

THE MYRRHBEARING WOMEN

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph observed where He was laid.

*Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away—for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is 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 into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you. **So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.** (Mark 15:43-16:8)*

In the gray hour before dawn the grieving women made their way to the tomb, worried that they might not be able to perform the final rites of burial over the body of one whom they had loved so dearly.

They were just two women and the stone that had been rolled over the entrance of the tomb was far too heavy for them to move. Nevertheless, they went. How could they have done otherwise? How could they leave him alone and un-anointed—abandoned by his disciples and reviled by the leaders of the people?

They arrived just as the sun was rising. And, to their amazement, the stone had been rolled away. Anxious and confused they stepped into the tomb itself only to encounter a young man—an angel?—in a long white robe. And they were justifiably alarmed.

Where was His body? What further injury had been done to Him beyond the horror of what He had endured just two days earlier, on the eve of the Passover, as the lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple in commemoration of Israel's redemption from Pharaoh?

Where was He, the Lamb of God, who had offered Himself up for the sins of the world?

"He is risen! He is not here."

What kind of response could they make? How does one parse the meaning of those words? How does one comprehend the incomprehensible?

Numb with shock, they ran away. Their minds could not embrace the impossible—that a dead man had raised Himself! Who had ever heard such a thing?

He had raised the son of the widow of Nain. But Elijah had also raised a widow's son. True, He had raised Lazarus, four days dead and stinking! None of the prophets had ever accomplished such a miracle.

But raise Himself? By what power could a man raise Himself?

They had seen Him die. When His disciples had run off in fear of their own lives, they had stayed behind to watch as the nails were driven into his flesh. They had stayed through the three dreadful hours of darkness as the priests and soldiers—even the others who were crucified with Him—tormented Him with insults and ridicule.

He was dead.

They watched Joseph and Nicodemus as they took His lifeless corpse down from the cross. They watched them wrap Him in the shroud and hurry Him off to burial before the sun set and the High Sabbath—when no work could be done—began.

He was dead and there was no denying it. He was dead until the Day of Resurrection when all the dead would rise. They had no doubts.

How could He have risen? By what power?

God alone could do such a thing. It was beyond the power of any human being.

The thought was unutterable, unthinkable. And yet it impressed itself on their minds and stopped their mouths for astonishment and dread.

Who but **God** could accomplish such a thing?

They ran. And, “They said nothing, for they were afraid”.

Perhaps it would be better to translate this sentence as, “They said nothing, for they were awed”.

Fear, in our contemporary usage, often implies the cringing, cowering, response of an animal to a cruel master. But this was most emphatically **not** what the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb experienced on the Day of Resurrection.

Their “fear” was that awesome fear that comes from an encounter with Holiness; it is the same fear that we are called to have when we come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ—God in the flesh!

Herein may lie part of the problem with the spiritual condition of our Church today: we have become too familiar—too comfortable—with the Resurrection story for its awesomeness, its fearsomeness, its holiness, to penetrate our consciousness (and our conscience!) It is no longer new and shocking to us.

We say, “Christ is Risen!” without the sense of incomprehensible wonder that those women felt when they heard those very same words at the empty tomb.

The words of the Paschal salutation should stick in our throats and render us dumb! And yet they slide out as if we were merely saying, “Happy Easter”, or some other pleasant seasonal greeting.

We have lost our sense of awe. We have become acclimated to heaven and in so doing we have lost the ability to perceive how completely “other” it is from the everyday world we inhabit.

We forget how unexpected the Resurrection of Christ really was—even to His closest disciples. Even though He foretold it, they could not comprehend what He was saying.

How could they? Nothing like it had ever happened before in all the history of Israel—in all the history of the human race.

They were only able to understand after the fact. It was the Resurrection itself that opened their minds and hearts to what Christ had been saying all along. It was His rising from the dead that finally brought home the fact that in Him they had encountered God.

It is a terrible thing to become ‘used’ to this story! It is a tragedy that it has become so ‘predictable’.

The Myrrhbearing Women remind us that it should not be so. They point to us the way back to the proper fear and awe which we, too, should have in the presence of the Living God.

He was dead. And now He lives.

He was buried. And now He is risen.

He appeared as a man. And now He is revealed as God.

Who, believing these things, does not feel the urge to run and hide from the burning power of His presence?

For, who are we to stand in the presence of the Living God—except for the awesome, fearsome, grace and love that brought Him to us in the first place?