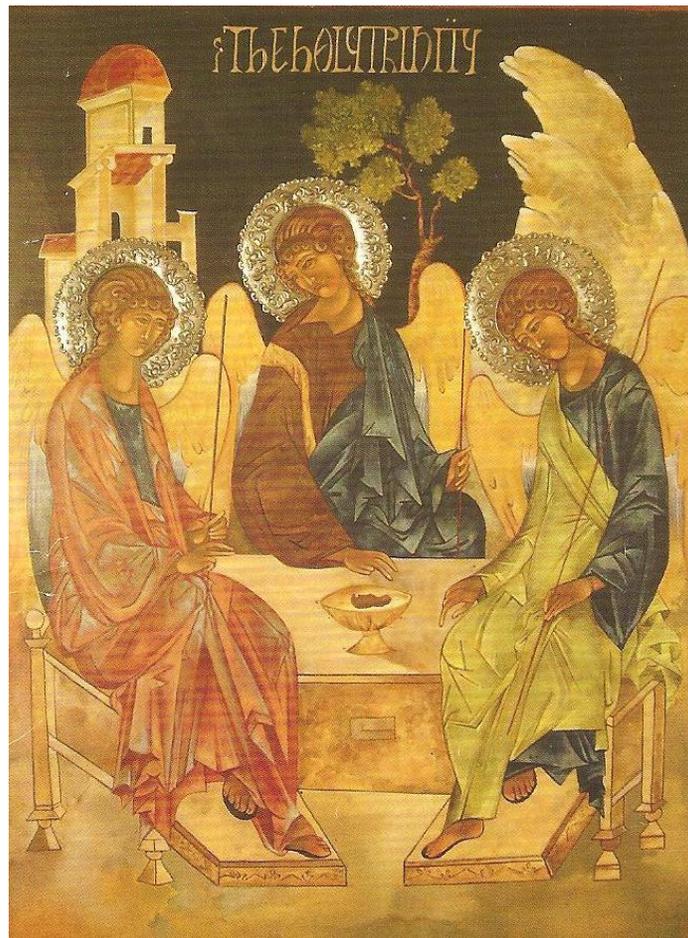


St Thomas Episcopal Church
Life of Christ Icons
Manual



Prepared during Advent 2014 by Rhonda Kindig
Revised 2015

Introduction to the Icon Tour

Welcome to St Thomas!

Thank you for your interest in our icon. **ICON** is just the Greek word for **IMAGE**.

This **style of art is known as BYZANTINE**, a name that comes from the **Eastern Roman Empire**, which lasted from about **300 to 1450 AD**. The name is from the city of **Byzantium**, located on the Black Sea; **today we know it as Istanbul**.

Icons are considered **HOLY OBJECTS** in the Orthodox Churches, such as the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox.

For them, the images are on **equal footing with the words of scripture**. In fact, the people who make the icons are not called painters but **ICON-WRITERS**.

Just as the Holy Bible is revered by Christians, icons are also **venerated** in Orthodox Churches. In fact, an Orthodox community regards the icons as **members of their community at prayer!**

This church, St Thomas, is an Episcopal Church; we are Protestant and not Catholic or Orthodox. We find them lovely for teaching purposes, but we do not venerate them.

Because the Orthodox tradition views an icon as equal to Scripture, **faithful icon-writers must match the form and content of the icons to original models approved by the Orthodox tradition!** Essentially, icons must be “copied” from authorized versions, some centuries old! The subject of an icon must be an event from the Bible or a holy person.

Icon-writing is **not supposed to show artistic imagination or creativity**; it is supposed to show **discipline**. There are definite prescribed steps in the process of icon-writing, including praying as well as correct preparation of each step in the layering of the images.

Between 2004 and 2006 a local artist, Mary Jane Miller, following the traditions of icon-writing, produced these panels in a studio at the William King Arts Museum. She got permission to display the collection here for some months before she moved permanently to her husband’s hometown in Mexico. At that time she sold the collection to St Thomas (the donors are listed on the back pillar). Mary Jane Miller learned icon-writing with a small group **25 years ago at St John Lutheran Church**, just down the road. The group was led by **J J Jessee**, owner of Bristol Sign Company. St John, also has icons throughout its building, which J J gave to the church; in Orthodox tradition, icons can only be given never sold.

There are **two unique things** about the St Thomas collection.

First, **no GOLD was used**. This is rare, because the gold of an icon is **symbolic itself of the divine light** that is supposed to be shining through them. Icons are used for **devotion and meditation in Orthodox churches**. This makes them like **windows** into the holy event or person shown. One form of the meditation is to **let the icon look at YOU!**

The second unique thing, besides the **black** and not gold backgrounds, is the pewter work that you will see shining as halos in ours. These are **pewter repousse** (a French word that means “push”). The pewter is pushed from both sides into the desired shape. The pewter work here is the work of Valentin Gomez, who is the husband to Mary Jane Miller.

So, let's begin our look at each icon with #1, just beside the pulpit.

Icon #1: The Hospitality of Abraham (aka "The Old Testament Trinity")



Since icons are expressions of the Orthodox faith and not personal expressions of creativity, icon-writers must conform to the authorized models approved by the Orthodox Church. All true icons are supposed to be faithfully fashioned after an acceptable model. This icon is modeled from one done by [Andrei Rublev in the 15th century](#). This is a particularly lovely icon.

The story behind this icon is drawn from the [18th chapter of Genesis](#), in which the patriarch Abraham is visited by three "men of God". The Greek word for messenger is *αγγελος*. The "angelos" inform Abraham that he will be a father, and Abraham serves them an elaborate meal. As angels, the three are typically shown with wings. And, indeed, if you look closely, you will see very subtle wings on our three. The color and shape of the wings blends smoothly into the background.

You will note this has a title: "The Holy Trinity". The [Old Testament does NOT have any concept](#) of the Trinity. In later centuries, Christians, who assumed these three visitors must have been the Trinity, read that identity back into the story. The supposition is that these three "men of God" prefigure the Trinity of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Traditionally, [icons NEVER have a figure](#) representing God the Father. [*Our brochures are in ERROR when they say that this is the Hebrew concept of the Trinity.*]

The three have [haloes, which just means they are HOLY](#). The pewter repoussé haloes are decorated with floral motifs.

Notice the three figures [circumscribe a circle, symbolic both of perfection and eternity](#).

And, the [postures of the figures mirror the background](#). Reading from left to right, we begin with God the Father, the erect figure in red. Behind him [rises a red-roofed building](#) symbolic of the Jewish Temple, where it was believed the Very Presence of God dwelled!

At the time of Abraham, there were no buildings at this place. The Bible tells us it occurs at the “Oaks of Mamre”, and we have an oak tree behind the middle figure in the center of the panel.

The graceful curving figure on the right represents the Holy Spirit, situated before a **curving mountain** shaded in a similar tint to the robe of this “man of God”. Mountains are traditional places for **theophanies**. A theophany is an experience of the divine. Moses had a theophany on Mt Sinai; Elijah had a theophany on Mt Carmel, Abraham had a theophany on Mt Moriah.

The central figure, whose head mirrors the sway of the **oak tree behind**, represents Christ, the one who will be crucified on a tree! Traditional icons have Christ reaching toward the food on the table in a very sacramental fashion. Notice his hand is in the **blessing posture** (two fingers extended, with three fingers touching to represent the Trinity). It is as if he is conferring blessing on the meal, making it into a sacrament.

Icons are not supposed to be realistic, naturalistic views; instead we are supposed to be seeing the icons in a spiritual dimension. One way an icon-writer shows this is by perspective. We are used to receding vanishing point perspective, which gives a picture the look of realism. Icon-writers employ **inverse perspective**. Look at the table and the footstools. The vanishing point we have here is converging upon the viewer. This serves to draw us into the sacramental scene we are witnessing!

(The three all hold staffs; travelers would have had “walking sticks”, helpful to ward off snakes. These very slender staffs are called “pastoral staffs”, suggesting ecclesiastical service.)

Icon #2: The Annunciation



Only the Gospel of Luke contains the story of the annunciation (Luke 1:26-33). The angel Gabriel visits Mary, telling her of God’s plan that she will bear his Son.

Art depicting the annunciation to Mary is one of the **most widespread of themes** throughout the centuries. You will find similarities in all of them. First, Mary is **always seated**, often on what appears to be a throne. After all, Orthodox and Catholic belief is that she is the “**Queen of Heaven**”. For this reason, she will be wearing **blue, symbolic of heaven**. The archangel will be **handing Mary a lily**, which symbolizes purity. **This Gabriel is not** holding a lily, but our artist has very cleverly placed a fleur-de-lys atop Gabriel’s staff, in a nod to this later convention.

She will be placed before an **open door or window**, symbolic of her receptivity. She is open to God's plan. In icons, there will be **stars on her shoulders**. They represent her perpetual virginity, which is an Orthodox and Catholic belief.

She will often be employed at a domestic task; here she holds a **spindle**, as she's been weaving. You can even see the **faint line of the thread**. This symbolizes her **destiny being "spun out"**! By the time of the Renaissance, Mary will always be holding a **book**, symbolic of her devotion, and the book will be open to the prophecy in Isaiah about "a child will be born unto you".

Now, something more about halos. **Divine beings get their initials inside halos**. In Greek, initials are the first and last letters of a word. So, in Mary's halo here, and also when we see her on the other side of our sanctuary, we have the initials of the words: **Mother of God (ματηρ θεον)**. You will see **MU-RHO** for MATER, followed by **THETA-NU**, for THEON, which means of God:

μρ θν

Assorted wildlife is shown on our lower margin, and I'm sure the smiling octopus is a wink from Mary Jane; you will not see that anywhere else. As an interesting tidbit, we also see four peacocks on the lower edge of the icon. Later symbology designates peacocks as a sign of resurrection, because folklore suggested their flesh never rotted!)

[Extra for docents: There are different types of angels.

The first angels mentioned in the Bible, in Gen. 3:24, are CHERUBIM. This was the angel with the flaming sword guarding the entry to the garden of Eden. In Exodus 25:19-20, two cherubim are atop the Ark of the Covenant, as if guarding the Presence of God within. Cherubim also appear in Ezekiel's 1st and 10th chapters as the four living creatures which seemed to travel with the Presence of God.

Cherub is the singular form of Cherubim, but contrary to our modern usage, cherubs were not little angel babies. In fact, the little angel babies, whose faces you will recognize from thousands of Christmas cards, are actually an invention of Renaissance artists, and they are called PUTTI. (Notice the plentiful putti in our St Thomas woodwork!)

Another type of angel, found in Isaiah 6:2, are SERAPHIM. The singular is Seraph. These angels were attendants to God on his throne. Seraphim is from a Hebrew word meaning "burning ones". That is why they are depicted with red wings in art.

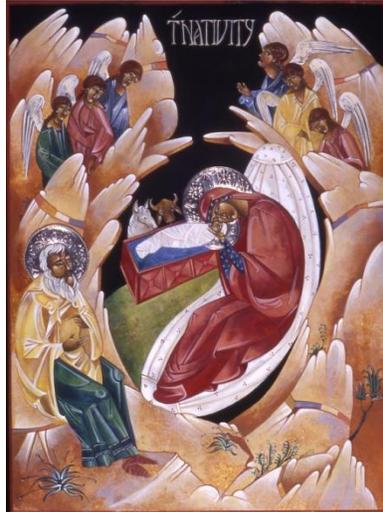
The named angels are ARCHANGELS. It is a compound word, in Greek, ARCH means ruler or prince; and, as we know, ANGEL, just means messenger. In art, archangels always have an attribute so you can identify them. Michael, the warrior, will always have a sword. Raphael, who is found in the apocryphal story of Tobit, always carries a little box of medicine. Gabriel, who tells Mary of God's plan, always carries a lily. In Renaissance art, it will look like Gabriel is handing the flower to Mary. Renaissance artists also tended to show archangels with peacock wings. The eyes of the peacock feathers symbolized their ability to see everything.]

[Extra for Docents: L – R positioning!

All annunciation art, right up until the late 1700's will show this orientation of Gabriel on the left and Mary on the right. The reason is related to sentence diagramming you probably did in junior high. Remember how you drew a line, and you put the subject on the line first, then you put the verb, and after that you would put any direct object. Since the subject is first in the sentence, it has more importance.

So, Gabriel, appearing first is the subject: Gabriel announced to Mary. Reversing it places too much importance on the direct object; we don't say, "Mary was visited by Gabriel."]

Icon #3—The Nativity



Only two of the Gospels have nativity stories. And, if you did not know this, they each have very different details. Matthew focuses on the righteousness of Joseph; only Matthew has the story of the Magi or wise men bringing gifts, and when they arrive it is in a “house”. The narrative in Luke is the one we all know by heart, thanks to the 1965 Charlie Brown Christmas special on TV! Only in Luke do we have a manger, the shepherds, and the angel choir.

I mentioned one of the bizarre features of icons is the perspective is not what we are used to seeing, with a vanishing point in the distance where all lines converge. Western artists first began paying attention to the converging lines of a vanishing point in the distance around 1400 (through the pioneering work of F. Brunelleschi). Our icon has two examples of this divergent perspective.

First, this icon also uses inverse perspective, which is evident if we look at the manger.

Second, Mary is shown exaggeratedly larger than the other figures. This is iconic hierarchical (or hieratic) perspective, where characters of more importance are shown to be larger than others. Notice how tiny Joseph is by comparison. Joseph is not only smaller than Mary, do you see how he is shown as an old man? The Orthodox and Catholic belief is that Mary was a perpetual virgin, therefore she never had other children. The Bible, however, DOES mention siblings of Jesus! So, the legend was devised that Joseph had to have been married before Mary, so these siblings must be step-brothers, which means Joseph must be much older to have had a family already!

The manger is in the very center of the icon, so it is the most important feature. You will see that the manger looks a little like an altar. But, it also resembles a coffin; in fact, it is a mirrored image of the coffin across our aisles in the “Entombment” icon! And the swaddling cloths surrounding the infant foreshadow the shroud which will enwrap Jesus’ body.

The pillow on which Mary is reclining is a precursor of the “man-DOR-la”, which we’ll be mentioning in other icons. A mandorla is a whole-body, almond-shaped halo, which represents holiness. We only see a mandorla around Jesus and Mary in iconography, typically in scenes of Ascension (or in Mary’s case of Assumption into heaven). [Our brochures tell us it is an egg shape symbolizing birth, but that is not

what is going on in icons, because Jesus at the Last (“Mystical”) Supper will often be shown on a similar pillow.)

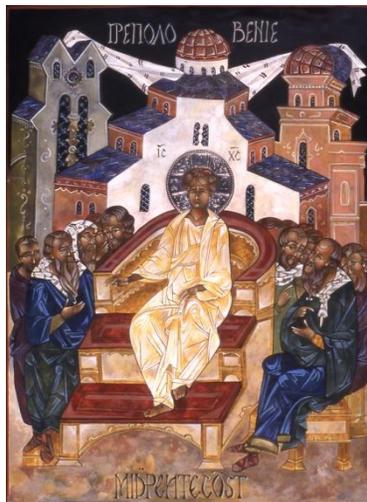
We see a couple of **animals peaking into the manger**. Luke’s narrative DOES mention a manger, which was a feed-box for animals, but no animals are mentioned in Luke’s story. We get our notion of a donkey and an ox in attendance from a prophecy in Isaiah: **“The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master’s crib.” (Isa. 1:3)**

We have a choir of angels framing the upper portion of the icon, but surprisingly they do not have halos. But many icons of this story do show halos upon the angels.

[Some icons of this scene will have a tree. If they do, it is the “Jesse Tree”, which is from Isa: 11:1-2 about *“a shoot shall spring forth from the root of Jesse”*, who, of course, is one of King David and Jesus’ ancestors

Byzantine art will show the scene in cave, as opposed to Renaissance art which tends to show it in a stable.]

Icon #4—Christ Among the Doctors (which is to say “Learned Men”)



This icon is modeled after a 16th century Russian icon in the Church of Nicholas the Wonderworker in Pskov. The story is from the 2nd chapter in Luke, the only place it is found.

There are virtually **no other childhood narratives** of Jesus in the Bible. The story is that when Jesus was 12 years of age he accompanied his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover. Passover was one of the three holy festivals that required all able-bodied Jewish men to make the **pilgrimage** to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the Passover, while Mary and Joseph were traveling home, they discovered that Jesus was no longer with the entourage. They frantically return to the city and finally find their son in the Temple, where he has been instructing the officials in Holy Scripture. (If you read the text, you may be surprised to hear that he was found “on the third day”!)

Jesus is shown in **hierarchical perspective**, meaning his importance is shown by his emphatically larger size as well as his central placement.

The **drapery above** is the iconic symbolization for a scene taking place indoors, and this is inside the Temple. This drapery matches the **fabric of the prayer shawls** of the Jewish officials, who are sitting enrapt by Jesus' knowledge.

If you look closely, you will see that Jesus is holding a **white scroll**. That symbol can be found in many of our icons. It shows us for this story that literally Jesus has knowledge of scripture, but even more than that, it represents that he is the fulfillment of the scripture! He is indeed the Word Incarnate! Jesus' reply to his parents shows that he was conscious of his divine mission even as a child.

We also have identifying **Greek abbreviations beside the head of Jesus**. On icons, the Greek abbreviations for names will be the first and last letters of the words. So, the abbreviation for Jesus Christ, *Jesous Christos*, is **IOTA-SIGMA, CHI-SIGMA**

ΙϚ ΧϚ (looks like C but is lower case sigma)

There is no "J" in Greek, the iota sound is the first sound; "X" is the "CH" sound. This particular abbreviation is on most of our icons of Jesus right beside his head.

Icon writers have formalized **means for showing the holiness** of their subjects, and we will see these features in the image of Jesus here.

First, of course, is **the halo**.

Second, the figures seem to be **making eye contact** with the viewers. This also serves to concentrate our attention, an enhancement for the devotional use of an icon.

Next, the **frontality of the face** (which is to say, the figure is looking head-on at the viewer) suggests its spiritual closeness to us.

Last, the stylized appearance of the features, such as the large eyes and small mouths suggest another dimension where that character exists.

You will have noticed that the figures in icons do not look like realistic human beings. **Large foreheads** are symbolic of wisdom. **Large, staring eyes** show orientation toward God. **Small, closed mouths** are symbolic of silence before the Presence of God.

[For Docents: We have not been able to figure out why the artist put "Mid-Pentecost" as the title. The phrase at the top of the icon is not in Greek words (the first word would be the Greek for "temple", if two of the letters were transposed, but the second word is unknown.)

Icon #5—Holy Baptism



The Holy Baptism is, of course, the baptism of Jesus. *All four of the Gospel accounts tell this story.*

John is the haloed figure on the left. His *hand touches Jesus' forehead as he baptizes him.* Byzantine art *does not show God the Father or the Holy Spirit*, so we have *no descending dove* above Jesus' head, which we will see in most Renaissance art of the Baptism of Jesus. But, when the text reads that the Spirit of God descended "*like a dove*", it is actually not saying the Spirit was in the form of a dove, just that the Spirit moved as a dove would have moved!

Jesus *is surrounded by the water representing the Jordan River*, but this water does not look like any river we might see. In fact, the water surrounding Jesus is doing *double duty as a MANDORLA*. Remember, a mandorla is the whole-body, almond-shaped halo you will find around Jesus or Mary in particular icons. A mandorla represents extreme holiness.

The *lines in the water suggest it is flowing; therefore, it is "Living Water"*. Living Water *supports life*, as *opposed to stagnant or still water*, like in a cistern or puddle. Some icons will have *fish cavorting* in the water, again to emphasize it is living water.

Notice that Jesus' *hand is in the traditional position of conferring blessing* (two fingers extended, while the other three touch as a sign of the Trinity). Jesus is blessing the water, thereby giving it a sacramental dimension. Indeed, baptism is one of our sacraments.

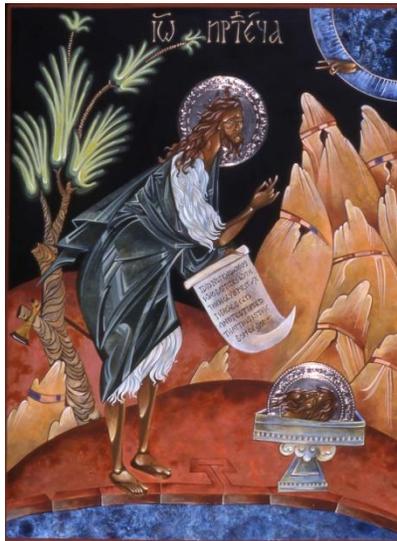
The figures on *the right riverbank are attending angels*, who are haloed. The *spiral motifs in the halos* represent eternity. Iconic tradition is that their hands are covered in reverence. By the time of Renaissance art, the angels' hands will be holding Jesus' robe for him. These angels have wings as white as their garments, arching as are the stylized mountains behind.

Just as human bodies appear distorted to our perspective, landscapes will, too. The mountains on the icons appear quite other-worldly. Traditional icons do not tend to have the bands around the mountains, so I emailed the artist to ask about them. She claims that she puts the bands around the mountains as symbolis of the *bridge between the human and the divine*, or the flesh and the spirit.)

[For docents--Biblical references: Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:34-35. Interestingly, Matthew tells us that even the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to John in the

Judean wilderness for a baptism of repentance! Interestingly, Jesus is surrounded by the water, but he is not submerged by water, because creation cannot enclose the Creator.]

Icon #6—John the Baptist in the Wilderness



This icon should probably be positioned before the previous one. It introduces John the Baptist. The text for this icon comes from the 3rd chapter of Matthew, where we learn the ministry of Jesus' cousin, John, in the wilderness of Judea, calling people to repentance. We are told that John wore camel hair, so the icon reveals a “shaggy” garment on John. John is the first one in the Bible who baptized folks, indeed that fact became part of his “name”: John the Baptist. Therefore, we see the River Jordan flowing at his feet.

The scroll John is holding here recalls the prophetic words from Isaiah, which John repeats in the story in Matthew. He proclaims, “**Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**” And, in support of that verse, we see the ax at the base of the tree behind John. [The icon brochure is in absolute error when it says the ax is for John's beheading!]

In the upper right-hand corner we see a hand. Iconography does not depict God the Father, so this is not the hand of God. If you look closely, you will see the hand is in the blessing position (like we talked about in Icon #1), so this is the hand of Jesus blessing John and perhaps conferring sainthood upon him after his martyrdom.

You may remember from the Bible that King Herod has John beheaded, and the head at the lower right of the icon foretells that event. Gruesomely, John's halo looks like a platter for his head.

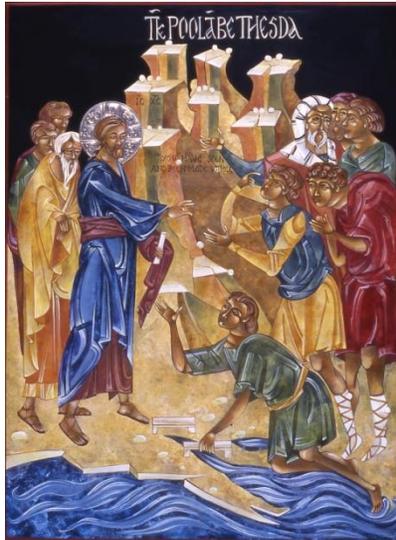
Our stylized mountains in the background have those red-white-and-blue bands around them, representing the BRIDGE between flesh and spirit. Another thing about mountains is they were places for theophanies, which are experiences of the divine (remember what we said in Icon #1). I'm not sure about the red, white, and blue, BUT, blue usually stands for heavenly things in icons, while red represents earthly things.

[For docents: John was the messenger who announced Jesus' arrival as the “Lamb of God”. By the time of Renaissance art, John will frequently be holding a banner with the phrase, “Behold the Lamb of God”.

Since the Greek word for messenger is *angelos*, sometimes icons of John the Baptism will depict him with wings; ours does not.

[We do not know the translation for the title on this icon; these are not Greek letters.]

Icon #7—Pool at Bethesda



The **next three icons** in the St Thomas collection are from the **ministry of Jesus** and are not part of the “Festival Icons”. The festival icons are a series that represents the important liturgical holidays of the church, and they are usually displayed in sequence. Orthodox churches will have all of them and use them on the appropriate holy days.

[The Festival Icon sequence is:

- The Annunciation
- The Nativity of Christ
- The Presentation in the Temple—we do not have this at St Thomas
- The Baptism of Christ
- The Raising of Lazarus
- The Transfiguration
- The Entry into Jerusalem
- The Crucifixion
- The Descent into Hell
- The Ascension—we do not have this at St Thomas
- Pentecost]

As told in the **5th chapter of John’s Gospel**, this represents the story of Jesus **healing a lame man** (John 5:1-18). In John’s Gospel, **the word “miracle” is never used**. Instead, we are told of **seven “signs of glory”** that Jesus performs, from the turning of water into wine at a wedding in Cana to the raising from the dead of Lazarus. The signs of glory are **glimpses into the power and glory of the divine, all of which is foretold in Old Testament scriptures, as the abundant life that is God’s plan**.

The setting is the **Pool of Bethesda**. Excavations have uncovered a 2nd century BC sanctuary and pool, and this is a separate pool from the Pool of Siloam mentioned in the 9th chapter of John. The text tells us that the water of the pool was **“stirred up” each day**, and people believed it was from an angel or

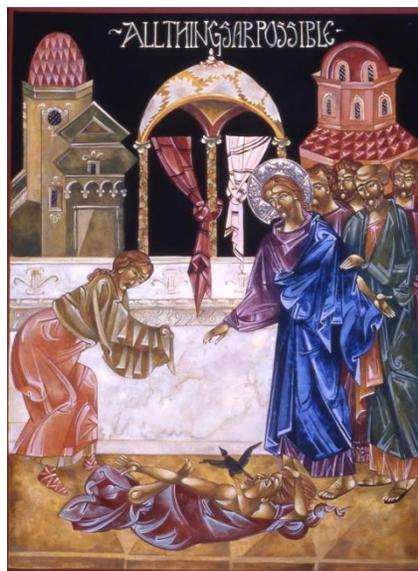
some divine action. At that moment, the first person to enter the pool would be healed. At this point of history, it was common for all illnesses and disabilities to be considered punishment for a person's sins. In this icon, the lame person is holding onto wooden "walkers", a version of "crutches" for a paraplegic.

One thing to notice about Jesus here is the color of his garments. In iconography, if he is not shown in white, Jesus will be wearing blue and red. The red of his clothing represents his earthly nature, while the blue stands for his divine nature. Because the pigments are more subdued with the tempera used, the red will often appear to be more brownish, but it is nevertheless intended to be red.

We recognize the Jewish official because of his prayer shawl. The Jewish officials (just called "the Jews" in John's gospel) were displeased that the lame man, once cured, picked up his mat—and that was considered "working" on the Sabbath. The Jewish authorities were also angered by the fact that Jesus did healings on the Sabbath Day, which they considered unlawful. Even worse, in their view, was that in this gospel story, Jesus referred to God as "My Father", which they felt was blasphemous.

These mountains are even more stylized than what we've seen so far! I'll talk about this style when we get to the other side of the sanctuary!

Icon #8—All Things Are Possible

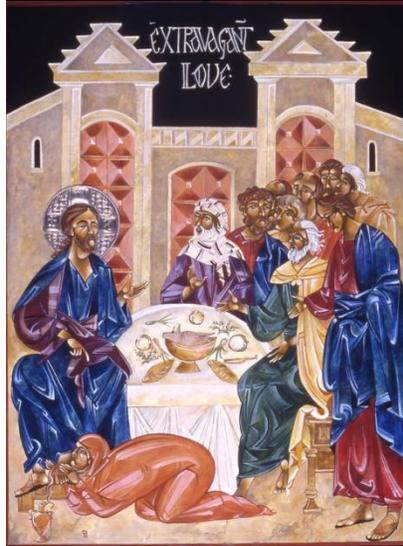


The title of this icon comes from a passage in Mark 7:27, where Jesus makes the comment about a camel and the eye of a needle. The event shown, however, is found in Luke's 11th chapter, where we read that Jesus casts out a demon from a mute person, who is then able to speak. The witnessing crowds are amazed.

In this icon, the black bird emerging from the person's mouth is symbolic of the demon. Birds frequently have symbolic meanings, and their symbolism becomes more pervasive by the time of the Renaissance in art. The contorted body of this person is very troubling.

You may have noticed that icons do not ever show shadows. The only light represents divine glory, so that light does not cast shadows.

Icon #9—Extravagant Love



Each Gospel writer tells a story of Jesus' anointing by a woman, but it is interesting that the details are very different:

Mark 14:3-8 and Matthew 26:6-13 are similar—At the house of Simon the leper in Bethany, an unidentified woman anoints Jesus' head with costly ointment.

Luke 7:36-50—At the home of a Pharisee, a weeping, sinful woman anoints Jesus' feet with ointment and her tears, drying them with her hair.

John 12:1-11—At the home of the siblings Lazarus, Martha and Mary in Bethany, sister Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, drying them with her hair.

Not one of the accounts names Mary Magdalene as this woman. It was Augustine, writing in the 4th century who decided that this was a story of Mary of Magdala, and because the weeping woman in Luke's account was a "sinner", Augustine proclaimed that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. There is no Biblical evidence for this accusation, but the tarnished reputation has stuck to Mary for centuries.

Following the practice identified in the Old Testament that prostitutes would sit in the windows with their hair uncovered and hanging down, Mary Magdalene is usually depicted in art with her hair uncovered and hanging down.

We also see an elaborate meal on the table, perhaps prepared by sister Martha, if this icon follows the narrative in John's Gospel.

The title, "Extravagant Love" does fit all four accounts, since the ointment or perfume used was so expensive that the witnessing disciples complained about the wastefulness of this gesture of devotion, when the money could have been better spent, in their opinion.

[Our English term "maudlin", meaning "tearfully sentimental" comes from the name of Mary Magdalene, and the mistaken assumption that she was the weeping woman.]

Icon #10—The Transfiguration



The story of the Transfiguration is found in the **three Synoptic Gospels**:

Matthew 17:1-8

Mark 9:2-8

Luke 9:28-36

In the story, Jesus, accompanied by the **three disciples of his “inner circle”, Peter, James, and John**, ascend a mountain. We are now familiar with the concept of a **theophany**, or an experience of the divine, taking place atop mountains in scripture. On this mountain, the disciples are amazed to see Jesus “transfigured” before their eyes. **The divine nature of Jesus is revealed to their very eyes (and ears).**

Transfiguration is from a Greek term that means **metamorphosis or transformation**.

The disciples witness Jesus transformed into a dazzling white figure. Our icon shows Jesus’ in the center, clothed in white, with rays of dazzling light beaming toward the witnesses; the **light rays suggest the transforming power** of Jesus.

We’ve spoken of the **mandorla** already, the whole-body halo that signifies holiness. At first glance, it would appear Jesus is surrounded by a mandorla in this icon.

But, this is something more! **Iconography does not show God the Father, but it does have ways of representing divinity. One way is with concentric circles of light, and that is what we have in this blue mandorla.**

The blue light represents something called **“uncreated light”**. That is in **contrast to “created” light**, which would be sunlight or candlelight, even electric lights. Uncreated light represents a **fundamental quality of God’s nature**.

[It was not believed that God dwelled in the blue heavens above earth. In Exodus 24:10 we learn that the blue sky is the “pavement of sapphire stones” for God’s feet! And, in Ezekiel 1:26-28, the blue heavenly dome above earth was considered God’s footstool!]

This uncreated light was the **place where God dwelled, and it was given the Greek name EMPYREAN**. The root of the word is the Greek term for “burn”.

πυρ = pyre = empyrean

If the fundamental quality of God's nature is this pure, uncreated light, and God was to be found in this fiery abode called the empyrean, much art, from icons to Renaissance art will show this as gold.

And, in nearly all the icons you will see except for ours, the gilding that serves as the base for the icon shines through as the background and is suggestive of the empyrean. Although the black background of ours is not unique in iconography, it is certainly rare! The St Thomas icons have no gold.

So, the blue concentric circles of light are the empyrean here.

What else do we see in this icon? On the left we see Elijah, who was considered the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. He is standing on the symbolic Mt Carmel, site of his own theophany with uncreated light—both in a consuming fire and in the fiery chariot you've probably heard about.

On the right we see Moses, the larger-than-life law-bringer of the Old Testament. In fact, we see Moses holding a book that represents the Torah, which is the Hebrew word for these Teachings. He is standing on a symbolic Mt Sinai, location of his own theophany with uncreated light—remember both the burning bush story in Exodus and the pillar of fire that later led the people through the wilderness for forty years.

We might also recall that after one of Moses' theophanies atop Mt Sinai, he returned to the people with his face shining brilliantly—transfigured! (Exodus 34:29)

Jesus' position between these two towering figures of the Old Testament confirms a continuity in his ministry with the Old Testament. It also confirms that Christ is the fulfillment of the Messianic expectations of the Old Testament.

The accompanying disciples we see below are:

James, who is on the left, covering his face at the vision, after falling backward;
John, in the middle, who is shown as falling head-over-heels—notice his dislodged sandal—who is covering his eyes at the vision; and
Peter, on the right, is just beginning to rise up to speak.

It is difficult to see with the dazzling white of Jesus' robes, but Jesus is holding the scroll we've come to expect. Not only is Jesus the fulfillment of scripture, it is Jesus who brings us the good news that "God is with us!" And the word "gospel" just means "good news".

In the Transfiguration, the same voice was heard that was heard at Jesus' baptism, announcing, "This is my Son, the Beloved!"

[Docents--background for you:

Why does this story only appear in three of the four gospels? John gives us a very different account of Jesus. In John's gospel, the reader knows from the beginning that Jesus is divine. (*"In the beginning was the Word..."*) In the other gospels, the synoptic gospels (from a Greek word meaning "seen with the same eye"), the people who encounter Jesus do not already know that he is divine. The Transfiguration is an important story to emphasize that. It is so important that it is in the central position of the gospels

of Matthew and Mark! (Semitic languages had a literary device, known as “chiastic structure”, wherein the central concept or theme of an account was found right in the middle rather than at the conclusion!)

Theology of the Transfiguration--

We might say that in all of the Bible stories, there are really only three “meta-narratives”. A meta-narrative is a “big picture”. In the Old Testament, we are shown two meta-narratives:

Exodus—Occupying much of the OT, this storyline gives us a political model offering God’s LAW, as brought through God’s mediator, Moses: We are in bondage to sin, but God leads us from slavery to Sabbath.

Exile—Occupying much of the latter half of the OT, this theme shows a prophetic model, as exemplified by the prophet Elijah, that speaks God’s truth: When we stray from the covenant and become strangers in a strange land, an ever-faithful God leads us home.

Then in the New Testament, we are introduced to a third:

Gospel—Jesus gives us a priestly model: Through his sacrifice of atonement, God comes down to us and offers himself in our stead.

So, what do these three meta-narratives have to do with the Transfiguration? These three themes, **LIBERATION, RESTORATION, RECONCILIATION**, are the underlying themes of the Bible, and the main Biblical characters representing each of them (Moses, Elijah, and Jesus) are the figures on the mountaintop theophany called the Transfiguration.

Icon #11—The Raising of Lazarus



The text for this icon comes from **John’s Gospel—the 11th chapter**—where we read that Jesus’ friend Lazarus is raised from the dead, as the **seventh and final “signs of glory”** Jesus offers in John’s Gospel account. Remember, the signs are **never called “miracles”**. They are **signs of God’s glory, intersections, if you will, of the power of God with the people on earth.**

The setting is the **town of Bethany**, home to **Jesus’ friends, the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus**. (We met them in Icon #9—even though chronologically, this scene precedes that in the Bible.)

Jesus’ is on the left, wearing his **red tunic and blue robe, symbolizing both heaven and earth**, and also representing **Jesus’ two natures in this story**. **Jesus weeps** in the story, a very human emotion, and Jesus has **power to bring his friend back from the dead**, a very divine authority!

We've mentioned that iconography does not show God the Father, so you might wonder **why Jesus, if he is divine, is able to be represented**. The answer may be found in Colossians 1:15, where Paul claims, *"He is the image of the invisible God."* Orthodox belief is that Jesus is the perfect image of God, and remember that the word image is the Greek word icon! Jesus is the first and the perfect icon.

We see the **omnipresent scroll in Jesus' hand**—he is the **one who fulfills Old Testament prophecies**, such as the one in *Ezekiel 37:13* that says:

***"And you shall know that I am the LORD,
when I open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves,
O my people."***

Lazarus, on the right, is emerging from his tomb in a cave, wrapped in white bands of cloth like a mummy. Sisters Mary and Martha are bowing down at Jesus' feet. A man, at Jesus' command, is beginning to "unbind" Lazarus, while holding his nose—after all, the Bible says the body had already begun to smell with decay! Another figure below has removed the rectangular gates to the tomb.

Look at the stylized mountains. Do you see the round shapes atop them? Traditional icons do show mountains of this shape, but they will not have these round shapes. Here's what might be happening. Jewish tradition is to place stones atop graves. Notice that if we follow the tomb, which is a cave, to its mountain peak, we see the stones atop! Perhaps when we see the stylized mountains with the "stones" placed on them, we are reminded that in our earthly existence, we are all dead in our sinful natures! And, the icons on this side of the sanctuary are mostly narratives about death.

Now for a little more Greek. You may notice that in many of the icons, Jesus' halo has some Greek lettering within the visible arms of the inscribed cross. Together these spell the phrase "the existing one" or "the abiding one". This is from the letters **omicron-omega-nu**:

Lower case: **ο ω ν**

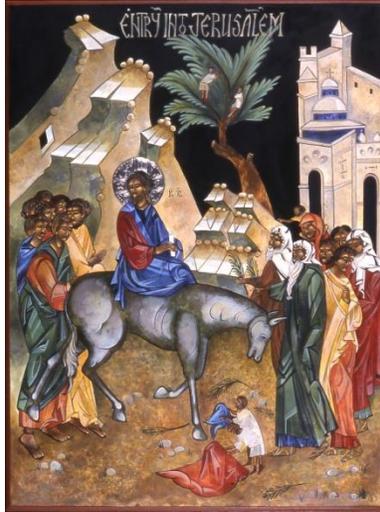
Upper case: **Ο Ω Ν**

The phrase is closely related to the name that God tells Moses in the 3rd chapter of Exodus: *"I am that I am"*, a name that encompasses all tenses of existence at once.

The fact that there is an omega in the phrase, has absolutely nothing to do with the well-known saying in Revelation, where Jesus says he is the "Alpha and the Omega", which is to say the first and the last. (The brochure, again, is in complete error when it claims this.)

Another interesting thing to note before we move on is that Lazarus also has a halo in this icon!

Icon #12—Entry into Jerusalem



All four gospels have a version of this story of Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem the week before his last Passover and Crucifixion. We recall this story every year on the Sunday before Easter, which we call Palm Sunday.

Matthew (21:1-11) refers to a quotation from Zechariah (9:9) about the Messiah humbly riding a donkey, which is quite a contrast to a political or military leader arriving on a war horse. [Unfortunately, in Matthew's account it actually reads as if Jesus is astride two animals like a circus performer. Check it out when you get home!]

The people lining the roadway spread leafy branches in front of his procession. Matthew and Luke mention the people spreading out their cloaks on the roadway before Jesus. Palms, as mentioned in John's gospel, are ancient symbols of victory. It would have been the children who would climb up into the palm trees to cut down the branches, so we see that here.

[Mark 11:1-10 has Jesus riding a colt, and the people spread out their cloaks and leafy branches. Luke 19:2-40 tells of Jesus riding a colt, while the people lay down their cloaks—no mention of branches or palms. John 12:12-18 mentions no tossing of clothing—just strewing of palm branches!]

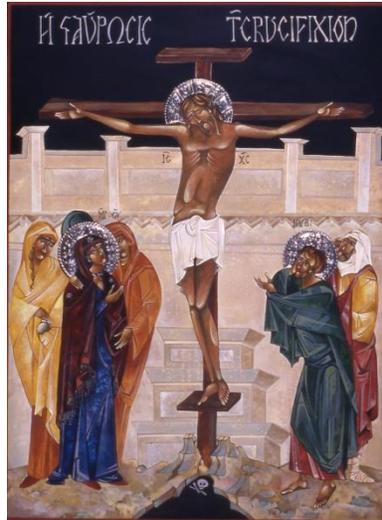
Jesus is seen traveling from the Mount of Olives on the left, toward the Holy City, on the right. We see the gates of the city are open to receive him.

We have come to expect Jesus in a red tunic with a blue robe and holding a white scroll, so we are not disappointed. The letters of Jesus' Greek monogram (ΙϞ ΧϞ) of Jesus Christos are visible beside his head.

Here is a fun factoid: In Russian churches, there is not a Palm Sunday. Instead, they have a Pussy Willow Sunday—and they wave pussy willow branches!

(If anyone asks why our icon has a "hole" like a window in the mountain, tell them that we have asked the artist, Mary Jane Miller, this question. She says that an opening like that is symbolic of a hermit's life in a cave or the darkness where one day God will be revealed.)

Icon #13—The Crucifixion



It is probable that the **earliest stories circulating about Jesus were stories of his crucifixion**. Indeed, the gospel accounts we have coalesced around these memories. Now in the series of “Festival Icons”, there **would be a Last Supper icon between our Palm Sunday icon and this one**. We did not get a Last Supper icon from the artist when the church bought all of these. However, last year a donor bought the Last Supper icon from the artist for us, and that is placed near the altar, so we will look at it a bit later.

[It has even been said that Mark’s gospel, the first of our four to be written (around 65 AD), is just a story of the crucifixion with an extended introduction!]

This Crucifixion icon is modeled after an **11th century mosaic icon at the monastic church in Daphne, Greece**.

You all recognize this scene. We are at **Golgotha**, according to Mark, the “**Place of the Skull**”. And, we can see **a skull in the opening beneath the upright of the cross**. Note that this cross is a **Russian Orthodox cross, with an additional cross-bar at the top**. Also notice that **Jesus’ body is softly curved in an S-shape, very typical in icons**, and contrary to the symmetrical postures we see in Renaissance paintings.

As for that opening at the base of the cross, it symbolizes not only that **Jesus will enter into death, but it represents the teaching that Jesus opens up the gates of death**, a concept we’ll consider more in Icon #15.

Behind the scene we see **an uninterrupted expanse of wall**. This **suggests the world’s indifference** to the colossal event taking place outside the city walls.

If you read the gospel narratives, you may wonder **where the two criminals are** who were also crucified at the same time of Jesus, on either side of him. Iconography does not depict them, as we are intended to enter into the holiness of this single event as we gaze at the icon.

There are **several figures at the foot of the cross**. **Matthew, Mark, and John name the women who remained**. Of the women behind Mary, the **one in yellow is Mary of Magdala**, whom we recognize for her unbound hair and jar of ointment.

[Matthew names Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James & Joseph; and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Mark names Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James & Joseph; and a woman named Salome. Luke does not name any women, but he has them observing. John names Jesus' mother; his mother's sister (!); Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

John also tells us that from the cross, Jesus commends his mother to the care of his disciple, John. That is what we see here. The haloed figure in the blue robe on the left is the mother of Jesus. The haloed figure on the right is disciple John.

Another unique attribute of our icon is the three-tiered "steps" behind the cross. Traditional icons do not show this. We are unsure of the symbolism of it, but we do recognize the inverse perspective, which serves to draw us right into the scene at the foot of the cross!

Remember what I said about the Jewish custom of placing stones atop graves? At the base of the cross, the opening into the realm of the dead is scene, and we also see littered above that lots of stones in what appear to be miniaturized versions of the stylized mountains we've just been speaking about!

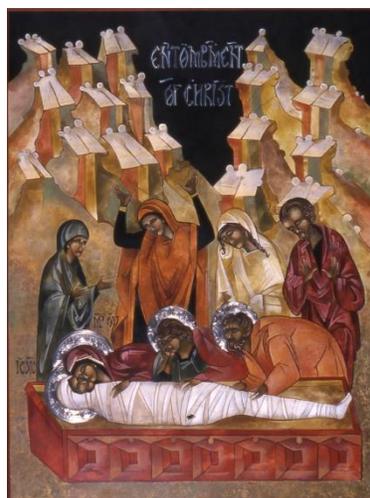
The curious figure behind John, wearing a prayer shawl and with a bound foot, according to the artist, Mary Jane Miller, is one of the Jewish officials who did not see Jesus clearly; they were "bound" by their beliefs, hence the bound foot. [And, Mary Jane deliberately made this foot point backwards "in memory of her own foot"!] -----

NOTE:

The four gospels are not biographies of Jesus in the modern sense. They were written for differing purposes, to very different audiences, and quite a few years after the events they tell. Our tendency is to want to synchronize them into one proper history of the life of Jesus, but close readers will realize that is impossible to do. There are too many discrepancies in "the facts".

A primary difference that becomes apparent in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion is that the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have Jesus crucified on the Passover. John, however, very deliberately (to emphasize a theological teaching he is putting forth) sets the account on the Day of Preparation, which was the day before the Sabbath!]

Icon #14—The Entombment of Christ



This icon is not part of the “liturgical festival” icons, but it is next in the sequence of the life of Christ. Ours is modeled from an [original done for the Cathedral of St Cyril at Belozersky Monastery](#) and now residing in the Andrei Rublev Museum of Medieval Russian Art. (Remember, Andrei Rublev was the iconographer who had “written” the original of our first icon, “The Hospitality of Abraham”.)

There is a [brief passage in each of the four gospels describing this moment](#), when Joseph of Arimathea offers his own never-before-used tomb for Jesus’ body.

There are two tiers of figures above the horizontal shrouded body.

[Left-to-right, those nearest Jesus: Mary](#), his mother, haloed, with her face touching his. Orthodox belief is that Mary’s face only touched the face of Jesus at two times in his life. At his birth—shown in the icon just across the aisle, and here at his entombment! Just beside her head, we see her initials (μρ θν).

In the [middle disciple John](#), whom [some identify as the unknown “beloved” disciple](#) in John’s gospel, also haloed. At the [feet of Jesus, we see Joseph of Arimathea](#), also in a halo.

The [upper tier of unhaloed figures](#) are, left-to-right, three women, and the man on the right is [Nicodemus](#). Legend tell us that Nicodemus was the one to remove (depose) the body from the cross, so sometimes icons will show him holding pliers & the nails he pulled from Jesus’ wounds! As for the women, we are not sure which women these are, but we know the women stayed throughout the passion of Christ, unlike the fleeing disciples! [The woman in yellow, with hair escaping along her shoulders is Mary of Magdala](#), who is even holding the jar of perfumed ointment from her reputation as the anointing woman!

[For docents:

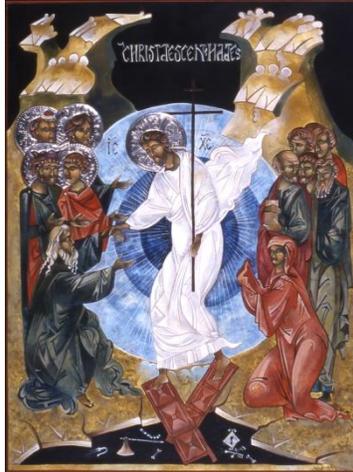
Matthew 27:57-66 tells of Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man and also a disciple, with Mary Magdalene and the “other” Mary present, burying the body of Jesus in his own never-be-used tomb. (Only Matthew says the tomb was Joseph’s.)

Mark 15:42-47 calls Joseph of Arimathea a respected member of the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish council; Mary Magdalene and Mary, the Mother of Jesus was present, as Joseph buried Jesus in a new tomb.

Luke 23:50-56 describes Joseph of Arimathea as good and righteous and a “dissenting” member of the Sanhedrin; Luke says “women” were there, but he does not name them.

John 19:38-42 calls Joseph of Arimathea a disciple of Jesus who buried Jesus in a new tomb in a “garden”! No women are mentioned at all, but we hear that Nicodemus helped Joseph. (We first meet Nicodemus in the 3rd chapter of John!) John’s Gospel mentions a “garden”, as we are clearly supposed to remember what took place in that first garden...in Eden!]

Icon #15—Christ Descends into Hades



The Bible does not tell us what we would like to know about how Christ spent the time between his crucifixion on Good Friday and his Easter morning Resurrection.

There is an obscure passage in *1 Peter 3:19* that reads,
*[Christ] was put to death in the flesh,
but made alive in the spirit,
in which also **he went and
made proclamation to the spirits in prison.***

Those “spirits in prison” are the dead, according to 1 Peter. You may also recall the phrase from the Apostles’ Creed: “*he descended to the dead.*”

Our icon shows Christ, wearing triumphant white, holding a Russian orthodox cross as a staff, having trampled the very gates of death.

The Greek word, **Hades**, just means a place of the dead. The Jewish concept, **Sheol**, has the same connotation—a shady place where the dead went. The Jewish understanding was **never** of a fiery place of perpetual torment—that idea developed more from Dante’s *Inferno*!

So, beneath these gates, we see relics symbolizing death and martyrdom, such as bones, locks, chains, nails, an axe, and a whip.

The first of those released from death are our Biblical ancestors, Adam and Eve—our first parents who brought death into the world; they are shown here without halos, Adam on the left, Eve on the right.

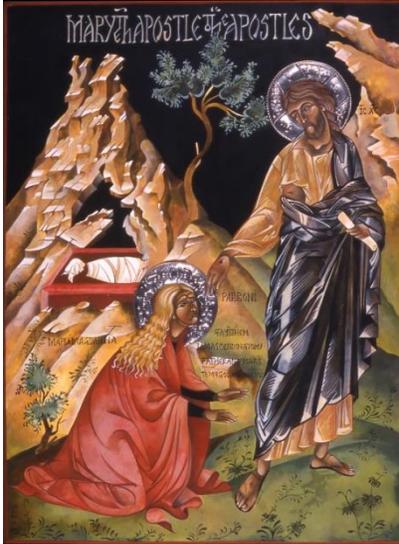
Most icons of this scene ALSO show Abel, the first human to experience death, according to the *Genesis 4:1-16* account. Icons show him with a shepherd crook, since he was a shepherd.

The circular blue field behind Jesus is his “mandorla”, but it is also representative of the uncreated light that represents divinity, like we saw in “The Transfiguration” icon.

Some versions of this icon label it “The Resurrection”!

For the St Thomas post-resurrection icons, we must “travel” to the back columns near the entry door!

Icon #16—Mary, Apostle of the Apostles



This icon is modeled after the icon of Mary Magdalene found in the [Haifa Melkite Cathedral in Israel](#). It comes from the [20th chapter of John](#), where Mary, all alone, arrives early in the morning, after the Sabbath, only to find Jesus' tomb is empty.

We see the [empty tomb](#), we see the [empty grave clothes](#) lying atop the coffin.

When she sees Jesus, she [mistakenly assumes he is a gardener](#). Renaissance art even shows Jesus in a flat-brimmed hat with a hoe to emphasize her confusion.

[Only when Jesus speaks her name does she recognize him](#), whereupon she tries to touch him, but he stops her, because he has not yet ascended to the Father. Jesus does have a halo but no mandorla yet—perhaps as he's not yet ascended.

[We see Mary's words, "Rabbouni", which means "Teacher"](#). You will also notice her hair is hanging down, with no head covering, though she does have a halo. (Think back to the anointing icon to know why her hair is shown hanging down!)

The [wounds on Jesus' hands and feet are clearly visible](#). The white cylinder Jesus holds is his [white scroll](#) (as the "Logos").

Jesus gives Mary the [instructions to go tell the disciples](#) what she has witnessed. Because she immediately does so, she is the [first person to share the story of the Risen Jesus](#), and the [earliest church fathers gave her the rarefied title, "Apostle of the Apostles"](#) for this reason. That is the title of this icon.

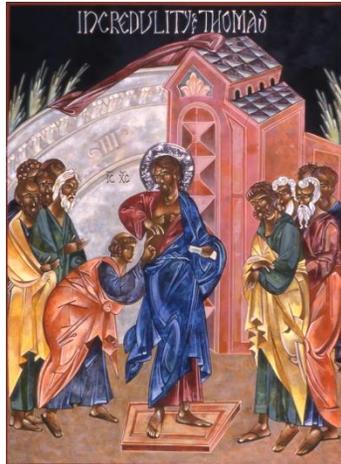
[For Docents: The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) have other women with Mary Magdalene, but in John's gospel, she is alone. The Bible references:

Matthew 28:1-2—Mary and the "other" Mary; an angel of the Lord descends, causing the guards to faint; a sudden "earthquake" opens the tomb—Matthew uses seismic activity as a literary device in his gospel for describing earth-shaking events!

Mark 16:1-8—Mary is with Mary, the mother of James, as well as Salome; the stone is already removed, there is a man in the tomb in a white robe.

Luke 23:55-24:2—Mary is with Joanna and Mary the mother of James, as well as other women. There are two men in dazzling clothes at the empty tomb.
John 20:1-18—as described above.]

**Icon #17—The Incredulity of Thomas
(also known as “The Convincing of Thomas”)**



Again, *only John’s gospel* has this story. Found in the *20th chapter of John*, this is another post-resurrection appearance by Jesus. We learn that the disciples had gathered behind *closed doors* out of fear for the Jewish authorities.

This icon *purposely shows a closed door with the outside world, represented by the trees peaking above the wall, not able to enter.* We see the red cloth draped above, the iconic symbol for a scene taking place inside.

Nevertheless, Jesus, eight days after his death on the cross, is able to enter this closed room where the eleven have withdrawn. Jesus is robed in his traditional red tunic and blue cloak, and he’s holding the white scroll we’ve come to expect.

Even though Mary Magdalene is haloed in Icon #16, we see that the eleven disciples are not haloed here.

The original icon, done by the Russian Novgorod School of iconography shows a red gash in Jesus’ side with Thomas’ finger reaching into it. *Our icon is closer to the text in John*, which leaves it unclear whether Thomas actually took Jesus up on his offer to touch his wounds!

John’s Gospel tells us that at this point, Thomas *proclaims, “My Lord and My God!”* He has realized that *when one looks upon the face of Jesus, one is looking upon God.* In all of John’s Gospel, *Thomas is the first person to know this.*

As a worshipping community named for St Thomas, we probably should *focus on Thomas’ affirmation* rather than his doubt. History would be kinder to remember our namesake not as “Doubting Thomas” but as “*Proclaiming Thomas*”!

So, the *two post-resurrection icons* you’ve seen have, I hope, given *new reputations* to your understanding of both Mary of Magdala and Thomas! Now we have to travel back up to the front!

Icon #18—Pentecost



The next festival icon we have is “Pentecost”. (We do not have “The Ascension”. If you ever see an Ascension icon, Jesus will be surrounded by a blue concentric-circled mandorla and will be holding his hand in the traditional blessing position.) This icon is modeled after a 15th century Russian icon from the Novgorod School of Iconography.

So, 50 days after Easter we have the Festival of Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish holiday that commemorated the receiving of the law that happened 50 days after the Exodus from Egypt! As we learn from the 2nd chapter of the book of Acts, the disciples are gathered in one place. There are again 12 disciples, as Matthias has been chosen by casting of lots to fill the vacancy left by Judas. All the disciples are shown with halos. Those who will write letters or books are shown holding scrolls or book.

In the Bible story, the Holy Spirit is represented by rushing wind and individual tongues of fire. In this icon, the Holy Spirit is represented by the rays of silver from the half-circle Spirit mandorla at the top and aiming toward the disciples heads.

The half-circle of the mandorla is mirrored by the half-circle seating arrangement of the disciples.

Nowhere does the Bible account suggest that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was present. And, the earliest Eastern Orthodox icons of the Pentecost do not have Mary, but they leave an empty seat at his position for Jesus. [Show the picture of the original!]

By adding Mary, the Orthodox Church makes a theological statement about her role in the church. This Mary is wearing the red and blue combination that we’ve seen on Jesus. This suggests her dual nature as both human and divine, but that is not a belief that Protestant faiths share about Mary.

We see her Greek initials beside her head (MP ΘY = mother of God).

As mentioned, there are rays of light traveling from the spirit mandorla toward each disciple, six rays on each side for the six seated on each side. But, notice there is a double dose of the silver ray heading toward Mary!

At the bottom of the icon there is a doorway in which “King Kosmos” stands. Kosmos is the Greek word for the “world”. King Kosmos represents all the nations of the world to whom the good news will be

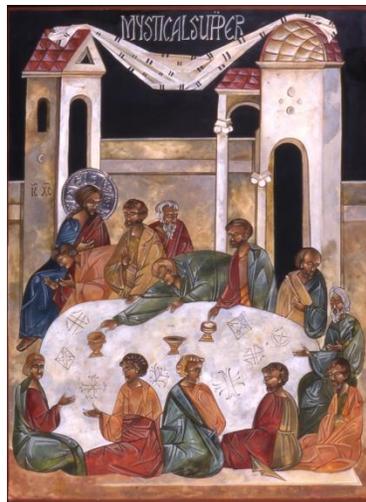
spread from this point on. Kosmos is holding a cloth on which sit twelve scrolls. These stand for the message of the **good news that the apostles seated here will carry to all the ends of the earth.**

In Orthodox Churches, this icon is brought out on Pentecost, but never by itself. It always appears paired with the one opposite (Hospitality of Abraham). But it was a **glorious accident** that we have them **placed oppositionally** in our sanctuary! The first shows God giving the news to Abraham that he will have many descendants who will be a **blessing to the world**; the latter shows how that blessing will be **transmitted!**

(Some icons show the apostle opposite Peter (on Mary's left-hand) as Paul—instead of recognizing the addition of Matthias! When that is the case, here is the order for them, beginning at the lower left and circling around to the lower right:

Thomas/Bartholomew/Andrew/Luke/Matthew/Peter—Paul/John/Mark/Simon/James/Philip

The Mystical Supper Icon



About a year ago, we were given this **late addition** to the St Thomas collection, still by the same artist; this icon has figures that appear a little different from the faces we've encountered in the rest of the collection. The faces of the disciples are not very appealing—jutting chins and bulging foreheads. They look very annoyed with each other! And, none of them have halos.

The title is from the **Greek word for sacrament**: mystikos.

What symbols do you recognize?

The **drapery** over the scene indicates it took place indoors.

Jesus is wearing his characteristic red and blue.

Jesus' halo has the Greek letters we recognize.

Jesus is shown in **hierarchical perspective**—as much larger than the other figures.

The diagrams on the table are decorative only, apart from the three items that appear to be vessels.

The table being **round** does suggest that all are welcome. After all, you can always add one more place to a round table.

The disciples are **almost reclining**—a first century Jerusalem meal would not have been taken seated in chairs at a dining room table, such as we see in Da Vinci's "Last Supper" and similar late art.

(Some icons of this subject actually show Jesus reclining on a mandorla-shaped pillow identical to the one on which Mary reclines in our icon of the Nativity!)

So, **who's who** among the twelve disciples?

Based on a statement in *John 13:23*, "**One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him,**" artists have traditionally shown John, as the **youngest disciple**, laying his head against Jesus. The Bible is never clear that this beloved disciple is in fact John, that is just an assumption. And, the reason John is traditionally depicted as young is that at one time it was believed that the disciple John wrote the book of Revelation. Well, we know that Revelation was written very late—maybe as late as 90 AD—so if it had been written by one of Jesus' twelve disciples, he would had to have been almost a youth in the year 30 AD, the year of Jesus' death.

Peter is always depicted as the **eldest of the twelve**, probably because he is given authority over them. So, Peter is the green-robed guy with the very white beard. The others around the table are not distinguishable in this icon.

Most icons have specific ways of showing which disciple was Judas. First, icons usually show the eleven **facing the viewer** so that both eyes are visible and the disciple is seen head-on, with nothing to hide. Renaissance art does this, too. Then, Judas, who cannot look the viewer straight in the face, is shown in profile, with just one eye visible. This is not what Mary Jane Miller has done in this icon; **she has five** of the disciples shown in profile.

Second, based on the Biblical texts that tell us the betrayer is to be identified by what he does with the bread. So, icons will show **Judas reaching into a vessel** or toward bread. Again, Mary Jane Miller has not used that device, because she clearly has two disciples reaching onto the table. It appears that she has deliberately left it ambiguous as to which disciple is Judas.

Third, in many renderings of the Last Supper, it has become traditional to show Judas **as left-handed**. This is not based on Biblical fact. However, left-handedness in the Bible (and elsewhere) means shiftiness and dishonesty. Indeed, the French word for left-handed is SINISTER!

Most Renaissance art and lots of icons do show all the disciples with halos during the Last Supper; tho' ours does not.

So, when you see Renaissance art of the Last Supper, you will certainly be able to identify Judas, who is often shown as the only disciple with a black halo, while the others have gold or silver.

Three Icons about Mary (behind choir stall)



Our **Life of Christ icons are concluded**, but we also somehow acquired three icons on the “Life of Mary”, the mother of Jesus. The curious thing about St Thomas having these three is that they **represent Orthodox and Catholic belief, but they do not represent Protestant beliefs about Mary.**

The narratives these icons portray are not anywhere in the Bible.

The first is the “Nativity of Mary”. This is a legend that developed to explain how Mary could have been pure enough to give birth to the son of God. The resulting explanation is called the “**Immaculate Conception**”. This belief claims that Mary had to be born without sin. So, this icon shows the birth of Mary. It is not based on the Bible. [Mother = Anna; Father = Joachim]

The middle is “The Presentation” of Mary. Just as Jesus had been presented at the 8th day of life to the Temple priests for circumcision. So, Mary, according to this legend that is not Biblical had to be presented to the Temple priests for consecration to the service of God. Mary’s size is small in scale to show her humility. Mary also appears on her throne as the Queen of Heaven in the upper left of this icon.

The third is “The Dormition of Mary”, or her “**big sleep**”! Again, this is not a Bible-based concept, and it is not accepted as Protestant belief, but the icon shows that Mary is taken directly into heaven by Christ at her death. That small infant Christ is holding is the spirit of Mary being taken to heaven for “adoption”.

The really great thing about his particular icon is the **pewter repousse wings** at the top above Jesus’ mandorla. Here’s what they represent:

In Old Testament times, the Ten Commandments were housed in a special **vessel called “The Ark of the Covenant”**. It was even believed the Very Presence of God himself travelled around with the people in this Ark! In New Testament times, Mary will be considered the new “Ark of the Covenant”, because she carried Jesus during her pregnancy.

Now, the **original Ark of the Covenant, according to the story in Exodus, had two cherubim** on its cover. According to the **Ezekiel text, cherubim were six-winged beings**. Therefore, the **array of repousse wings** on this icon represent the cherubim atop the New Ark of the Covenant.

Mirrored Themes of the St Thomas Icon Collection

#3 & #14 (The Nativity / The Entombment)

Earlier we mentioned that Icon #3 (The Nativity of Christ) has features in common with Icon #14 (The Entombment of Christ)”

+the baby and the body are both wrapped in white bands of cloth

+the manger and the coffin look similar

+Mary’s face is touching Jesus’s face, which only happens these two times, according to Orthodox belief

The fact that these are situated opposite each other across the aisle is not by design but by *glorious accident!*

And, we can find parallels in the other icons, as they mirror each other across the aisles. Let’s begin toward the back:

#6 & #11 (John the Baptist / Raising of Lazarus)

Both portray *deaths of people beloved* by Jesus—his cousin John and his friend Lazarus. John’s beheading is foreshadowed in his icon, while Lazarus’ death is overturned in his.

#5 & #12 (Baptism of Jesus / Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem)

At his Baptism, Jesus hears a voice form heaven *hailing* him as God’s Beloved Son. At his entry into Jerusalem, the crowds *hail* him with shouts of “Hosanna”.

#4 & #13 (Boy Jesus in the Temple / The Crucifixion)

In the first, Jesus *so amazes the Jewish officials* that they listen in awe. In the Crucifixion, Jesus has *so angered the Jewish officials* that they do whatever they could to eliminate him.

#2 & #15 (The Annunciation / Christ’s Descent to the Dead)

In the first, the angel *announces God’s plan* for a Savior to come to us. In the second, Jesus *announces* to the dead that *God’s plan* has been fulfilled for their release from death’s bondage.

#1 & #18 (The Hospitality of Abraham / The Pentecost)

The first represents the promise of multitudinous descendants for Abraham, who will be a *blessing to all the nations* of the earth. The last shows the Holy Spirit filling the disciples who will spread the good news as *a blessing to all the nations* of the earth!

Thanks be to God!