

Lenten Study for April 1

The study this week focuses on the “**Myrrh Bearers**.” These are the women that went to the tomb of Jesus early Sunday morning to anoint his body for proper burial rituals. What they found was the stone at the entrance of the tomb rolled away and the body of Jesus gone. Some encountered angels. One met Jesus. Here is their story.

Ancient Jewish burial tradition included the ritual anointing of the dead body with spices, often myrrh. Jesus' body was taken down from the cross near the time of sunset on Friday afternoon. There was not time to properly anoint the body for burial since at sundown the Sabbath would begin and such work was prohibited. So a number of women made the decision to meet early on Sunday morning to complete the burial ritual for Jesus.

In ancient Orthodox icons the women are shown in a group of seven. Who are these women?

Mary, the mother of James, is mentioned in three of the Gospels. The Bible records that she was present at the cross of Jesus and saw the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus laid the body. Ancient tradition believes that this “Mary” refers to Jesus’ mother. A man by the name of James was listed as one of the brothers of Jesus and eventually became the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem. So Mary, the mother of James, could well be the Virgin Mary, Jesus’ mother.

Salome, is mentioned in Mark. She was at the cross on Friday and at the tomb on Sunday. Ancient tradition listed her as the mother of the disciples James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Some sources say that Salome was a sister to Mary, Jesus’ mother, which would make James and John, cousins of Jesus. Perhaps that is why the writer of the Gospel of John often refers to himself as the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” since he could be a close relative of Jesus and grew up with him in Galilee.

Mary, the wife of Cleopas was at the cross and at the tomb. Ancient tradition indicates that this Mary was also a sister to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her husband, Cleopas, was a brother to Joseph, the step-father of Jesus. That would mean that three sisters, Jesus’ mother and two aunts, went to the tomb on Sunday morning to do the ritual anointing of the dead body of a relative. It is also possible that this Mary, was with her husband, Cleopas, walking back to Emmaus [a village outside of Jerusalem] on the Sunday morning of the resurrection. Luke records that Jesus met with them and explained to them the significance of his death and resurrection, although they did not recognize their nephew as Jesus kept himself unknown to them until he broke bread with them in their house in Emmaus.

Joanna, the wife of Chuza, King Herod’s household manager, also was at the tomb on Easter morning according to Luke. She had supported Jesus’ work early on in his ministry by providing funds for the disciples.

Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are not mentioned in the Gospels as being at the cross or at the tomb but ancient tradition associates them with the myrrh bearers. This is probably because Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with anointment on the Saturday evening before Palm Sunday at a dinner party at the home of Lazarus. That night Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.”

Mary Magdalene, is the most famous of the myrrh bearers, as she personally encountered Jesus on Easter morning.

Read her story in John 20.

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

Mary Magdalene was at the cross and at the tomb. According to Luke Jesus healed Mary Magdalene from a demon possession early in his ministry and afterwards she followed him.

In the mini-series Jesus of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene is played by Anne Bancroft.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Bancroft

So these seven women have been listed in the Orthodox Church as the Myrrh Bearers, first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.