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Giving Life and Bouncing Back in Russian

By Michele A. Berdy

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The Resurrection of Christ by Italian Renaissanse painter Pietro Perugino



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Воскреша́ть: to resurrect

If you hopped on a plane, bus, or train last weekend to travel to a country with few Orthodox Christians, you might have forgotten the Easter rituals. But if you stayed in Russia, you were probably overwhelmed by colored eggs, кулич (Easter sweet bread), пасха (a spread that tastes a bit like cheesecake), and of course the cheerful greeting Христос воскресе! (Christ is risen!) to which people reply: Воистину воскресе! (Verily He is risen.)

Wait a sec — воскресе? That doesn't sound like Russian. Good catch! It isn't. It's Church Slavonic. You can also say in Russian: Христос воскрес! Воистину воскрес! — although that's a bit down to earth.

In any case, the verb being used is воскрес-, that is, воскреш-, no — hold on I'll get it ...

Ah. Here's the tricky bit. There are two verb pairs that are almost but not quite synonyms: воскрешать/воскресить and воскресать/воскреснуть. Blink and you mix them up. But the meaning and way you use them differs.

Воскрешать means to resurrect someone or something. It's a transitive verb, which means in everyday language that you carry out the act of resurrecting on a person or object. Usually you come across this in a religious context: Христос воскрешает нас, как воскресил когда-то Лазаря (Christ resurrects us the way he once resurrected Lazarus.)

But we humans can also resurrect things, like memories: Нам легко воскрешать в нашей памяти радостные моменты прошлого (It's easy for us to resurrect the joyful moments of our past in our memories.) Or we can give concepts a second life: Это давным-давно умершие понятия нашего проклятого прошлого, и я не пойму, кто и зачем их воскрешает (Those are concepts of our cursed past that died out long ago, and I can't understand who is resurrecting them and why.) Or we can bring someone back to life, albeit in a human way, like this prison camp inmate described by Varlam Shalamov: Даже пятьсот граммов ржаного хлеба, три ложки каши и миска жидкого супа в день могли воскрешать человека (Even 50 grams of rye bread, three spoonfuls of porridge and a bowl of watery soup a day could bring a man back to life.)

The other pair, воскресать/воскреснуть, also means to resurrect, but the verb pair is intransitive — someone or something resurrects itself. This is verb you're using at Easter with the greeting Христос воскрес. And even though this is a very religious word, you can find it used figuratively — or at least secularly: Воскреснет твёрдый знак, вернутся ять (The hard sign will be resurrected and the letter yat will return, too.) Of course, most of the time it's rather lofty: Я шёл так, словно мне шестнадцать лет, всё апрельское волнение и юношеские страхи воскресли во мне (I walked along just like I was 16 years old, and all the excitement of April and fears of youth came to life in me again.)

Now you might not have cause to talk about resurrection much, but you do bring things back to life, like your garden in the spring. With these secular verb pairs, it's the same story: оживлять/оживить (to bring someone or something to life) and оживать/ожить (to come to life). You even have the same problem telling the verbs apart. Мы оживляем газету (We're bring the newspaper back to life.) And in fact: Газета ожила! (The newspaper has bounced back!)

Hey, it's the season of miracles.

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