SUNDAY OF THE MYRRH-BEARING WOMEN
May 19

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.
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 Jewish religious leaders’ supreme judicial and administrative council, composed of 71 members. 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 eagerly sought His Kingdom. He courageously goes to the governor, Pilate, and asks for the Body of the Lord to give Him a proper burial. Pilate marvels that Jesus was already dead. Crucifixion was a method of punishment reserved for the vilest criminals. The purpose of crucifixion as a method of execution was to inflict long-lasting pain and torture. A crucified person would die publicly and slowly to deter others from criminal behavior.

On Friday, when the Lord is crucified, the Jewish people do not want to profane the holy Sabbath, which was to begin at sunset. Therefore, they ask the Romans to break the legs of Jesus and the thieves to accelerate their death and to remove them from the cross. As we read in the Gospel of John: “The soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:32-34).

This was to fulfill the Old Testament prefiguring of Christ as the Paschal lamb — the lamb sacrificed at Pascha — about which Moses instructed the people: “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 pour forth. This has profound significance. Just as Eve, the spouse of Adam, was born from his side in Paradise, so the Church, the spouse of Christ, is born from His side on the Cross. The water and blood symbolize the two essential sacraments of the Church — Baptism and Eucharist. For it is in the waters of Baptism that each Christian becomes a member of Christ’s Church. And it is in the Eucharist that each Christian is nourished with Christ’s Body and Blood.

When Pilate learns from the centurion that the Lord is dead, he grants the Body to Joseph, who wraps Him in a linen shroud to prepare Him for burial. Joseph lays Jesus in an unused tomb carved out of the rock, and he rolls a stone against the door. As Christ was born in a cave and innocently lies in a manger, He rises from a cave and victoriously exits a tomb.

The Sabbath starts at sunset on Friday, as they put the Lord in the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joses, see where He is laid. The Lord fulfills the Sabbath rest by laying in the tomb on Saturday. On Sunday, the first day of the week, He recreates
all things. Christ’s resurrection is the new beginning of life — of humanity’s reunion with God and all of creation as a manifestation of God’s glory. When the Sabbath was over, in the early morning hours of Sunday, the women bring spices to anoint Christ’s Body. This is why they are called the “Myrrh-Bearing Women.” They wonder: “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?”

When the women arrive, they see that the large stone is 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 was rolled away not for Him, but for the first witnesses to the Resurrection, to show that He is truly risen!

As the women enter the tomb, they see a shining angel sitting where Christ 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 witness the most extraordinary event of all time, which changes the course of history and provides the cure to what has plagued humanity since the Fall. The Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ defeats the works of the Evil One and opens the door to man’s salvation. It is not the Apostles or the other disciples, but the Myrrh-Bearing Women who first learn the most fundamental truth of our Faith. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Let us consider for a moment what this means for us today. Women performed an essential ministry in the life of Christ. And it is women who continue to offer themselves in service to Christ throughout our churches today. In the Gospel, the remarkable role of women is highlighted from the very beginning. It was from a woman that the God-Man, Christ Jesus, was born. It was women who financially supported Jesus and His disciples (Luke 8:3). It was women who had the courage to accompany Christ during His arrest and trial. It was women who were present when Christ was crucified. It was women who came to the tomb to anoint His Body with myrrh oils. They do not fear the Jewish leaders or the Roman soldiers who would have been expected to be guarding the tomb. It is not surprising, then, that it was women who were the first to witness Christ’s resurrection because it was women who first went to the tomb.

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.”

The example of godly women is what the Church provides for us today. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “Do you see the women’s courage? Do you see their affection? Do you see their noble spirit in matters of money? Their noble spirit even unto death? Let the men imitate the women.” Let us uphold the privileged place of women in the Church.
And, most of all, let us imitate the women who accompanied Christ throughout His life and death. And may we, like the Myrrh-Bearing Women, experience the grace of His resurrection.