

St. Peter the Aleut

The Icon that Washed Ashore

This is a story about St. Peter the Aleut. On November 9th, 2016, (I remember it well as it was the day after the elections) I was walking the beach at Sandy Cove, as I always did each morning when I lived and worked at Fort Ross. I have taken the walk hundreds of times — enjoying the sunrise and being reminded of the many blessings that surround me. I have a routine where I would walk from one end of the beach to the other, crossing the seasonal creek. On this day the creek had plenty of water rushing out to sea as we had many large storms in the weeks before. When you walk and visit an area repeatedly, you become very familiar with it and generally notice new changes and things that seem out of place. There was nothing unusual as I began my walk to the south. When I walked to the north end and started to leave the beach I crossed the creek back to the path but turned one last time to glance at the ocean and the crashing waves. Turning, I saw something with color on it in the sand that was certainly out of place (I had not seen it earlier when I arrived). I went closer to retrieve it thinking it was trash, but as I got close enough I could see more color that looked as though it was a painting. As I neared the last object I could tell it had a gold color at the top and a figure. I ran across the creek and started digging it out of the sand to discover it was an icon of St. Peter the Aleut. I cried as I know St. Peter very well. I could not believe it. I wiped it down, stared at it in disbelief and tried to imagine how it came to be here. St. Peter came back to the shores of Colony Ross where he had left on his last hunting trip.



My back story is that I had worked at Fort Ross for 27 years. My heart and soul was tied to this place, with its amazing history - and the diversity of people that touched these shores. I loved every bit of the history here as well as the modern stories we were creating, bringing people together. I learned about the people of the past in-depth so that I may share these personal stories with our visitors, the school children, and the church and share the idea of daily life at Colony Ross. Visitors learn about many of the Californian and Alaskan native peoples, as well as the Russian natives, the Russian American Company, and the Church presence. I had studied St. Peter the Aleut at length. He is the only Saint from the Northwest Pacific history that lived and worked at Colony Ross. I spoke about him often because of his story of being captured and killed. Every Sunday as a part of my morning walk, I walked to the cemetery to offer prayer to those at rest here. He was included in those prayers. However, my time at Fort Ross was coming to an end. It was the most difficult time for me personally and professionally. I knew that I wasn't going to lose my connection, but I would be leaving these shores as a caretaker living here, the very shores that Peter, as a young Alaskan hunter, had left on his last voyage

St. Peter the Aleut lived a short life as a servant. Cungagnaq, at the young age of 15, from Kodiak Island area, was working under the Russian American Company (RAC). He was at some point baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith and thus given the name of Peter. As a skilled hunter, Peter was taken to Colony Ross, where he hunted the sea otter as well as other fur mammals for the RAC. Most likely he lived out on the front terrace in front of the fort compound in what today is called the Alaskan Neighborhood at Fort Ross, where many young Native Alaskan men lived. I don't think he lived there long. Many of the hunters would be hauled to southern areas of California to hunt. Peter, along with several other hunters, was captured by Spanish soldiers on one of these hunts in 1819 and taken to a nearby mission. At the mission he was tortured by the priests unless he became Catholic. Peter refused to renounce his faith as a Russian Orthodox and continued to be tortured and killed. Now St. Peter the Aleut has been referred to as a "martyr of San Francisco". There are many oral histories written about this story in regards to location and where St. Peter was buried, if at all. Peter the Aleut was glorified as a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia and locally glorified by the Diocese of Alaska of the Orthodox Church in America as the 'Martyr of San Francisco' in 1980. His feast day is celebrated September 24 or December 12. Here is a link to the Wikipedia site, which is the site the icon was fashioned from. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_the_Aleut

After I found St. Peter the Aleut on the beach that early morning, I brought the icon to my home and called several people and told them this story. One person I called was Mother Melania at the Calistoga Monastery, Holy Assumption. She asked me to bring it to the monastery, which I did several days later. She shared the story with Archpriest Lawrence who held the molebin of the icon at St. Seraphim of Sarov.



I was asked by several clergy and sisters if the icon brought comfort. Yes, oh yes, comfort and peace. I still believe it is a miracle that it washed ashore on that beach. It could have been any beach. This is the beach that Peter left on his last kayak voyage. And it could have been anyone that found it, but St. Peter showed himself to me, someone who knows him well, shed tears for him on my cemetery walks, spoke about him to thousands, and for this I am eternally grateful. Peter has offered me a story of faith and hope and reminded me that no one can take the story of Fort Ross from us. It has brought inspiration and hope to me, and I do hope that the story will do the same for you.



When I think of Peter, I think about him as a young hunter and someone of strong Russian Orthodox faith. I think about him knowing and praying with St. Herman. I think about him as the martyr. Peter came back to the beach at Fort Ross – the place he had left with every thought about returning as a young hunter. He came back to say ‘I am still here and still have a story to tell, a story of faith in Jesus.’

St. Theophan the Recluse writes: “Some icons are miraculous because it so pleases God, but the power is not in the icons, or in the people turning to them, but in the mercy of God.” The Lord creates miracles anywhere, anytime, and through anything. An icon is said to be a window into the heavenly realm. I believe this is true.

There are several icons that have washed up on beaches. A colonel was shocked to find that the dolphins had delivered an icon of the Theotokos, which they later realized was of the type “of the Sign.” Here is the story <http://orthochristian.com/104337.html>

The icon of the Mother of God of the Iberians (Iveron) was found on a beach. The holy icon was painted in the 19th century and found ashore on October 25, 2013 on a beach the day before the Iveron icon celebrates its feast day according to the ecclesiastical calendar. <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2013/11/an-iveron-icon-of-theotokos-washes.html>