

## **Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing Women: Christian Joy Part 1**

A sermon by Rev. Fr. David G. Subu  
delivered on April 22, 2007

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Christ is risen!

Today we begin a Paschal series on the subject of joy. This is simply because that while for many, the solemn and sober introspection of Great Lent and the drama of the Passion Week often touch a deep chord within the souls of Christian believers, the spirit of the Paschal season is often short-lived and as much of a spiritual let down. And even if we do our best to keep that joy alive, the world does not stop turning and tribulations do not cease unfolding, as we saw this last week both here in Virginia and throughout the world. Yet joy is described in the Bible as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, second after Love itself. How can we avoid losing the joy we built up to in Lent and Holy Week? How can we keep kindled the fire of love for the Lord that we know should be there, that we so long to preserve? What is thing called “joy,” and how come it seems to be so elusive to so many of us? Certainly, its presence in one’s spiritual life is a sign of spiritual health, a sign of the very presence of the Holy Spirit. Over the next few weeks, we shall consider the various facets of a joyful spiritual life in the light of the Resurrection, in the hopes that our own joy may be fulfilled.

First, let us address a common idea, that joy is not the same thing as happiness. Is this true or this just a semantic game? Often enough, when people speak of happiness, they may be thinking of a worldly happiness, a sense of satisfaction, satiation, and celebration. This happiness may be temporal and fleeting. Or they may be speaking of a broader, life-spanning appraisal of contentedness—“So, are you really happy?” Fewer and fewer people can answer affirmatively to such piercing questions without hesitation. Among some, it has even become vogue to disdain such earthly happiness as spiritually inferior to real “Joy” which transcends the earthly life. Yet

we should not rush to join this type of thinking. There is a similar false dichotomy popular today in contrasting the terms “religious” and “spiritual”—the first being stereotyped as rigid, self-righteous, and unfulfilling while being spiritual means being sincere, genuine, and deep. Certainly this is not the original meaning of these terms and not a true reflection of the complexity of a spiritual and religious life. Likewise, a joyful person is no stranger to happiness and is in fact better equipped to experience earthly happiness with less. The Psalms use the term “happy” and “blessed” often interchangeably. The key is that we do not stop our search at the blessings of this life that bring us happiness but to seek rather an eternal and *internal* state of blessedness in God.

This is the depth of joy to which we are called. In the Gospel of St. John, as the Lord was preparing His disciples on the night in which he was betrayed and gave Himself up for the life of the world, spoke to them and taught them many things. This included the teaching of joy even in the face of darkness and difficulty:

<sup>16</sup>“A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father.” <sup>17</sup>Then some of His disciples said among themselves, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” <sup>18</sup>They said therefore, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is saying.” <sup>19</sup>Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, “Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’?” <sup>20</sup>“Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. <sup>21</sup>“A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. <sup>22</sup>“Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you. <sup>23</sup>“And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. <sup>24</sup>“Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full... <sup>33</sup> “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16)

This passage reflects many of the first things we need to understand about joy to receive it. The first is that the joy of the Resurrection is not an easy, shallow thing, but one born out of tribulation and testing. A person who has not known sorrow often has not truly known joy. There is a reason perhaps why we say “rejoice,” as if to say, we “return to having joy.” It is difficult to trust our happiness often enough, even more the happiness of others. It may be false front, a courageous attempt to hide the pain inside. The joy of which Christ speaks is not like that.

When we encounter a person of joy are they not often those who have most deeply drunk of sorrow in this world? Yet for all of the troubles they have gone through, they have a sparkle in the eye that demonstrates the complete victory over tribulation that can be found in Christ. One of the great joys of my life has been meeting Fr. Roman Braga, perhaps the closest thing we have in our diocese now to a spiritual elder, who now lives at the Holy Dormition Monastery in Michigan. Here is a man who suffered and saw inhuman cruelty in the communist prisons of Romania for many years. He saw the worst side of human nature. He also had to face the worst in himself, confined in solitary confinement for months, years on end. (His crime, by the way, was for teaching young people about Jesus.) Yet for all that, he is possessed of a transcendent joy that brings light to any one with whom he speaks. It is the confident joy of one who has had their joy made full in Christ. And once one encounters that joy, they immediately are drawn to it and desire it to be part of their own life.

Christian joy therefore brothers and sisters, is not a superficial denial of the reality of evil and pain in this world, but a recognition of its utter powerlessness in the light of eternal life in Christ Jesus. Dylan Thomas told us to “rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Yet the Gospel teaches us something greater: “Come receive the light, that is never overtaken by night, and glorify Christ who is risen from the dead.” Christ is risen!