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A Year of the Lord Liturgical Bible Studies

Volume 4: Easter to Pentecost

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Department of Religious Education

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Icon by Theologic

Chapter 3 Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers

Prayer

Sing: *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen)

Christ our God, the myrrh-bearing women came to the tomb early in the morning seeking to anoint Your pure body. But hearing the words of the angel they heralded joyous oracles to the disciples: Christ the author of our salvation is risen! He has conquered the power of death! He has granted to the world life and great mercy! Lord, together with them we praise You: glory to you!

– Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers Vespers Hymn

Sing: *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen)

A Tomb for Jesus

On the third Sunday of Pascha, the Orthodox Church commemorates a number of persons connected with the final events of Jesus's life who were important witnesses to His death and resurrection. These are the myrrh-bearing women who came to anoint the body of Jesus,

Joseph of Arimathea who buried Jesus, and Nicodemus who helped him. We gratefully remember them during the third week of Easter for their faith, courage, and devotion to the Lord.

Joseph of Arimathea was an influential Jewish leader, a member of the supreme Jewish Council in Jerusalem, who was attracted by Jesus's message about God's kingdom. St. Luke tells us that "he was a good and honorable man" and that "he had not agreed with their [the Council's] decision and action" (Luke 23:51) regarding Jesus's crucifixion. Yet like Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Council, Joseph did not make a public witness to Jesus. Both he and Nicodemus were "secret disciples" (John 19:38–39) who, during Christ's ministry, did not dare risk their reputation and standing among the Jewish aristocracy by identifying with Jesus. But the injustice of Jesus's death led them to a moment of decision. They asked Pilate for Jesus's body and dared bury Him whom the Council had condemned, while the known disciples scattered and were hiding in fear!

Joseph was a wealthy man, and he buried Jesus in a tomb that he owned (Matthew 27:60), a new tomb in a garden (John 19:41). He bought a fine linen shroud in which to wrap Jesus. He and Nicodemus spared no expense and gave the Master a royal burial (John 19:39). Who can describe the richness of their feelings, their tears of repentance and love, as they buried their dear lord with their own hands? A hymnographer has tried to catch the intimacy of this moment with the following moving Vesper hymn, which is also chanted near the Epitaphios, the symbolic tomb of Christ, on Holy Friday afternoon during the Service of the Descent from the Cross (*Apokathelosis*):

When Joseph with Nicodemus brought You, who have put on light like a robe, down from the Cross, and beheld you dead, naked, and unburied, he mourned with deep compassion and wailed, saying: "Woe is me, sweet Jesus! A while ago, the sun beheld you suspended on the Cross; it was shrouded in darkness. The earth quaked with fear. The curtain of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. But I see that You willingly endured death for my sake! How then shall I bury You, my God? How shall I wrap You with linen? With what hands shall I touch Your pure body? Or what dirges shall I chant at Your departure, Merciful One? I magnify Your passion! I praise Your burial together with Your resurrection? I cry out: Lord, glory to You!"

Read Mark 15:42–47, which is the first part of the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers.

How is Joseph described in verses 42–43?

He was a _____ .

He was waiting for _____ .

What adverb described how Joseph went before Pilate (verse 43)? _____

What four actions did Joseph take in burying Jesus (verse 46)?

1. What do you like about Joseph of Arimathea? Why?

2. In what ways are you a “secret” and/or “public” follower of Christ today?

Meditation

How beautiful Christ looks in some of our icons. We bow down before him and even kiss Him. But Christ is not to be buried in icons...We respect the icons of Christ in church, but how do we treat the living icons of Christ, our fellow humans, especially the last and least of our brothers and sisters? If we kiss the icon of Christ in church but treat with disrespect the living icon of Christ in our fellow humans, are we not dishonest? Are we not hypocritical? Don't ever let Christ be buried in an icon. Roll away the stone and let Him become a living presence and power in your life.

– Anthony Coniaris, *The Message of the Sunday Gospel Readings*, vol. 2, p. 45

The Women Disciples

In ancient Jewish culture, women were restricted to domestic duties. They didn't have full access to either the Temple or the synagogue. At least ten Jews were required to form a synagogue, but women did not count. Women could not be called as witnesses in court. Their religious duties were the same as a slave's on the assumption that women, like slaves, could not control their own time. A pious Jew would not talk to a woman on the street. Even when women had to come out of the house, they had to wear veils, and, if married, walk a few steps

behind their husbands. As the Jewish historian Josephus put it, “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man.”

When one considers the place of women in the ministry of Christ, the contrast with the usual role of Jewish women of that time could not be more striking. Among the most faithful followers of Jesus were women. In a remarkable passage, St. Luke reports that a close circle of women along with the male disciples followed Jesus and supported Him out of their own resources (Luke 8:1–3).

It is true that Jesus didn’t choose any women to be among the twelve disciples, but apart from that He did not treat men and women differently. He addressed everyone with the same love and the same message. He talked freely with the Samaritan woman (John 4). He healed many women, among them the woman with the hemorrhage (Matthew 9:20–22). He allowed the sinful woman to touch Him, much to the surprise of His host (Luke 7:36–50). He also had a special friendship with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42, John 11:5). While the men disciples fled at the hour of the crucifixion, the women followers did not desert Jesus. They were present near the cross and observed where He was buried. In the early morning following the Sabbath they courageously came to mourn Jesus and to anoint Him with spices and aromatic oils, a burial custom of the Jews. Their devotion to the Lord, as is shown in the Gospels, was rewarded by the fact that these women were the first to discover the empty tomb and the first to see the risen Christ.

An anonymous writer has composed the following words about the myrrh-bearing women:

Because of their total love for their Lord, all obstacles in their path were overcome. The darkness of the night gave way to the light of the resurrection. The unbelieving soldiers yielded to the angel of God. The holy women wept with joy as they heard the good news of Christ’s resurrection. They came to anoint the Savior, but instead were anointed themselves with everlasting life.

Read Mark 16:1–8, which is the second part of the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers.

What were the names of the myrrh-bearing women (verse 1)?

What concern did they have as they went to the tomb (verses 3–4)?

What was the good news about Jesus (verse 6)?

“He is not here – He _____!”

The women were at first afraid to say anything, but what is the message they were to take to the men disciples (verse 7)?

1. How does the example of the myrrh-bearing women speak to you?

2. How can the teachings of Christ bring equality and harmony to men and women today?

Meditation

“Suddenly there was a violent earthquake; an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled the stone away” (Matthew 28:2). When the angel of the Lord comes to take away the stone from the sepulchre, he does not roll it gently away. It is not an operation that can be accomplished without effort, without a deep and violent upheaval. An earthquake is necessary. In the same way, the removal of whatever obstacle separates us from Jesus cannot be thought of as a partial adjustment. It is not a matter of taking off or rearranging some loose stones, of modifying some details and leaving the whole as unchanged as possible. In this case, too, an earthquake is needed. It is to say that the change must be total, reaching into every aspect of our being. Conversion is a spiritual “earthquake.”

– A Monk of the Eastern Church, *The Year of Grace of the Lord*, p. 185

Serving Others

The myrrh-bearing women, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus shared a willingness to serve Christ. They loved Jesus deeply. In the hour of His death, and despite great risks, they had the courage to serve His last earthly needs.

It was Jesus Himself who set this pattern of love and service. He said, "I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep" (John 10:11). He taught: "Love one another, just as I love you. The greatest love a person can have to his friends is to give his life for them" (John 15:12–13). Read the words Jesus spoke to His disciples in Matthew 20:25–28 when they became angry with each other about position and privilege.

Read Acts 6:1–7, the Epistle reading for the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers, which tells about the seven deacons (*diakonoi*, or "servants" of the early Church).

Why did a quarrel arise among the early Jewish Christians (verse 1)?

What did the early Church do about this under the supervision of the apostles (verse 3)?

How were the seven deacons confirmed in their new role (verse 6)?

How did the apostles serve the Church and the Christian mission (verse 4)?

1. List some examples of service to others from the Bible or from Church tradition.

2. What practical steps can you take at this time to serve others?

... in your family: _____

... in your parish: _____

... in society: _____

Prayer

Sing: *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen)

Christ our God, the company of women came to your tomb in the morning darkness seeking You, the Sun who existed before the sun. A luminous angel said to them: the Light which enlightens those in darkness has dawned. Let all nations rejoice! The Lord and King who submitted to death as a mortal has conquered death and has raised Adam from corruption. Christ the savior of the world has risen from the dead and has filled creation with the air of resurrection. Lord and benefactor of our souls, glory to You!

– Adapted Hymn, Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers

Sing: Christ is Risen (*Christos Anesti*)