

The Holy Door

Nowadays the pilgrims enter the Church of the Resurrection through a single entrance which is called the Holy Door. Its dimensions are relatively large, its height exceeding five meters and its width over three. Its two door panels are made of pine and walnut wood and on the inside they are supported by two iron plates. There are Arabic inscriptions engraved on its two ancient handles. On the right handle it is written: "Pilgrim, enjoy your desire. Enter into the Lord's joy, the luminous heaven... the mother of churches". On the left handle it is written: "Strangers, enter into the courtyards of the Lord, into the tomb of Life, where the grace lives and blessed light prevails". Beyond this entrance and in an easterly direction, there is another identical entrance, which was sealed in 1187. Both these entrances constitute the complex of the gates of the Church and they are flanked by eleven white and greenish marble pillars, which end in Corinthian crowns. On the semi-circular panel, above the holy Door, there used to be relief engravings of Lazarus' Resurrection, Jesus' glorious entrance into Jerusalem, the Holy Basin and the Last Supper. Now, the engravings are kept in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. On the equivalent panel of the now sealed entrance there were emblems, under which lay the gilded icon of the Virgin Mary lay, that survived until 1801 and is also known to us from the life of St. Mary of Egypt.

Before entering the Church, one can see on the left the middle pillar with a long crack in its lower part. According to tradition, in 1580, when Murat III, having been bribed by the Armenians, granted them the right to perform the ceremony of the Holy Light, the Orthodox gathered in the Holy Courtyard waiting for the outcome of the events. Despite the Armenian Patriarch's hopeless attempt, the Holy Light did not shine in the holy Aedicule or anywhere else inside the Church. Instead, the marble pillar was torn and from within the crack, the

Orthodox received the Holy Light. Emir Tounom, witnessing this miracle, was so impressed that he cried out: "Great is the faith of the Greeks", an utterance that cost him his life. When the Sultan heard about the miracle, he issued a decree (*firman*) granting the Greek Orthodox Patriarch the exclusive right of receiving the Holy Light. The Armenians of course, maintain their own explanation for the big tear on the pillar, according to which some poor pilgrims, who could not afford the required "donation", remained outside the Church. However, Divine Providence provided for them, as they saw the light through the crack of the pillar.

During the night, the Holy Door remains closed, its keys kept by Muslim doormen from a specific family through hereditary right. Each time the gate needs to open for ceremonial or other reasons, the doorman is called upon to open the gate and guard it until the end of the event, whereupon he locks it and departs. However, for the official opening and closing of the Church Door, a special officiating prerequisite has been incorporated, by which the presence of a Greek doorman is required.

The cracked and blackened pillar

During the Easter of 1549 AD, the Armenians were successful in bribing the Turkish Administrator to issue an order forbidding the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Sophronios IV from entering the Church to perform the ceremony of the Holy Light. The guards closed the Holy Door and Patriarch Sophronios IV, accompanied by men of the cloth and the faithful, stayed outside, praying. Indeed, the Lord's response was prompt. Despite the desperate attempt of the Armenian Patriarch, the Holy Light did not shine within the holy Aedicule, or anywhere within the Church. Instead, it shone through the Pillar which to this day remains cracked and blackened. To everyone's great surprise, the candles held by the Orthodox Patriarch then lit up. Sophronios went on to share the Light with the Orthodox faithful in the courtyard, whereas the Armenian Patriarch left the scene in

shame. This miraculous event was witnessed by Emir Tounom, a guard at the Holy Door. According to one tradition, Tounom became a Christian, and was killed by the Turks in order to silence the event. A different tradition relates that, upon witnessing the miracle, Tounom exclaimed "Behold the true faith" – and for it he was burnt alive by the Turks. Today his relics are kept in the Monastery of the Great Panaghia. When the Sultan was informed of the miracle, he issued a decree recognizing the Orthodox Patriarch's exclusive right to receive the Holy Light.