

SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT
SAINT MARY OF EGYPT

Our holy mother Mary was born in Egypt. She had left her parents at the age of twelve to go to Alexandria, where she spent the next seventeen years in debauchery and the greatest profligacy. Living on charity and linen-weaving, she nevertheless offered her body to any man, not being forced to it by dire necessity as were so many poor women, but as though she were consumed by the fire of a desire that nothing was able to appease.

One day, seeing a crowd of Lybians and Egyptians moving towards the port, she followed them and set sail with them for Jerusalem, offering her body to pay her fare. When they arrived in the Holy City, she followed the crowd that was thronging towards the Church of the Resurrection, it being the day of the Exaltation of the Cross. But, when she reached the threshold of the church, an invisible force prevented her entering in spite of repeated efforts on her part, although the other pilgrims were able to go in without hindrance. Left alone in a corner of the narthex, she began to realize that it was the impurity of her life that was preventing her approaching the holy Wood. She burst into tears and smote her breast and, seeing an icon of the Mother of God, made this prayer to her: "O Sovereign Lady, who didst bear God in the flesh, I know that I should not dare to look upon thine icon, thou who are pure in soul and body, because, debauched as I am, I must fill thee with disgust. But, as the God born of thee became man in order to call sinners to repentance, come to my aid! Allow me to go into the church and prostrate before His Cross. And, as soon as I have seen the Cross, I promise that I will renounce the world and all pleasures, and follow the path of salvation that thou wilt show me."

She felt herself suddenly freed from the power that had held her and was able to enter the church. There she fervently venerated the Holy Cross and then, returning to the icon of the Mother of God, declared herself ready to follow the path that the Virgin would show her. A voice replied to her from on high: "If you cross the Jordan, you will find rest."

Leaving the church, she bought three loaves with the alms a pilgrim had given her, discovered which road led to the Jordan and arrived one evening at the Church of Saint John the Baptist. After having washed in the river, she received Communion in the Holy Mysteries, ate half of one of the loaves and went to sleep on the riverbank. The next morning, she crossed the river and lived from that time on in the desert, remaining there for forty-seven years without ever encountering either another human being or any animal.

During the first seventeen years, her clothes soon having fallen into rags, burning with heat by day and shivering with cold by night, she fed on herbs and wild roots. But more than the physical trials, she had to face violent assaults from the passions and the memory of her sins and, throwing herself on the ground, she implored the Mother of God to come to her aid. Protected by God, who desires nothing but that the sinner should turn to Him and live, she uprooted all the passions from her heart by means of this extraordinary asceticism, and was able to turn the fire of carnal desire into a flame of divine love that made it possible for her to endure the implacable desert with joy, as though she were not in the flesh. After all these years, a holy elder called Zosimas (April 4), who, following the tradition instituted by Saint Euthymios, had gone into the desert across the Jordan for the period of the Great Fast, saw one day a human form with a body blackened by the sun and with hair white as bleached linen to its shoulders. He ran after this apparition that fled before him, begging it to give him its blessing and some saving words. When he came within ear-shot, Mary, calling by name him whom she had never seen,

revealed to him that she was a woman and asked him to throw her his cloak that she might cover her nakedness.

At the urging of the monk, who was transported at having at last met a God-bearing being who had attained the perfection of monastic life, the Saint recounted to him with tears the story of her life and conversion. Then, having finished her account, she begged him to come the following year to the bank of the Jordan with Holy Communion.

When the day arrived, Zosimas saw Mary appearing on the further bank of the river. She made the sign of the Cross and crossed the Jordan, walking on the water. Having received Holy Communion weeping, she said: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation" (Luke 2:29). She then took leave of Zosimas, asking him to meet her the following year in the place where they had first met.

When the year was past, Zosimas, going to the agreed spot, found the Saint's body stretched on the ground, her arms crossed and her face turned towards the East. His tearful emotion prevented him from noticing at once an inscription traced on the ground by the Saint, which read: "Abba Zosimas, bury here the body of the humble Mary; give what is of dust to dust, after having prayed for me. I died on the first day of April, the very night of the Passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, after having partaken in the Holy Eucharist." Consoled in his grief by having learned the Saint's name, Zosimas was amazed to discover that she had, in several hours, covered a distance of more than twenty days' march.

After having vainly tried to break up the earth with a stick, he suddenly saw a lion approaching Mary's body and licking her feet. On the orders of the Elder, the beast dug a hole with its claws, in which Zosimas devoutly placed the Saint's body.

On his return to the monastery, he recounted the marvels that God had wrought for those who turn away from sin and move towards Him with all their hearts. From the hardened sinner that she had been, Mary has, for a great many souls crushed under the burden of sin, become a source of hope and a model of conversion. This is why the Holy Fathers have placed the celebration of her memory at the end of the Great Fast as an encouragement for all who have neglected their salvation, proclaiming that repentance can bring them back to God even at the eleventh hour.

GREAT VESPERS

LORD I CALL: Six stikhera of the Resurrection in tone 4, followed by three stikhera for Saint Mary

Resurrection, tone 4:

We glorify Your Resurrection on the third day, O Christ God,
by always honoring Your life-creating Cross;
by it You have renewed the corrupted nature of mankind, O almighty One.
By it You have renewed our entrance to heaven,//
for You are good and the Lover of mankind.

You loosed the Tree's verdict of disobedience, O Savior,
by being voluntarily nailed to the tree of the Cross.
By descending to hell, O almighty God,
You broke the bonds of death.
Therefore, we adore Your Resurrection from the dead, singing in joy://
“Glory to You, O all powerful Lord!”

You smashed the gates of hell, O Lord,
and by Your death You demolished the kingdom of death.
You delivered the human race from corruption,//
granting the world life, incorruption and great mercy.

Come, O people,
let us sing of the Savior's Resurrection on the third day!
By it, we have been freed from the unbreakable bonds of hell.
By it, we have received life and incorruption.
Save us by Your Resurrection!//
Life-creating and almighty Savior, glory to You!

Angels and mortals sing of Your Resurrection on the third day, O Savior.
By it, the ends of the earth have been illuminated.
By it we have been delivered from bondage to the enemy.
Save us by Your Resurrection!//
Life-creating and almighty Savior, Glory to You!

You have shattered the gates of brass
and destroyed the chains of death, O Christ God.
You have raised the fallen human race.//
O Lord, risen from the dead, glory to You!

SAINT MARY, tone 6:

You stood before the doors of the church,
Polluted with evil and unable to enter.
Accused by your own conscience, O wise one of God,
You converted to a better way of life.
Looking upon the icon of the blessed Mother of God,
You condemned all your past sins, O Mother Mary,//
And went to bow before the precious Cross.

Having worshipped at the holy places with great joy,
You received saving grace for your journey of virtue.
You set out in haste to follow the narrow path.

You crossed the River Jordan
And went to live where the Baptist had dwelt.
Through self-denial you tamed the savagery of the passions;
Through violence you broke the rebellion of your flesh, //
Taking the kingdom of God by force!

You lived alone in the wilderness.
As you erased the images of sin from your soul.
God marked it with the imprint of holiness.
Filled with the Spirit, O blessed Mother,
You walked on the surface of the waters;
By your prayers you ascended from earth to heaven.
Since you stand before Christ, O glorious Mary, //
Entreat Him with boldness to save our souls.

GLORY... Triodion, tone 4:

The power of Your Cross has worked a wonder, O Christ!
Through it a harlot became a champion of the ascetic life.
She cast aside her weakness and bravely fought the devil,
And having won the prize of victory, //
She ceaselessly prays for our souls.

NOW AND EVER... the Dogmatikon in tone 4:

The Prophet David was a Father of the Lord through you, O Virgin.
He foretold in songs the One Who worked wonders in you:
“At Your right hand stood the Queen,”
Your Mother, the mediatrix of life,
since God was freely born of her without a father.
He wanted to renew His fallen image, made corrupt in passion,
so He took the lost sheep upon His shoulder
and brought it to His Father, joining it to the heavenly pow’rs. //
Christ who has great and rich mercy has saved the world, O Theotokos.

APOSTIKHA: All stikhera of the Resurrection in tone 4:

By ascending the Cross, O Lord,
You have annulled our ancestral curse.
By descending to hell, You have freed the eternal prisoners,
granting incorruption to the human race. //
Therefore in songs we glorify Your life-creating and saving Resurrection.

By hanging upon the tree, O only powerful Lord,
You shook all of creation.
By being laid in the tomb You have raised those who dwelt in the tombs,
granting life and incorruption to the human race. //

Therefore in songs we glorify Your rising on the third day.

The lawless people, O Christ,
handed You over to Pilate, condemned to be crucified,
thus proving themselves ungrateful before their benefactor.
But voluntarily You endured burial,
rising by Your own power on the third day as God,//
granting us life everlasting and great mercy.

With tears the women reached Your tomb,
searching for You, but not finding You.
They wept with wailing and lamented:
“Woe to us! Our Savior, King of all,
how were you stolen?
What place can hold Your life-bearing body?”
An angel replied to them:
“Do not weep but go and proclaim that the Lord is risen,//
Granting us joy as the only compassionate One!”

GLORY... Triodion, tone 2:

With the sword of abstinence,
You cut down the corrupt desires of your souls and the passions of your flesh.
With the silence of the wilderness you strangled your sinful words and thoughts.
You watered the desert with the streams of your tears.
You made the fruits of repentance grow for us.//
We celebrate your memory O holy one.

NOW AND EVER...Resurrectional Theotokion, tone 2:

A new miracle surpasses all ancient miracles!
Who knows of a Mother who gave birth without a man,
who carried in her arms her Creator?
This birth is the will of God!
Since you carried Him as an infant in your arms, O most pure one,
and since you possess motherly boldness before Him,
do not cease praying for us who honor you,//
that He may be bountiful and save our souls!

TROPARIA

Resurrection, tone 4

When the women disciples of the Lord learned from the angel
The joyous message of Thy Resurrection;
They cast away the ancestral curse
And elatedly told the apostles;
Death is overthrown!

Christ our God is risen,
Granting the world great mercy.

Saint Mary of Egypt, tone 8

The image of God was truly preserved in you, O Mother,
For you took up the Cross and followed Christ.
By so doing, you taught us to disregard the flesh, for it passes away;
But to care instead for the soul, since it is immortal.//
Therefore your spirit, O holy Mother Mary, rejoices with the angels.

Resurrectional Dismissal Theotokion, tone 8

For our sake You were born of the Virgin
and endured crucifixion, O Good One, destroying death by death.
Revealing the Resurrection as God, do not despise the work of Your hand!
Reveal Your love for man, O Merciful One, and accept the Theotokos praying for us,//
and save the despairing people, O our Savior!