

## **The Third Sunday of Pascha: The Myrrh-bearing Women**

### **"He is not here."**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

The encounter of the Myrrh-Bearing Women at the empty tomb shakes me, especially the angel's words to them: "He is not here. He is risen" (Mark 16:6). It is not the resurrection of the Lord that shakes me, but rather the fact that these women, who thought they were doing the right thing for the Lord, stumbled upon an empty tomb instead of the body of the Lord, which they thought they would anoint with their spices. I wonder about the extent to which my ministry to Christ aligns with His mind and will.

The four Gospels agree on the story of the women visiting the Master's tomb. This story is so firmly rooted in the Church's tradition that our Church chose the passage from the Gospel of St. Mark, which tells the story in detail, as the Gospel reading for the Resurrection ("Rush") Service on Pascha. These women came to be known as the "Myrrh-Bearing Women."

The Gospel narrative tells us that these faithful women—including Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and others—prepared the spices that tradition required to be used to anoint the dead before burial. And because the Lord was buried hurriedly, before the start of the Sabbath (which begins at sunset on Friday, according to the Jewish day), His body was not anointed with those spices. The women prepared the necessary spices, waiting for dawn to arrive so that they could go to the tomb, which was a cave sealed with a large stone. They were eager to perform their duty to the Lord. Their concern was how to roll away the stone that sealed the entrance to the cave, so that they could reach the Lord's body.

On the one hand, the women had their concerns, but on the other hand, the Lord had risen and no longer needed the spices. He needed them to spread the news of His resurrection. The women's hearts and concerns were in one place, while the Lord's were in another.

Love drove these women to do what they thought was their duty, to honor their teacher and Lord. Of course, the Lord accepted their efforts, although He did not need their spices, and He entrusted them with a greater task—the greatest task—

to proclaim the news of His resurrection from the dead: “Go and tell the disciples” (Mark 16:7).

If we pause for a moment and contemplate the women’s thinking and their work, reflect calmly on the gap between their thinking and that of the Lord, and apply what happened to them to our approach to serving and dealing with God, we will discover much that makes us similar to the women before their knowledge of the Resurrection. How many of the actions that we, as believers, undertake out of righteous zeal, believing that our actions are in harmony with the Lord’s thinking, are, in fact, not so?

Do we not act repeatedly, as individuals and as a Church community, like those women, out of love for the Lord and the belief we are honoring Him and being faithful to Him, doing works that may not please Him and sometimes are rejected by Him? When the influence of the spirit of the world in which we live is stronger than that of the spirit of the Gospel in us, are we not driven to do many unnecessary and non-essential things that may, in essence, contradict our Faith? When we focus on form and appearance and forget about essence, do we not encounter an “empty tomb”? When we care more about stones than people, are we faithful to the Gospel? Are we faithful to what Christ asked of us when He said, “What you have done to the least of these, you have done to Me,” (Matthew 25:40), when we spend generously on ritual aesthetics while being stingy with those in need? When we don’t know the standard by which we should prioritize our lives, are we carrying spices that the Lord doesn’t need?

The women were excused because the death of the Lord was beyond their comprehension and the Holy Spirit had not yet enlightened them. But what is our excuse, we who have inherited almost two thousand years of Christian life and Scripture and have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit? Many still do not realize the importance of the treasure that was given to them “in earthen vessels.” We appear neglectful of the Lord, preoccupied with what is around us. Every faithful person and every church servant, as well as the Church as a whole, is exposed to this temptation. And the slips and mistakes are many throughout history.

For example, slipping in a matter of faith can happen when we understand and interpret the Gospel in a secular, rather than spiritual, context. There can also be a behavioral slip when a believer focuses on actions that he considers essential but,

in reality, are not. Furthermore, the slip can be “pastoral” when one pastors and gathers people for reasons other than feeding them the Bread of Life. And last, but not least, the slip can be seen when we fail to incarnate love in our lives. With this, the focus shifts to finding institutions, growing them and making them competitive at the expense of “the least of the Lord’s brothers,” that is, the poor.

The Cross of the Lord is made up of two beams: vertical and horizontal. Focusing on one and neglecting the other leads to a deviation from the mind of Christ. The vertical beam symbolizes the personal relationship between the believer and God, while the horizontal beam symbolizes the personal relationship with the other, whom the Gospel calls “the neighbor” (Luke 10:29). Focusing on the vertical dimension and neglecting the horizontal one throws the believer into spiritual delusion based on the ego growing constantly as a result of false self-satisfaction and complacency. The purification of the soul and its liberation from its faults and desires is inevitably linked to the love of the “neighbor.” On the other hand, focusing on the horizontal dimension and neglecting the vertical one leads to a superficial, emotional Christianity based on human works that feed the feeling that one does not need to sit at the feet of the Lord. This steals the spiritual power that makes human service a true service of love, not just a filling of material needs.

Who saves us from falling into this danger? Who helps us maintain a balance between “Mary” and “Martha”? There is no doubt that pure spiritual communion among brothers and sisters is a great protection. So, beware of clinging to your personal opinion and neglecting the opinions of your brothers and sisters.

The Scriptures say, “Where there is no guidance, a people perish; but in an abundance of counselors, there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).