

THE RESURRECTION AND THE MOTHER OF GOD

by
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From the beginning of the Church, Christian thinkers have sought to harmonize the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Christ. From their work and from the Gospels themselves, it is evident that there was more than one group of women who visited Jesus' tomb in the very early hours of that first Pascha, "while it was yet dark" (John 20:1). This begs the question: was the Mother of God among these women? After all, the women at the cross were there not only for Jesus' sake, but to comfort his mother (as was the custom of the era), whose presence at the crucifixion is made explicit by John (19:25-7).

Among the more interesting efforts of harmonization is that of Saint Gregory Palamas, whose goal was to support the belief that it was the Mother of God who first received news of the resurrection and who alone first witnessed the risen Christ.

A clear exegesis is far from easy. To illustrate: even though the second ending of Mark's Gospel tells us "that when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene" (16:9), it is obvious from the accounts of the other Gospels that she was not the first to receive the news of the resurrection from the angels. For example, John is explicit that Mary first saw the stone removed, ran and told Peter "that they have taken away the Lord ... and we do not know where they have laid Him" (John 20:2). Here, as Palamas points out, she is "speaking about a corpse" – hardly an explicit knowledge of the Resurrection. Only after this does Mary Magdalene return to the tomb where she encounters Christ.

Mary Magdalene's words in John 20:2 have another significance: she uses the pronoun "we." So, whereas the longer ending of Mark (16:9) says that Jesus first appeared first to Mary Magdalene, the shorter ending of Mark says that three women went to the tomb (Mk 16:1), Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome – which concurs with her use of "we" in John 20:2.

This apparent confusion, says Palamas, becomes understandable when upon closer scrutiny we realize that there were multiple groups of myrrh-bearers, who made several trips to the tomb. We can summarize these differences in the Gospels: Only Matthew mentions the "other Mary" and the earthquake with angels, and then the departure of the women. In Mark and Luke, the women encounter the empty tomb, then

see angels and then depart. In John, they encounter the empty tomb and then depart, and only later *return* and see angels.

Using such comparisons, Palamas goes on to state that the "the other Mary" mentioned in Matthew, who witnesses the earthquake and is addressed with the words, "Fear not!" (Mt 28:1-4) – is in fact the Mother of God. Moreover, since the Gospel of John is clear that Mary Magdalene saw the stone removed from the sepulcher but did not receive an angelic salutation on her first visit, it is obvious that she was not a witness of the earthquake and descent of the angel. The person who witnessed these things was "the other Mary."

Such a conclusion based on the Gospel accounts is far from conclu-

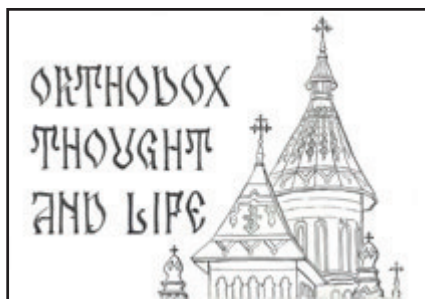
sive. Palamas himself realized this and therefore sought to substantiate his argument with some circumstantial evidence, which is by no means implausible. For example, the Mother of God did not abandon her Son at any point during His passion on the Cross and death. The other women were there to support her, not the other way around. She was present for the burial of her Son, and therefore it would be normal for her to go to the tomb to finish a proper burial on Sunday morning. Since it was *her* Son that was buried, it is not unreasonable that she was the first to go there.

Much more interesting than this circumstantial evidence is Palamas' theological rationale for his exegesis of these texts. First, he says, no man witnessed the creation of Adam. The first to see him was Eve – the first woman. Likewise, no man saw the new Adam rise from the dead. The first to see him was His mother – the new Eve.

Secondly, the angel that announced the resurrection was Gabriel – the bringer of tidings. He had already spoken to the Mother of God at the Annunciation, and she knew from experience the truth of his words. There he said "fear not, Mary" (Lk 1:30). Here he says "Fear not... He is risen" (Mt 28:5-6). This makes more sense when we recall that in the early church the Annunciation and Resurrection were believed to have happened on the same day, and in both events the same angel brought the glad tidings. So it was that the Mother of God herself, Palamas says, became the "Apostle to the Apostles."

We can extend St. Gregory's rationale with further parallels: whereas Adam "died" (sinned and was de-

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prived of grace - Gen 3:3,8) in a garden, so the new Adam, Christ, died and was buried in a garden (John 19:41: "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid"). Similarly, the first Eve believed a fallen angel in the garden, the tidings of death; and the New Eve, the Mother of God, believed a good angel in a garden, bringing her tidings of life.

Finally, Palamas ponders why the Evangelists simply did not mention Jesus' Mother as a witness to the Resurrection - an interesting question, since she is obviously a member of the Church (Acts 1:14). His answer here is also plausible: because mothers cannot be taken as witnesses defending their sons. They are never impartial. The point of the Gospels was to record the events that witnesses provided for the resurrection of Jesus. According to St. Gregory, a mother's testimony would give "unbelievers grounds for suspicion."

All this shows that, though not explicit in the Scriptures, the early Christian belief that the Mother of God was the first to encounter the risen Christ is not implausible. Moreover, it is significant: it shows that Christ is *always* the Son of His Mother and always attentive to her, evident from His first "sign" in Cana (Jn 2:1) to His concern for her while on the Cross (Jn 19:26), and so also after His Resurrection. Similarly, she was and is *always* to be found near her Son. Hence, her abiding presence among us and our continual commemoration of her in our divine services. For this reason, the Orthodox Church in its Great Paschal Celebration completes the parallel between the Annunciation and the Resurrection at no less a moment than at the climax of the Paschal Matins, when it sings Gabriel's resurrectional tidings to the Mother of God: *Rejoice! For your Son is risen from His three days in the tomb!* (9th Ode; cf. Lk 1:28). What began at the Annunciation (the re-creation of Adam) is completed in the Resurrection (Adam's justification from the law of death), restoring mankind to its original state of angelic purity. And both events were told by the Angel to the Virgin.

Preparing ... *Cont. from page 6*

The story of the Prodigal Son illustrates mercy in a powerful manner. It helps us realize once again, with sober joy, that God's mercy does fall upon all. But like the Son who "came to himself," or like the rain which falls on fertile soil, His mercy must find a heart which is made ready to receive it. We have to do our part. We need to do that inner work — that journey to the heart — which is necessary for us to wake up, or to prepare ourselves to be that fertile ground. Then God will be merciful; He will be "all that He is" to us. And we will be all that we are.

A.R.F.O.R.A. CONGRESS CONVOCAATION

In conformity with Article II, Section 2 of the By-Laws, we hereby convoke the

62nd Annual A.R.F.O.R.A. Congress

+NATHANIEL, Archbishop

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June 4 - 6, 2010

Hosted by:

**Protection of the Holy Mother of God
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7223 Roosevelt Avenue
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(703) 280-0770

Schedule of Events

Friday, June 4

4:00 pm – 6:00 pm Executive Board Meeting at St. Mary's
6:00 pm – 9:00 pm Registration/ Reception at St. Mary's for Clergy, Preotese, Delegates, Past Presidents

Saturday, June 5

8:00 am – 9:00 am Registration for Delegates at Hotel
9:00 am – 11:00 am Brunch Buffet
9:30 am – 1:30 pm Congress Session Begins
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm Recess Refreshments & Photograph
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm Congress Reconvenes
5:00 pm – 6:00 pm Parastas & Great Vespers at St. Luke Serbian Orthodox Church
6:00 pm – 9:00 pm Dinner Reception
+ JONAH, Metropolitan
Guest Speaker

Sunday, June 6

9:00 am Matins at St. Mary's
9:45 am Entrance & Vesting of Hierarch
10:00 am Hierarchal Divine Liturgy
12:00 pm Lunch & Farewell

Hotel: Marriott Fairview Park, 3111 Fairview Park Drive, Falls Church, VA 22042.

For reservations: phone (800) 228-9290 or (703) 843-3400 *mention ARFORA* or online <http://cwp.marriott.com/wasfp/arforaconference> *use discount code ARFARFA* to receive special discounted rate of \$85 plus tax per night. Please make reservations no later than May 21, 2010.