

SERMON ON THE SUNDAY OF THE MYRRHBEARING WOMEN - April 22, 2018

(Based on a Sermon given by Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann on the Myrrhbearing Women, "Love and Faithfulness do not Die Out")

On Holy Friday the Orthodox Church commemorates the crucifixion and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. According to the Jewish custom of the time, the body had to be prepared with fragrant and sweet smelling spices, myrrh and aloes and also had to be buried within 24 hours of death. These events could not take place on the sabbath. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy Jew of renown who served on the Sanhedrin and secretly was a follower of our Lord. We are told in the Gospel that he was a good man and did not agree with the council's decision concerning Jesus. Nicodemus was another member of the Sanhedrin who, out of fear, used to visit Jesus by night and was also a secret follower of our Lord. There is no longer any time for fear. The Sabbath is rapidly approaching and Jesus' body must be buried before sundown. The love and loyalty that Joseph and Nicodemus had for our Lord outshone their fear and without any regard for self, reputation or possible repercussions, their sincere love compels them to fulfill their duty to the breathless and lifeless body of the Lord. Joseph boldly goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus. Having been granted permission to take possession of the Lord's body, he wraps the Lord in a linen shroud and he and Nicodemus lay the Lord's body in a tomb which was hewn out of the rock. This tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea and had been prepared in his garden for his own eventual burial. He now gives his burial place to the Lord, and rolls a stone against the door of the tomb. Very early Sunday morning the sabbath has now passed and at dawn on the third day Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James (the Theotokos) and Salome bring spices so that they may anoint the body of the Lord. This duty could not be fulfilled on Friday because the Lord had to be buried in haste because the sabbath was rapidly approaching. These women were extremely remarkable, because their love and faithfulness was steadfast and greater than anyone else in the Gospel. They were the only individuals who not only openly cared for and loved the Lord while Jesus was alive, but they openly remained steadfast and loyal in their love and devotion when Jesus was arrested, judged and crucified. All of Christ's disciples ran away. Peter denied him three times. Judas betrayed him. Crowds used to follow Jesus when He was alive because they expected to get something from Him. They expected help, miracles, healings, liberation from the hated Roman occupation; they expected Jesus to put their earthly affairs in order. Their attachment to our Lord was selfish and weak. These countless people poorly understood the meaning of His teaching, if they really heard it at all, of self-renunciation and love, of whole-hearted self-giving. For them, Christ was a handout, an offer of help, and so they came and followed. All they knew was "give me give me give me." But then came growing hatred toward Him on the part of the national leaders and those in authority. In Christ's preaching of love the crowds now began to hear from Him foretelling that, through this love, He would offer Himself as a sacrifice. The crowd was not interested in hearing about self-renunciation or love, or about a Jesus or a Messiah who spoke about a cross and sacrificing Himself. The crowds began to go away and disappear. Palm Sunday was the last bright burst of earthly glory and triumph, the crowds expecting Jesus to give them an earthly kingdom, earthly victory, power and glory. The bright light of Palm Sunday was rapidly extinguished and then came the darkness, loneliness and inconsolable grief of Holy Week. The most painful part of these final days was the betrayal and renunciation by close friends and disciples to whom Christ had given Himself totally. In the end, in Matthew 26:56, the evangelist writes that "all the disciples forsook him and fled." But not all, as it turned out. In John 19:25 the evangelist writes that "Standing by the Cross of Christ were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." Throughout everything these women never asked anything from Jesus but unconditionally, openly and sincerely maintained their simple human faithfulness and love. Christ had not revealed the mystery of the future to these women, as He did to the twelve chosen apostle. They know neither the meaning of His death nor the mystery of His

approaching victory in the Resurrection. For them, the death of their teacher and friend was simply death, the end; even worse, it was a terrible, shameful and agonizing death and abrupt end. They stood at the Cross only because they loved Jesus, and in loving Him, suffered with Him. They did not leave His poor, tortured body, but did all that love has always done at final separation. “Mary stood weeping outside the tomb” it says in John 20:11. Because of the love and faithfulness of these women and Joseph and Nicodemus, they are the first to learn of the victory of the Resurrection. The women are the first to whom the Risen Lord appears. The love and devotion of the Myrrhbearing women judges our lack of courage, our fear, our selfishness and seeking of handouts, our endless and servile rationalizations. Today, in the world, we are in need of recovering this love and basic human loyalty. We live in a time when love and faithfulness are being discredited by harmful concepts of the person and human life. Love does not ask about theories and ideologies, but speaks to the heart and soul. What remains after all the bloody wars and tragedies of history is the image of care, self-giving, love and compassion. Without this presence, without this light, our world, regardless of its successes and accomplishments, would be a world of terror. In today’s Gospel this image is exemplified in the person of womanhood, in her never fading love and faithfulness. “The wine gave out..” (John 2:3), but while she is here — mother, wife, bride — there is enough wine, enough love, enough light for everyone ...