

SUNDAY OF THE MYRRH-BEARING WOMEN
LOVE AND LOYALTY
Mark 15:43-16:8

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, April 30, 2023

The four Gospels together give us the full picture of the crucifixion, death and burial of the Lord. The Passover lamb was always slain at the ninth hour, which is about 3:00 pm in the afternoon. It is recorded in Mark's Gospel that this is the hour when Jesus, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed and died on the Cross. All of the Lord's disciples had scattered and abandoned Jesus except for John the Theologian, Mary the Mother of Jesus, her sister Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and Salome. It was a Friday, and the next day on the Sabbath the Jews would eat the Passover meal. The Jewish practice was to bury as soon as possible, usually no later than eight hours after death. Burial was forbidden on the Sabbath, especially that Sabbath being Passover, for as it says in John's Gospel, "that Sabbath was a high day." Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy Jew who was a secret disciple of Jesus, already owned an empty tomb hewn in a cave in the Garden of Gethsemane which was near Calvary, the place where Jesus was crucified. Joseph needed to act quickly if he was to succeed in preparing Jesus' body and bury Him before sundown, which is when the Sabbath would begin. Toward evening he asked Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body down from the Cross. According to John's Gospel Nicodemus accompanied Joseph and brought one hundred pounds of sweet smelling aloes and myrrh to be used to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. Nicodemus was another disciple of Jesus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Joseph wrapped the nude, bloodied and battered body of the Lord in a linen shroud and he and Nicodemus swiftly carried the body to the nearby tomb. According to the Jewish custom of the time, they washed Jesus' body, anointed him with the sweet spices, and wrapped Him with strips of linen cloth, much like a mummy. Only the face was exposed, which was covered with a cloth napkin. Luke's Gospel tells us that the women were present and witnessed the burial. They then went to buy more spices in order to return to the tomb after the Sabbath had passed in order to further anoint the body of Jesus.

These women are the epitome of steadfast love and loyalty. In contrast, the Lord's own apostles, to whom He had bequeathed and given so much, dropped Him, ran away, and renounced Him. The women fearlessly stood by the Cross, they fearlessly accompanied the Lord's body for burial, and they fearlessly brought myrrh and sweet spices to anoint the body of Jesus very early in the morning on the first day of the week. And it was precisely to them that the Lord first appeared after the Resurrection, greeting them with the word "Rejoice!", which forever afterwards became the essence of Christian strength. True love is often accompanied by tears. When Mary Magdalene saw that the tomb was empty and surmised that someone had stolen the body of her beloved Lord away, she wept copiously. It is this love which first learns of the victory over death and that there is no longer any need for weeping.

The Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing women reminds us that the love and faithfulness of a few individuals shone brightly in the midst of hopeless darkness. It calls us to ensure that in this world love and faithfulness do not die out. Many harmful concepts of the person and human life are prevailing in the world today. Instead of love and basic human loyalty, today's world is filled with hatred, sarcasm, doubt, division, and mistrust. Now more than ever we must recover the love and basic human loyalty as exhibited by the Myrrh-bearing Women, and this can come only if we first direct our love and loyalty to God. Love does not ask about theories and ideologies, but speaks to the heart and soul. Throughout history nations have risen and fallen and continue to do so today. Bloody wars were fought and are being fought today as well. Throughout this tragic history there is one bright thread — the love and steadfast faith and loyalty as exemplified by the Myrrh-bearing Women. God is love, and it is this alone which has made it possible for humanity to survive. "By this shall all men know that you are my

disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13:35). But it all starts with God. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, He responded, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind...the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37). Amen.

(Based on a sermon by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann)



Jesus reveals Himself to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection