



## SUNDAY OF THE MYRRH-BEARING WOMEN

April 30

### THE GOSPEL READING

**Mark 15:43-47; 16:1-8**

[The Burial and the Empty Tomb]

*At that time, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. And Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. And he bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.*

*And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*



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## THE SERMON

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are secret disciples of Jesus. They are also members of the powerful assembly of Jerusalem, known as the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the supreme judicial, ecclesiastical, and administrative council of the Jewish religious leaders. For any member of the Sanhedrin to openly display a connection with Jesus Christ would place them in grave danger.

Yet, Joseph had opened his heart to God's will and was eagerly seeking the Kingdom of God. With courage, he goes to the governor, Pilate, and asks for the Body of the Lord for the purpose of giving Him a proper burial. Pilate was astonished that Jesus was already dead. Crucifixion was a method of punishment reserved for the worst criminals. The purpose of crucifixion as a method of execution was to inflict long-lasting pain and torture. A crucified person would die slowly and publicly in order to deter others from engaging in criminal behavior.

On that particular Friday, when the Lord was crucified, the Jewish people did not want to profane the holy Sabbath, which was to begin at sunset. Therefore, they asked the Romans to break the legs of Jesus and the thieves to accelerate their death and remove them from the cross. The soldiers came and broke the legs of the other two who were crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.

This was to fulfill the Old Testament prefiguring of Christ as the Paschal Lamb (the lamb to be sacrificed at Pascha), about which Moses instructed the people of Israel: "nor shall you break one of its bones" (Exodus 12:46). As the centurion pierces the side of Jesus to make sure He was dead, water and blood come out. This points to the Eucharist that Jesus instituted, where the elements of wine, water, and bread become the Body and the Blood of the Lord, which we receive in Holy Communion for eternal life. In His death, the Lord is already giving us life. As Eve came from the side of Adam, now the Church, the Bride of Christ, comes from His side.

When Pilate learns from the centurion that the Lord is dead, he grants the Body to Joseph, who wraps Him in the linen shroud to prepare Him for burial. We witness the representation of this yearly in the Vespers of Holy Friday, in the "un-nailing of the Cross." Joseph lays Him in an unused tomb that had been carved out of the rock, and he rolls a stone against the door. As the Lord Jesus was born in a cave of a manger, He rises from a cave of a tomb.

Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, see where He is laid. The Sabbath starts at sunset on Friday, as they put the Lord in the tomb. The Lord fulfills the Sabbath rest by laying in the tomb on Saturday before recreating all things on the first day of the

week. Saint Athanasios the Great says, "The old Sabbath was like a candle lit in the night before the rising and appearing of the sun." When the Sabbath was over, early in the morning hours of Sunday, the women bring spices to anoint the Body, and they wonder, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"

When they get there, they see that the large stone was already rolled back. This was not because the Lord needed a stone to be removed for Him to exit the tomb. His glorified and divinized Body can appear and vanish (Luke 24:31), enter a house where the doors were locked (John 20:19), and ascend to heaven (Luke 24:51). The stone, therefore, was rolled away not for Him, but for us, as a public display of His Resurrection. It was to show us all that the tomb is empty because He is truly risen!

As they enter the tomb, they see a shining angel sitting where He was laid, and the angel says to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here . . . go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him, as He told you." The women leave the tomb but are astonished and say nothing to anyone, for they are afraid.

The Myrrh-Bearing Women are the first to learn of the most extraordinary event of all time, which changes the course of history and provides an answer to what has plagued humanity from the beginning. The Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ puts an end to death and dying, once and for all. It is not the apostles, nor the other disciples, but the Myrrh-Bearing Women who first learn of the most fundamental event in our faith. As the Kontakion hymn for the Sunday of the Holy Myrrh-Bearers reads, "In saying Rejoice to the myrrh-bearers, You allayed the lament of the first mother Eve, at Your Resurrection, O Christ our God. And You ordered Your Apostles to proclaim, 'The Savior has risen from the sepulcher (tomb).'"

The Myrrh-Bearing Women are faithful and loyal to Christ until His death and beyond. They had ministered to Him out of their own possessions. Following His death, they come to the tomb to anoint His Body with myrrh oils because they love Him. They do not even fear the Jewish leaders or the Roman soldiers who would have been expected to be guarding the tomb. This is why the Lord chose them, and why they are blessed to be the first ones to experience the Resurrection of Christ. Jesus could have revealed His risen self to any one of the Apostles, but He chose the Myrrh-Bearing Women.

Let us consider for a moment what this means for us today. In the Church, women are a fundamental building block of the faith. In the Gospel, the remarkable role of women is highlighted from the very beginning. It is women who have shouldered from the beginning of the Church most of the responsibility for initiating children into the faith. It is, for the most part, women who continue to undertake this task today. It is women who continue to offer themselves, who continue to serve as the hands and feet of Christ throughout our parishes today.

From this point of view, it is not surprising that it was women who were the first to be told of Christ's Resurrection because it was women who went to the tomb. It was wom-

en who had the courage to accompany Christ during His arrest and trial. It was women who were present when Christ was crucified. Women did all of this without really knowing for sure how things would turn out. They did all of this without understanding who Christ really was. They did all of this without fully understanding His significance, not only for themselves, but for the entire world, and its salvation.

This is the example that the Church provides for us today, for all of us to follow, as well as conveying the privileged place of women in the Church from the beginning. Let us all be inspired by the Myrrh-Bearing Women but let us especially help our younger women learn more about the female disciples of Christ. The Myrrh-Bearing Women embody the essence of what it means to serve Christ and others. They are the very definition of holiness, of reaching our ultimate potential as persons created in the image and likeness of God.