

Beloved: Christ is risen! Hristos a inuiat! Χριστός Βοσκήρε! Χριστός ἀνέστη! Al Maseeya kam!

The gospel readings we hear for Holy Saturday Liturgy, Paschal Matins and Thomas Sunday are gospels of Christ's resurrection. We hear of the empty tomb, Christ coming to His apostles on Pascha night, and then the following week His coming to confirm the doubter, Thomas. Today we turn back the clock. Today we begin with Jesus dead upon the cross. It is the darkest moment in the lives of the Myrrhbearers and of Joseph and Nicodemus. Their life, their hope, their beloved, the Christ is dead.

They all had a choice before themselves: to accept this pain of loss, of Jesus dead, of any hope *or* to run from the pain, to run from Christ who in the eyes of His enemies was a failure, to run away from God. They had given from their treasures and, the greatest treasure, themselves, over to Jesus. What to do now? They could accept their sorrow, this crushing defeat, and make it their own. Or they could run from their sorrow as something to be avoided. Give up. Renounce God. Get on with their lives. Their choice ultimately was whether to accept this seeming disastrous failure, Jesus's death, as God's will or reject it as His will. Truly, to accept or deny God.

In the face of their hopelessness, they do not despair. They do not reject God. When all is darkness and hopelessness they choose God, they choose the path of love. And their love looked like this: they will not allow that Christ should go unburied. Joseph and Nicodemus lay Jesus in Joseph's own tomb. Their love looked like this: the women buy spices and ointments to anoint the buried Jesus, to honor His body, even in death. Such was their love for Christ that, even after their hope is shattered, they pour themselves out to the utmost to honor Jesus.

The myrrhbearing women did not do any of this seeking any recognition or reward from Jesus, nothing that they would get out of it. He is dead. The women, like the rest of the disciples, probably don't remember Jesus teaching that He would be killed, buried and rise on the third day. They have no sense of hope in Jesus's triumph. They come to the tomb not to receive and probably not even consciously to give. Their sole motivation is their love for Jesus, that they want His body to be blessed with the sweet aroma of spices and ointments. So great is their love that they don't begin by asking about the stone at the tomb. They buy what they need and hurry to the tomb, only on the way remembering that the stone would need to be moved. Such is their love!

But they find the stone rolled away, Jesus's body nowhere to be found. And "a young man clothed in a long white robe" – an angel. And not any angel. The saints interpret this angel as the Archangel Gabriel, the same angel who announced to the Virgin that she would be the mother of God, it is the same Archangel Gabriel who announces to her and the women that her son, Christ Jesus, is risen from the dead. "He is risen! He is not here!" They were the very first ones to have their grief and despair changed into awesome joy. They were the first ones commanded to proclaim the message we still say to this day, "Christ is risen!" They received all this because, though in pain and suffering, yet they loved Christ, even though He was dead and buried. They chose God rather than despair.

In our own lives we suffer, we are in pain. We experience grief and despair. And we, like the women, we don't know how it will end. We have only their example and choice before us: In our pain do we look only at ourselves and reject God? Or do we choose "to accept our suffering...embracing it within the wholeness of our lives?...When we accept as our own will, as our own desire, the will of God for our life...we will cease being anxious about our sufferings,

for we will see that they, too, are signs and tokens of God's presence...The avoidance of suffering serves only to increase suffering in a vicious cycle that never ends...If we are able to see our sufferings as proof of God's love for us, then we will undergo another, greater experience that will shake us to the core of our being: an upward surge into new life...as our perspective is altered and we will see that Christ is very close indeed...and our true life will begin...because death will no longer have hold over us, for we will be with God. The darkness will vanish and we will see only light." Elder Aimilianos continues, "by struggling to find the right relation to suffering, to our own death, we shall at the same time find God, and not simply find Him, but acquire and indeed conquer Him completely."

Like the women, like Joseph and Nicodemus, may we look to see God, not only when times are good, but especially when we are in suffering and in pain, accepting as our own His will for us so that we, like the women, will find in our suffering God, "and not simply find Him, but acquire and indeed conquer Him completely."