

Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ is risen!

Brothers and sisters, while the rest of the world—including most non-Orthodox Christians—have already moved beyond and past Pascha and have forgotten about it, putting away their lilies, bunnies and eggs--we Orthodox Christians are still very much caught up in the singular joy and exaltation of the Resurrection of Christ. And indeed, we will stay in this liturgical “place” of great happiness until the Feast of the Ascension, on the fortieth day.

Last Sunday we remembered the encounter of the Apostle St. Thomas with the Risen Lord, but today we remember the Myrrh-bearing Women who came to the tomb early on the third day—that is, when the sun was just rising.

Customarily, for more than three decades, on this Sunday I have given a sermon about the holy priesthood, which I hold as a precious privilege and gift from the Lord—for I was ordained on this weekend 32 years ago. But since the Myrrh-Bearing Women are such tremendous models for priests *as well as* lay people, I want to focus exclusively on them this year.

Who were the Myrrh-Bearing Women?

They were the pious ladies of Jerusalem who were among the followers of the Master, our Lord Jesus Christ, and who served Him and provided material and financial help for Him and the Apostles as it was needed. During the passion and crucifixion, while all of the others—except for the Beloved Apostle John--had run away in fear (and Peter had even denied Him three times!), these holy women did not desert the Lord. They remained faithfully with Him throughout, as silent consolers and compassionate witnesses until His entombment. They were joined at the foot of the Cross by the Theotokos, and they sought to ease her grief and unbearable suffering at the sight of her Son in such terrible agony.

The precious body of the Lord was taken down from the Cross late on that Friday, but before sunset, because the setting of the sun would mark the beginning of both the Sabbath and the Passover, and it was illegal to do any “work” on that day. St. Joseph of Arimathea and St. Nicodemus (who were followers of the Lord) were also there; St. Joseph had himself provided the tomb, which was nearby, in a garden, and he and the women gently brought the Savior’s body down from the wood of the cross and carried it into the cave tomb. The sun was about to set and there was no time to do the required ritual washing and anointing of the body. So they carefully covered it with a shroud. (Likely this is the very cloth that is preserved and venerated to this day in the Italian city of Turin, and which we call the Holy Shroud.)

Now, brothers and sisters, in a mystical way, this tomb represents the human soul, where Christ must always reside. About this, one of the Holy Fathers of the Church, Blessed Theophylact, very firmly instructs us "... Let us (also) take the body of Jesus, through Holy

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Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



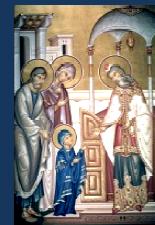
Communion, and place It in a tomb hewn out of a rock, that is, place It within a soul which always remembers God and does not forget Him. And let that soul be hewn from a rock, that is, from Christ Who is the Rock on which we are established" (Blessed Theophylact, Commentary on Mark 15:42-47). By the way, it's very interesting to note that the Greek word for 'tomb' is derived from the word "mneme" which means "memory". Therefore we must not make the mistake of just believing in Christ and yet not working to build a proper place for Him in our soul.

But the washing and anointing still had to be done. It couldn't be done on the Saturday, for that was a High Holy Day, so very early in the morning of the following day, Sunday, these brave and loving women approached the tomb carrying myrrh and linen for the necessary work they had to complete. Here we must note that myrrh was very costly and used only in the anointing of kings and other great and high personages—further, we are told that they brought a large amount of this costly myrrh. This demonstrates the conviction Christ's followers had that He was indeed a *king*, as well as Savior and Redeemer. A poor man, such as was Christ, or a criminal—as He was regarded by the Romans and the unbelieving Jews—would not have been the object of such an expensive burial. So, they came, showing great faith and courage, for they knew they would not be able to roll back the stone sealing the entrance to the tomb; in addition, they knew that the tomb was guarded by soldiers who would probably try to prevent them from entering.

We can only imagine their shock when they arrived and discovered that the stone had already been rolled away and the soldiers were gone. The Gospel of Mark tells us that they were actually "afraid", for they did not immediately understand what had happened. It was really too much for them to bear all at once, for they had really expected to find the *lifeless* but precious and holy body of their Lord in the tomb. But then, the Lord rewarded them for all their love and devoted care, for these Myrrh-bearers were among the first witnesses to the Resurrection of Christ, having found the tomb empty and hearing from the angel the overwhelming and actually stupefying news that "He is risen!"

Among these holy women was Mary Magdalene, who, as we know from the Gospel account, actually meets and worships the risen Jesus Christ and then ran to tell the good tidings to the Apostles, who were still in hiding.

(By the way, as an important aside, it is critical to know that the Mary Magdalene presented in Western Christianity as a reformed harlot is *not* historically accurate nor does it even conform to the Gospel account. There was indeed a reformed harlot, but the Mary who was among the Myrrh-bearing Women at the tomb was a wealthy woman from Magdala, who had been able to provide for much of the financial needs of the Lord and His disciples. She went on to become an important missionary and evangelist, for which reason the Orthodox Church has given her the title, "Equal to the Apostles"! She is also the originator of "Easter eggs"—but that is a story for another time.)



The number of women who served Christ during His lifetime on earth was many, but we know the names of only seven of them from the Gospel accounts. They are, Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Salome, the mother of the Holy Apostles James and John the Theologian, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, and Susanna.

But—now listen carefully--*there was still another Mary, the All-Pure Mother of the Lord herself*, but she had come earlier, before the others, and the risen Christ revealed Himself to her first. (This tradition is preserved only in the Orthodox Church, as far as I know.) In fact, according to our Holy Father, St. Gregory Palamas, in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, she was there when the stone was rolled back and her Son was raised. He writes: The Lord's "countenance was like lightning and His raiment

white as snow. And for fear of him the guards did shake and become like dead men." In other words, the Lord raised Himself specifically for her, out of His great love for her. St. Gregory adds, "So you see that even before Mary Magdalene, the Mother of God saw Him who for our salvation suffered and was buried and rose again in the flesh."

From all this you can see, Brothers and Sisters, how we, like the Myrrh-bearers, must *first* come to the saving *Cross* of our Savior—as the Holy Women of Jerusalem did--and *then* to the empty Tomb, seeking comfort and instruction for our souls. Only if we do this can we, according our strength and ability, will learn how to serve Him like the Myrrh-bearing Women did: quietly, peacefully, gently, fearlessly, and above all with courageous love. Therefore, let us bring our love and worship, and our good works, too, to Christ in the same way that these good women brought precious myrrh to His tomb, so that He, the all-merciful and resurrected One, may reward each of us, in His good time, with salvation and resurrection.

O holy Myrrh-bearing women, pray to God for us!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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